

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at <http://download.archiveofourown.org/works/7789801>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/F</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Wynonna Earp (TV)</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Waverly Earp/Nicole Haught</a> , <a href="#">Waverly Earp &amp; Nicole Haught</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Waverly Earp</a> , <a href="#">Nicole Haught</a> , <a href="#">Wynonna Earp</a> , <a href="#">Doc Holliday (Wynonna Earp)</a> , <a href="#">Xavier Dolls</a> , <a href="#">Gus McCready</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Wayhaught - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Post-Canon</a> , <a href="#">Wynaught Brotp</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Smut</a> , <a href="#">Original Characters - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Revenant scum</a>
Stats:	Published: 2016-08-16 Completed: 2016-09-14 Chapters: 9/9 Words: 44221

## Like a Boomerang

by [HaughtBreaker](#), [jaybear1701](#)

### Summary

Months have passed since the S1 finale and a recently rescued Waverly struggles to come to terms with the horror she's inflicted while possessed. The team must band together to stop a mysterious revenant while Nicole and Waverly try to repair the bond that's barely keeping them together.

### Notes

Hi guys. This takes place a few months after s1 ending. We'll be trying to stick to a weekly posting schedule with weekly previews on the weekends posted on tumblr.

# Chapter 1

The first thing Waverly sees is Nicole.

Everything's out of focus, like the blurred haze of a long lingering dream.

Everything but Nicole.

Her eyes are dark and wide, crystal sharp with concern, but steady. So steady. She has one hand outstretched toward Waverly, beckoning. Her lips form words Waverly can't make out over a furious roar that makes the ground quake beneath her feet.

Waverly reaches out, but her arms feel sluggish, as if she's struggling to move in the deep depths of the ocean, the water's heavy pressure keeping her immobile. Fear spikes through her and she tries again, to no avail. Nicole turns to her side and shouts at something. Or someone. And a glow appears next to her.

It grows brighter and brighter until it explodes in a brilliant flash of white and the world snaps into place.

Waverly stumbles, finally released from invisible bonds that had trapped her in blistering heat. But she can't maintain her balance, legs weak and wobbly, worse than a newborn foal. She pitches forward, bracing herself for impact against the cold, hard ground, but someone catches her, breaking her fall. Warm arms envelop her gently.

"I've got you, baby," an aching familiar voice whispers in her ear.

"N-nicole?" Waverly manages to breathe out. It hurts to speak. Her mouth is so dry that her tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth.

"Yeah, it's me, Waves." Nicole pulls away slightly, smiling through tears.

It's then that Waverly notices the blood streaming down the side of Nicole's face, the cuts and bruises along her forehead and cheeks. She cradles Nicole's jaw between her hands. "Are you...?"

"I'm okay," Nicole reassures her. "And you're okay. Everything's gonna be okay."

"Haught, get her out of here!" Dolls appears in the periphery of Waverly's vision, gun blazing with rapid-fire shots. "Go, go, go!"

"Don't gotta tell me twice," Nicole grunts as she hooks one arm underneath Waverly's knees and the other behind her back. She lifts Waverly, bridal style, and kisses her forehead. "Just hold on tight."

Waverly wraps her arms around Nicole's neck and shoulders, clinging tightly as Nicole carries her away. She chances a glance back, just barely making out a blonde woman running from Doc. He curses at her, shoots in her direction twice but misses, too distracted with helping Wynonna and Dolls drive back a massive form in a hail of bullets. The thing is dark and misshapen, a horrifying fiend straight out of a night terror. It screeches in agony as they drive back through a gateway emblazoned in golden sigils.

Stomach twisting, Waverly shuts her eyes tightly and buries her face in Nicole's shoulder, breathing in her girlfriend's soothing scent of vanilla and spice and sweat.

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"...the salt suppresses her abilities..."

"...terminate the subject..."

"...tied to Doc. We can't just..."

The hushed whispers grow louder as Waverly comes to again. She struggles to open her eyes, her mind swimming through a cloud of unfocused awareness. There is a chill that has settled through her body, no doubt a result of losing the unbearable heat that had coursed through her, imprisoning her for God knows how long.

What had she done? Her memories are foggy and distorted, fragments of facts and images coursing through her mind. She's lost track of any sort of concept of time, all the memories blending into one inconsistent story that makes no sense at all.

"...warheads..."

"...gateway..."

"...black badge..."

Whispers of the past overlap with the current, trying to reveal a roadmap of events that is more a web of unbearable confusion.

When she's finally able to open her eyes, she instantly recognizes the hospital from a memory of Nicole in the same bed not that long ago... or at least she thinks it was not that long ago.

The room is small, but somehow accommodates the group that has apparently taken up residence, including a folding table that's set up in the corner, two very familiar forms turned away from her, pouring over whatever is on the table.

"So the solution is to find her and then just leave her somewhere in the ground?" The disapproval in Dolls's voice is clear, despite being turned away from her.

"That's the plan, Stan." Wynonna responds, her voice muffled by whatever she's eating.

"Were you ever planning on telling me you had a witch buried in the salt flats?"

"Gee, I don't know. Tell me again how you escaped the Black Badge prison and diverted a military air strike on Purgatory..."

"That's classified."

"Yeah I thought so."

Waverly winces, shifting slightly and noticing her hand is currently occupied. Looking to her right, she finds her fingers intertwined with long, tapered digits that belong to the tall form slumped over the side of the bed, obviously sleeping. Nicole. The first thing she notices is that the woman's hair is longer, by at least an inch or two and she's instantly worried that maybe more time has passed than she thought. What had she been doing the whole time? She remembers Willa, and some sort of substance on the ground before the heat consumed her, but everything else is a blur.

"Nicole?" Her voice is a hoarse whisper, but that in combination with a squeeze of her hand is

enough to wake the officer.

"Baby..." Nicole stands quickly, getting the attention of the others in the room. "Thank God you're awake."

Wynonna is suddenly on her other side, concern in her eyes. "How ya doing, Baby Girl?" She thinks Waverly doesn't see the way her hand lingers at her belt, where Peacemaker is sitting in its holster, but she's wrong.

There's a strange mood in the room, one of concerned hesitance and Waverly feels it instantly. It's as if they're all on edge, waiting for her to do something. "I feel... exhausted." She can't believe how tired she feels, despite just waking up. "What happened?"

Waverly notices as Wynonna and Nicole exchange looks, some sort of consensus reached between the two of them.

"Well..." Wynonna takes a seat on the edge of the bed as Dolls moves to the door, making sure it's closed securely.

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When Waverly's discharged from the hospital, she can't believe Purgatory's harsh winter is already melting into spring. Gone is the frigid chill in the air and the hard frost on the ground. To say that it's jarring would be putting it mildly, and the realization that she's lost months of time forms a queasy pit in her stomach.

Her memories have been vaguely reconstructed, piecemeal, by Wynonna and Nicole and the others. She still can't remember everything that happened. But at the very least, she has a jigsaw puzzle of impressions from which she generally grasps the who, what, where, when, why and how of things despite the gaps in her own recollections.

Waverly rides back to the Homestead in the back of Dolls's SUV, pressed up against Nicole, who's holding her hand. Wynonna rides shotgun next to Dolls, cracking jokes about the townsfolk. Waverly half pays attention, but can't quite focus, not with the dread lodged in between her ribs that expands whenever she catches the others trading furtive glances with one another.

"You okay?" Nicole asks, gently lifting Waverly's hand and pressing a tender kiss to her knuckles.

She looks worried. They all do. All the time. And Waverly feels like she's on the brink of losing her shit. But instead, she just smiles, pasting on a familiar mask, one she's mastered over the years of being the perfect Earp.

"I'm fine."

Nicole searches her eyes, not looking at all convinced, but she nods anyway and they settle back to listening to Wynonna make awkward small talk about Sheriff Nedley's new found love of all things Earp.

Hearing her surname aloud causes the growing coil of tension within Waverly to splinter and crack as Bobo del Rey's words echo in her skull:

*You're not even an Earp. You're not even an Earp. You're not even an Earp.*

The pain that washes over Waverly is overwhelming, stifling in its intensity, that when Dolls finally parks outside of the Homestead, she claws at the door handle and scrambles out. She

inhales and exhales sharply. The overpowering smell of budding flowers and newly sprouting grass saturates the air and makes her nauseated. She can feel her mouth watering, her body preparing to expel the few bites of soup she managed to swallow at the hospital, and she stumbles away from the car, needing to get away from everything. From everyone.

"Wave, what's wrong?"

She hears Nicole's voice and three pairs of boots rushing after her, but she holds a hand up to stop them.

"I'm okay," Waverly lies. "I just... I need to take a walk."

"We can come with you," Nicole suggests.

But Waverly shakes her head. "No, please, I just... I need to be alone right now."

Nicole opens her mouth to protest, but Wynonna lays a hand on her shoulder, silencing her. "You go on then, baby girl. We'll have some whiskey waiting for you when you get back."

Relieved, Waverly nods in gratitude. She continues unsteadily down the driveway and over the wooden bridge, ignoring the twinge in her heart as she passes the mailbox that proudly bears the Earp namesake on faded metal.

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The first memory that comes to Waverly happens weeks later. She's working a night shift at Shorty's, sweeping the recently closed bar as she's done almost every night since Gus reclaimed it after Bobo's death. It comes so quickly to her, she's knocked to her knees in surprise.

They're in the bar and she remembers some sort of struggle. Dolls was two, maybe three times her size, but she remembers the burn of anger coursing through her, anger that was not her own. She struggled for control as her hand closed around the Deputy Marshal's neck, pinning him to a wall. He was bleeding from a wound across his cheek and she was crying, or at least she would have been if she had control of her body. She wanted so badly to stop herself, to release the man who'd smiled and called her Earp as they drank coffee across from each other, who had been nothing but a friend to her, but the burning seared through her resistance. She was so mentally spent, she didn't have the will to keep fighting. She didn't have the strength to keep her hand from squeezing tighter until she heard him gasping for air.

The memory of an impact that came across the back of her head would have physically put her on her knees if she weren't already there. It brings her back to the present where she's alone, gasping for air. Her mind is stained with the vision of laying on the ground while Wynonna helped Dolls up. She knows it's a memory, but it's like nothing she's felt before, and definitely not one that anyone has told her about. She remembers the fear in her own sister's eyes and it hurts worse than taking a chair to the head.

She should have known. She had felt there was something missing from the story they told her when she awoke. What else hadn't they told her? Who else had she hurt?

The memories come to her at the worst times. When she's working. When she's sleeping. When she's at the market. Each one is worse than the one before and when she confronts Wynonna about them, about the secrets and the lies about the things she's done, there are no excuses but the ever present one that her sister was the heir and did everything for Waverly's own good.

The most unforgivable memory is one that shatters her completely.

Despite everything that has happened, Waverly is excited for just a normal date night. Everyone has been on eggshells around her and she's thrilled to just push it all aside and reclaim some bit of normalcy.

"I've missed you." Nicole whispers in her ear when she picks the officer up from the station, nipping teeth etching a smile across Waverly's face for the first time in weeks. She feels something other than confusion and guilt, the redhead's voice carrying every bit of the sensual need she felt herself.

She's preparing dinner, some chicken stir fry for Nicole who's currently changing out of her work uniform. It's a small slice of normal, one she has doubted would ever be possible again.

Waverly scrunches her nose as she makes quick work of chopping the peppers. She isn't quite sure if it's red or yellow peppers the redhead dislikes and she needs to clarify it. The last thing she wants is something so trivial ruining the moment. "Nicole?"

She doesn't think much about going to find the woman. Maybe she's gotten too comfortable that she doesn't think about setting the knife down first. "Nicole?"

Not expecting her, Nicole exits the bedroom just seconds before Waverly reaches the door. Unable to stop, she freezes, her eyes falling on the knife, her hand instinctively reaching for a gun that isn't there.

It's only a brief moment, but Waverly sees the look in her eyes, that momentary flash of fear, and suddenly she's flooded with a familiar heat, one that consumes her completely. It's the memory she never wanted to remember, the doubt and terror in those eyes as Nicole pleaded with her.

*"Please, Baby. I know you're in there." Nicole's hands were wrapped around her wrist, Waverly's fist gripping the front of her uniform. "Fight it!"*

*"I don't want to fight it. This is who I am now and I definitely don't need you." Waverly laughed as she tossed the tall form against a wall as if she weighed less than a pillow, the sound of Nicole's head impacting the wall bringing the brunette back to the present.*

The knife falls from her hand, clattering against the floorboards as she begins to back up. "I'm sorry." Her voice wavers as she looks down at her own hands.

"Wave?" Nicole moves forward only to be met with hands raised in her direction. "Shit I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I was just surprised...."

"No! I..." She's shaking her head, unable to fight the frigid chill of guilt that courses through her. "I'm sorry... I didn't know..." Tears well in her eyes as her mind keeps reliving the newly surfaced memory. "I hurt you..."

Realization fills Nicole's eyes as she quickly closes the distance between them. "It wasn't you, Baby. You have nothing to be sorry for." Her touch is tender, the way it always is, attempting to sooth the friction between them. Nicole has always been a very physical person, always comforting through loving caresses and it's too much.

"No no no." Waverly is quick to pull away, quick to put distance between them. She doesn't even have the strength to be upset that Nicole never told her. She just feels an emptiness growing from within. She looks everywhere but at the redhead, not wanting to see that look of fear again.

It doesn't go unnoticed. "Look at me, Wave." Nicole tries to pull her back in for a hug but Waverly stays an arms-length away.

"First Dolls... Wynonna... Doc... I thought I was strong enough to at least not hurt you." She shakes her head because she honestly had thought her love would be enough. She thought it would be strong enough. "I can't do this..." The words break her heart even as she hears them slip out, but she knows it's for the best. She's a plague on everyone's life, nothing but pain and suffering. "You were fine until I dragged you into all this shit..." Her voice quivers with emotion and her eyes burn from the pain, but still she cannot look Nicole in the eyes. Before Nicole can stop her, she grabs her bag and keys.

"Waverly."

"No... I can't do this." Waverly speaks just before slamming the door shut and running for the stairs. She needs to get away. Everyone around her has been hurt by her weakness and inability to stop that beast from using her like a meat puppet. The last thing she should be allowed is a love as pure as Nicole's. She doesn't deserve her.

## Chapter 2

By the time Waverly reaches the Homestead, her head's pounding and she's so congested from crying that she has to breathe through her mouth. As she unlocks the front door, she sends up a silent prayer of thanks that Wynonna's not home. Even though she thinks she can't possibly have any more tears to shed, Waverly knows she looks like a mess and won't be able to hide it from her sister. And she has no extra energy to explain anything or justify herself.

She walks through the foyer, past the kitchen, and into her bedroom, boots thudding heavily on the hardwood floor. She drops her purse at the threshold and fishes out her cellphone from the front pocket of her jeans. It's been buzzing nonstop since she left Nicole's apartment and Waverly knows she probably has dozens of missed calls and texts from Nicole. She holds the phone in her hand and stares at it for several long moments, heart lurching in her chest at the temptation to respond. To take everything back.

But then Waverly remembers the uncertainty in Nicole's eyes – the *fear* – and the way she had reached for her sidearm. The memory allows her to find the strength to turn off her phone and set it aside on her nightstand.

She strips down to her underwear, too exhausted to put on her pajamas, and slips underneath her comforter. That turns out to be a mistake because her bed still smells like Nicole, all warm vanilla spice, and Waverly's eyes sting again with fresh tears. Grabbing Nicole's pillow, she hugs it to her chest and curls up into a ball as silent sobs wrack her body.

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Waverly wakes later with a cold compress on her forehead. Her eyes feel puffy and she blinks slowly as she focuses on the figure sitting on the edge of her mattress.

“Wynonna?”

“Hey there, Waves.” Wynonna half smiles. “You sick? It's not like you to go to bed so early. Or did you go on a bender without me, which, rude.”

“No to both,” Waverly says, voice rough and thick. “What time is it?”

“Just a little past 8. You sure you're okay?”

Waverly rubs at her eyes with the back of her hand and sits up. A wet washcloth folded into a rectangle falls to her lap.

“I'm fine.” She's been repeating those words nonstop for the past several weeks that she almost believes them.

“Okay.” Wynonna hesitates, eyes drifting to the nightstand. “Your phone's off. I think Nicole's been trying to reach you.”

Nostrils flaring slightly, Waverly swallows down the lump that suddenly lodges her in her throat. “I don't want to talk to her right now.”

Wynonna frowns. “Why? Did something happen?”

Waverly looks away, unable to bear the concern in Wynonna's confused expression.

"Did she do something to you?" Wynonna asks.

"No!" The need to defend Nicole rises sharply in Waverly's chest. "No. She would never..." Waverly takes a deep breath, willing her voice not to crack. "She didn't do anything. It's... it's me."

"You?"

"I broke up with her," Waverly whispers. Somehow confirming it out loud makes it feel real. Makes it feel final. And the pain of it pierces through her chest all over again.

"You..." Wynonna shakes her head. "I'm sorry, but it sounded like you said you broke up with Nicole."

Waverly doesn't answer, but her silence speaks for itself and Wynonna's eyes widen.

"Shit," Wynonna breathes out. "Um, okay, but... but why?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Waverly..."

"Please, Wynonna." Waverly lies back down and turns away from her sister, cocooning herself in her blanket. "Just... not now."

She hears Wynonna sigh behind her. The bed flattens out again as Wynonna stands. "Okay, Baby Girl. You let me know if you need anything."

Knowing full well she won't, Waverly nods anyway and closes her eyes, her pillow once again becoming damp beneath her cheek.

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Waverly doesn't realize she's fallen asleep again until she hears Wynonna's muffled voice drifting in from the foyer. The room's dimly lit by an oil lamp that Wynonna must have placed on her dresser and, based on the chimes from the cuckoo clock in the kitchen, Waverly knows that it's midnight. Reluctantly, Waverly slides out of bed, wincing from the stiffness in her muscles, and pads across the cold floor toward the front door. She freezes just around the corner when she hears Nicole's voice.

"Wynonna, please."

Waverly's heart clenches painfully at how broken Nicole sounds.

"Dude, look, I know it fucking sucks," Wynonna responds. "But Waverly needs her space right now."

"I'm not leaving until I see her."

Wynonna lets out a long, deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Nicole."

Waverly waits until she hears the door click shut before she steps into the foyer, watching Wynonna rub her face wearily with her fingers. Her sister startles when she finally notices Waverly, one hand flying to her chest.

“Shit, you sca... I mean, I didn’t see you there.” Grimacing, Wynonna chucks a thumb toward the door. “Did you... Of course you did. I swear these walls are made of papier-mâché.”

She nibbles at her bottom lip when Waverly doesn’t immediately respond, an uncomfortable silence expanding between them. “Look, Waves, you know I’m not one to tell people what to do but... please just consider talking to her. She deserves that much... after everything.”

Wrapping her arms around herself, Waverly chances a glance behind Wynonna where she can make out Nicole’s silhouette through the door’s sheer curtain. It would be so easy, Waverly thinks, to just turn the knob and run out onto the porch and into Nicole’s arm. Easy, but not right. She had to, for lack of a better turn of phrase, stick to her guns on this. For both their sakes. She’d rather have Nicole alive and heartbroken, than dead and gone because of her.

Waverly shakes her head and Wynonna sighs.

“I’m going to bed,” Wynonna mutters, walking toward the living room and her make-shift bed on the couch.

Waverly’s about to head back to her own room when she hears Nicole call out to her softly. Aching deep in her bones, Waverly turns around once again. Nicole’s shadow looms larger through the door’s window, as if she’s pressed right up against it.

“Waves,” Nicole pleads. “I know you’re there.” She braces her hands on the frame. “If you don’t want to talk right now, I understand but please just listen.” She rests her head against the glass, her breathing labored, as if she’s trying so hard not to cry. “Whatever you need, I’ll give it to you. And if what you need is to be alone then... then okay.”

Nicole sounds so very much *not* okay, and Waverly can’t stop herself from yielding to her ex’s magnetic pull. She approaches with small, cautious steps, and stops within a foot of the door. She dares not get any closer, already trembling from the exertion of remaining in place.

“I know you’ve gone through a lot,” Nicole continues. “Are still going through a lot. I can’t even begin to imagine what that’s like. And I know you’re scared. I’m scared too. But I want you to know that I...” Her voice falters and Waverly’s heart stops beating, both with dread and hope of how Nicole might finish. “That I’m here for you. Always.”

Nicole waits for several long seconds, and when she receives no response, she backs away from the door. One step. Two. Until her shadow shrinks and disappears from the porch. Without thinking, Waverly reaches out and presses the pads of her fingers against the cool pane through the thin fabric of the curtain, right where Nicole had been. When she hears Nicole’s car engine start, she snatches her hand back as if she’s been burned.

Waverly walks backwards, covering her mouth to stifle a sob that threatens to spill out. She almost runs into a wall, but adjusts in time to avoid it and stumble back to her room before her knees weaken completely and her legs give out. All the while, she doesn’t notice Wynonna sitting on the couch, watching her with sadness etched across her face.

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The next few days seem to both stretch on forever and pass in the blink of an eye. For the most part, Wynonna leaves Waverly alone except to let her know when there's leftover Chinese food in the fridge. And Nicole? Nicole stops calling and texting, and Waverly can't tell if she's relieved or not.

Truth be told, a part of Waverly itches to just up and leave. To pack her bags and disappear into the darkness of night, like Wynonna and their mother had done so many years ago. But she doesn't. She can't quite bring herself to take that step, and even deludes herself into believing she doesn't know the reason why.

On the fifth day, Gus lets herself into the Homestead early in the morning...and proceeds to show absolutely *no* sympathy for Waverly.

Zip. Nada. Zilch.

"Sweet Jesus Christ on a pony, girl, you are a mess," a flabbergasted Gus exclaims after she pulls back the curtain separating Waverly's room from the rest of the house. "Worse than Wynonna even."

"You know I can hear you in here right, Gus?" Wynonna calls from the kitchen.

Gus just shrugs, not caring in the slightest, and yanks the covers off Waverly's prone form.

"Hey," Waverly protests. "Not now, Gus, I'm still tired."

"No, I think you've had about enough rest, missy." Gus tugs the blanket away before Waverly can grab it back. "You can't hide in here forever."

"Sure I can," Waverly mumbles as she falls back onto her pillows.

Gus places her hands on her hips. "Look, I get it. You're upset about that demon whositswhatsits hurting everyone. But you know what I think?"

"No, but I'm sure you're gonna tell me."

Ignoring Waverly's comment, Gus continues, "I think that *thing* wasn't the first nutsack that's ever tried to destroy this town and everyone in it. And it most certainly won't be the last." She arches a stern eyebrow at Waverly. "So what are you gonna do about it?"

"Wallow in self-pity?" Waverly tries.

Gus rolls her eyes. "I really thought you were the smart one. No, Waverly, you're going to get up and make sure it doesn't happen again. That's what Earps do."

Waverly stiffens and clenches her jaw. *But I'm NOT an Earp!* She wants to shout, but she bites her tongue.

Wynonna appears next to Gus, mouth covered in powdered sugar, cheeks bulging from an unchewed donut. "She's right, Waves. At least come to the station today. Dolls has a shit-ton of records he wants you to help him collate."

*The station.*

Waverly's heart throbs against her ribs when she thinks about who she might bump into at the station. "I... I don't know..."

“If you’re worried about Nicole, don’t be,” Wynonna says, reading Waverly’s mind. “She’s not there.”

Waverly frowns. “She’s not?”

“Nope. She asked Nedley for some time off to go back home.”

The news should calm Waverly’s nerves. But instead it makes her stomach sink low in her gut. “For how long?”

Wynonna just turns up her hands, while Gus matter-of-factly interjects, “What’s it matter to you?”

Gus has never liked anyone Waverly’s dated, but Waverly knows that Gus definitely had a soft spot for Nicole. So it’s not surprising that she’s none too pleased about their breakup. Gus crosses her arms in a challenge that Waverly has no intention of fighting, no matter how much the words sting, as if ending the relationship means Waverly somehow doesn’t care about Nicole. Instead, Waverly clears her throat and gets out of bed.

“Give me 20 minutes to get ready,” she says, pulling down a towel from a nearby rack.

“You’ve got 10 before I leave your ass with Gus all day.”

“You should be so lucky,” Gus gruffs out as Waverly heads toward the bathroom, not really wanting to leave the Homestead, but not really having a choice, lest she be bombarded with more truth bombs from her surrogate mother that she wasn’t ready to hear just yet.

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Turns out Wynonna’s right.

Nicole’s not at the station when they arrive. When they pass by the front desk, now manned by the owlish Officer Gertrude Hawk (who, at 75 years of age, is the oldest deputy in Purgatory), Waverly nevertheless feels a twinge of disappointment at not being greeted by a familiar dimpled smile. Hawk squints at Waverly when she approaches and then wrinkles her nose up in agitated disgust when Waverly tries to smile at her.

Mildly confused by that reaction, Waverly enters the Black Badge office where Dolls barely spares her a welcoming glance. She hasn’t seen him since her memories returned, and guilt and shame rise in her as she remembers trying to choke the life out of him.

“Welcome back, Earp,” he grunts like he usually does, as if nothing’s changed. He drops a massive stack of papers in front of her when she timidly sits at the table. “Get to work.”

Waverly glances up at Wynonna who gives her a half-shrug. “You heard the man.”

And so Waverly delves into the files, losing herself in the organization and research.

Day in.

Day out.

It becomes a routine of sorts – busy work with Black Badge during the day, mindless bartending

at Shorty's on nights Gus needs extra help. It's a way for her to focus her quick-fire mind on one thing at a time; a way for her to not drive herself crazy about the past and, most importantly, Nicole.

Not that it works completely.

Waverly can't *not* think of Nicole whenever she enters the police station or sees a patrol car roll down the street or catches a glimpse of a figure in a tan-and-blue uniform and white Stetson. But Nicole is nowhere to be found.

Days turn into a week.

A week turns into two.

Things almost seem sort of normal, except for the fact that Waverly has a Haught-shaped hole in her soul that she tries to pretend doesn't exist.

But she *feels* it.

Every time she walks by the front desk and Officer Hawk scowls at her. Every time she sees Nicole's squad car parked outside the station. Every time she passes by Nicole's apartment building and the windows remain dark. Every time she orders a cappuccino for one.

She feels the dull emptiness that only grows and grows the longer Nicole is gone.

No one else seems all that concerned about Nicole's absence. Not Wynonna or Dolls or Doc. Not even Nedley. Waverly, however, feels like she's about to snap, like a guitar string tightened way past over-tuned.

And by the start of the third week, Waverly's just about to give in and call Nicole when Dolls bursts into the office, an excited gleam in his eye.

"We've got an unusual homicide," he announces to both Wynonna and Waverly, as if they've just won the lottery. "Let's go."

He does an immediate about face without waiting for their responses.

"Whoa, wait," Waverly says. "Me too?"

"Yes you too Earp."

Fumbling to disconnect her phone call, Waverly is surprised to find she doesn't cringe as much when she hears the surname.

## Chapter 3

*OK so maybe we felt a little bad about the whole super angsty first 2 chapters so we've decided to post this chapter instead of a preview. Plus Jay got to her milestone followers on TUMBLR so yay!*

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"So..." Wynonna crosses her arms over her chest as she takes in the sight before them. "How is this one of ours?" She rubs her arms to fight the chill of the morgue.

Dolls rolls his eyes as he lifts the chart from the gurney. Surprisingly, the body is completely intact which is rare for revenant behavior. There are no missing limbs or strange disfigurements, in fact at first glance, the man looks like he could be napping... except of course for the recently adorned Y incision that's been sewn shut after the autopsy. "Mr. Lanchester here was found in his home, laying peacefully in his bed, dressed in a tailored suit, with all the outward appearances of sleeping. Originally they thought he died of natural causes and would have closed the case if not for the liter of salt water they pumped from his lungs. Cause of death was found to be asphyxiation by drowning. There were no signs of a struggle."

"Did you say salt water?" Waverly snatches the chart from him. This is what she needs, more than research and logging. She needs something that will completely absorb her mind, something to focus on what isn't a missing officer from the front desk.

"Maybe he was just... gargling with salt water or whatever and like... fell asleep." Wynonna offers with a false nonchalant look. She snuffles and rubs at her nose with the palm of her hand. She's yet to regain her comfort in the refrigerated morgue, not since the last coroner ended up kidnapping her and trying to remove her internal organs.

Waverly's eyes light up as she reads the report. "Dolls, this is amazeballs... well not for Mr. Lanchester here obviously, but it says that it's actually seawater." She shows the report to Wynonna who lets her eyes scan the paper in mock interest.

"Ok... and?"

"Not just any seawater. The lab ran an analysis and found dinoflagellates that only exist in the United States, specifically in the waters of the bayou around New Orleans." Dolls leans closer to the body. "Further investigation has shown that he is actually the third male victim with similar elements." He hands out folders containing autopsy reports.

"Wait... he had dinosaurs in him?" Wynonna snorts in disbelief. "To each their own I guess. No kinkshaming here." She releases a frustrated sigh. "Wasn't there already a revenant that tried to drown you with lakewater? Haven't these guys ever heard of originality? They can't just keep doing the same thing over and over again."

"Not dinosaurs... dinoflagellates... they're phytoplankton." Waverly's eyebrows shoot up as she continues reading. "Aaaand... I don't think this revenant is a guy..."

"What?" Wynonna looks over her shoulder, her eyes trailing down the report. "...vaginal secretions around the base of... ew." She sticks her tongue out in distaste, moving away. "Dude

needs to learn to take a shower after..."

"After being brutally murdered?" Waverly smiles and it feels like she hasn't done so in years. Of course, focusing on the lack of smiling forces her mind to return to Nicole. Was she ok? Was she finding what she needed back home? Was she ever coming back? What if she never sees the redhead again? It was such an agonizing possibility that she barely manages to contain her anxiety.

"Waves?"

Wynonna's voice pulls her from her downward spiral and she shakes her head, putting on the classic Waverly Earp smile that everyone expects of her. This time however, it's lacking any actual joy. "Sorry. Ok so female revenant significantly cuts down the options. A revenant with ties to New Orleans... I'm 95% sure I know who it is."

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"Gwendolynne Lafayette." Waverly pulls the manilla folder from her pile of research, a little more excited than she should be considering the population of Purgatory is slowly being whittled away. Removing a black and white photo, she pins it to the corkboard. It's a photo of a group of women, with one obviously at the center...at least they look like women. The photo is old and lacks any sort of refined detail, the focus having been on the building behind the group. The word Lafayette's is clearly legible on the wooden sign, but none of the faces are distinguishable from the others. They may as well be ghosts. "She ran one of the local '*knitting circles*'..." She flexes her fingers in quotation marks, mostly for Wynonna's sake.

Her sister gives her a confused look from where she's sitting on the edge of the desk, arms crossed over her chest. Suddenly she silently mouths the word *oh* and she offers Waverly an exaggerated wink.

"As it would turn out, she was flexing her monetary muscles, exploiting some of the more impressionable girls in town with promises of fortunes, that she ended up pocketing herself of course, for doing the dirty with some of Purgatory's finest scumbags." Waverly pinned another photo to the board, the black and white building a familiar sight to all raised in the area. "You know the old Price building?"

"The one that's been condemned for like 50 years but no one wants to spend the money to tear down?"

"Yeah. That one. That was the center of all the activity. And as if exploiting young women isn't enough, it was discovered that she was using her girls to bring in men that she would later murder." Waverly hands out copies of old newspaper clippings. "After men in Purgatory started disappearing, word came up from the states that she was wanted for the deaths of almost a dozen men in New Orleans, including her husband and a few notable officials of high standing. Wyatt, being the upright citizen he was, decided that Louisiana had a greater stake in her misdeeds, so he personally signed the extradition paperwork and a few weeks later, news came that her body had been 'found' in the bayou after she allegedly ran away from custody."

"Good ole US of A." Wynonna snorts. "Ok, so we have another revenant whose death is indirectly related to our super great grandpappy. How are we even supposed to find all the revenants if we keep running across these random criminals who somehow stub a toe in Wyatt Earp's presence and therefore connecting them to the curse?"

"It's not that simple." Dolls objects.

"Yeah yeah. So we've got us a genuine madame that's somehow luring in men with her magic vag, and murdering them by somehow drowning them with seawater that we're nowhere near, without them fighting back." Wynonna purses her lips. "Ok then. So what are we..."

A quick knock comes on the glass pane of the door seconds before it opens. "Hey, Deputy Marshall Dolls, there's been..."

As soon as the tall form clears the doorway, the room comes to a standstill. Waverly feels her chest tighten at the sight of the midnight blue shirt and khaki pants hugging the familiar curves of the redhead whose eyes meet her own for the briefest of moments. She can't decide if she's glad the woman is back or if she should return to the solitude of her bed back at the homestead.

"They've found a body that Gertrude tells me is connected to one of the cases you're working on." Nicole looks tired, but in relatively high spirits. There are dark circles under her eyes but a smile has worked its way back onto her face, despite the silence that follows her statement.

"Attack of the Mag-Vag." Wynonna breaks the uneasy tension in the room by hopping off the desk and heading out the door, playfully bumping against Nicole on purpose. "Autobots, roll out!"

Waverly nods, still thrown by the woman who's still standing in the doorway. She knows this moment had to come, but now that it's there in her face, she finds her tongue swelling in her throat, her mouth unwilling to cooperate, unable to do anything but gather the files with shaky hands. *I'm sorry.* Her mind whispers. *I love you.* But the words stay hidden in her silence.

"Come on Officer Haught. We can catch you up on the way." Dolls sees Waverly freeze again and barely stops himself from rolling his eyes. "This won't be a problem will it? The two of you working together?"

Nicole shrugs, as if someone hadn't just asked her if she was fine spending the day with a woman who'd broken up with her without an explanation. "It's fine with me. I have no problem with it. Waverly?" It's the first time she's addressed the shorter woman since the night at the homestead, and even though there's no door and curtain between them, she feels as though a wall has been erected.

She finds that far more alarming than the sudden presence of the redhead. "Of ... of course not." She hears the wavering in her voice, but Nicole doesn't seem to notice. She gives the Deputy Marshall a smile that's far from genuine, waiting until the officer follows him out the door and she has a moment of solitude before she releases a shuddering sigh. Her world is upside down again and she struggles to find her breath. "You can do this." She whispers to herself, leaning forward, hand played against the desk. "You can do this."

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The motel room is small, but just big enough to accommodate the group, a bed in the center and a small desk to the side. On the mattress before them lays a still form with the outward appearance of slumber. "Peaceful sleeping expression... check. Water in lungs... check." Wynonna dusts her hands off on her leather pants. "I'll leave checking under the hood for specific juices to the docs, but survey says... it's another revenant kill!"

"You know, some people are more respectful around the recently deceased." Dolls gives her a disapproving look.

"Hey someone's got to break the tension that's just rolling off the misery twins there."

Waverly pretends not to hear. She can't tell if Nicole notices or not because the redhead has been buried in her notes since they arrived, scribbling down all the details Dolls points out. The determination to fit into her role as a Black Badge deputy is adorable, but it reminds her again that the woman has had months to fit into the role. She's had months of working with Dolls and Wynonna and it's obviously the roll she's adopted. Official notetaker? It doesn't seem fitting for the intelligent woman.

"The change in MO is...unexpected." Dolls offers to the group.

Wynonna is poking around the desk, more out of boredom than looking for evidence. Her gaze falls on a small pile of candy and her eyes light up, looking around before she slips the small bounty into her pocket.

"Wynonna! What are you doing?" Waverly hisses under her breath, trying not to get the attention of the others.

"What? She's not gonna eat it." Wynonna whispers back before turning to Dolls. "What the hell is MO?"

"Modus Operandi." Nicole comments without looking up from her scribbling. "Method of operations? Usually killers have a specific target in mind, whether it's a fetishist, a sexual craving, or simply a surrogate for who they truly want to kill. When there's a serial killer, the deaths are rarely victims of opportunity. It's not normal for a killer to cross gender lines like this which makes it difficult to determine how she chooses her victims." She purses her lips as she looks up at the room, noticing the impressed look on Dolls's face.

"So the rev likes a little fish for dinner instead of meat. It's obviously not as rare as people in Purgatory think, is it Baby Girl?" She tosses a wink in waverly's direction, only to be rewarded with a partly surprised, partly horrified, but completely disturbed look.

Waverly doesn't respond, but shifts uncomfortably.

"What? Come on it was funny." Wynonna nudges Dolls who gives her a warning look.

It's Nicole, once again, who breaks through the strained atmosphere. "Any guess on how she draws them in? I mean, she doesn't quite have a brood of beautiful women working for her anymore does she?" Nicole smiles as she looks from Wynonna to Dolls. "I mean, I may be relatively new to the area, but I'm sure I would have heard if there was an underground prostitution ring in Purgatory."

"Maybe her vag really is magic now." Wynonna offers seriously. "Think about it, all these revheads got totally awesome jedi powers when they came back that are generally related to what they did in their former lives. If she was luring men in to kill them with the power of young vag, maybe it's part of her abilities."

"Can you please stop saying vag?" Dolls pinches the bridge of his nose. "As ridiculous as it sounds, Wynonna does have a point. It could be some sort of ability that she uses, perhaps a sort of pheromone?"

"Magical Vagina." Wynonna whispers.

"Okay!" Waverly speaks up. "So a revenant with pheromones coming from her hoohah that lures men in so she can drown them with her own personal supply of New Orleans Bayou water?" Waverly gives her sister a skeptical look. "Why can't we ever just have regular serial killers?"

"Because you can't shoot a human between the eyes without a trial?" Nicole supplies with half a

smile, her eyes having returned once again to her notepad. "Believe me you don't want to deal with the paperwork that comes in the normal world when you're involved in a shooting."

There's a strange quiet that settles over them until Wynonna clears her throat. "You uh... shoot a lot of people in Chicago?"

Nicole looks up and shrugs, just the tiniest smile tugging at one side of her mouth. "Only in the knee."

Wynonna can't stop herself. She wraps her arm around Nicole's neck and pulls her down to place a loud kiss against her temple. "I knew you were my kind of people, even if you are a rookie flatfoot." She laughs before pushing the redhead away, straightening Nicole's stetson.

Dolls signals the coroner who's been waiting on the sideline. "Alright, let's get back to the office to review."

"To the Batcave!"

Waverly looks at Nicole who is still scribbling and she notices she's left with just her and the coroner who is too engrossed with the crime scene to notice the growing tension in the room. She knows she has to address the situation. She doesn't even know where to start.

"Um...Nicole?" Caramel colored eyes look up at her, a questioning look in their depths. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" The question is so simple but the answer is far from easy.

"I um... I know I kind of left you hanging and I'm sorry about that."

Nicole gives her a look that's partly cool, partly amused. "Oh, that. Yeah you kind of did but I understand why you did it. You need your space, I get it. You don't have to apologize." She smiles. "Totally water under the bridge."

The response is so collected and carefree, Waverly isn't even sure how to respond. She's never been in this situation and she wonders how the woman could remain so calm when her own emotions were a tidal wave threatening to consume her. "Oh... then thank you... for understanding." She feels like she's walking on eggshells...that are on fire... while barefoot...

"You take all the time you need, Wav. I'm always here for you, no matter what you need. That's what friends are for."

"Yeah..." *Friends*. Waverly wants to say more. She doesn't understand why Nicole is so unaffected. She can't help but wonder what in the world happened while the redhead was at home. From the voice-mail messages Nicole had left that day, the woman had been completely distraught and now she's standing before her acting as if they hadn't broken up. Worse even. The officer was acting as if they were never together, as if that day in the cruiser she'd simply accepted Waverly's request to be just friends. She can feel her emotions shifting, a sinking sensation that threatens to consume her again.

"Change of plans, guys." Wynonna enters, pausing in uncertainty at the strange tableau.

"What's up?" Nicole smiles as if the world is perfect, as if Waverly isn't slowly disappearing into a void of wallow.

"Dolls has some stupid briefing to do so we're free. I think it's 5 o'clock."

Waverly's brows furrow as she tilts her wrist, glad for the distraction. "It's only 3:25."

"Well it's 5 o'clock somewhere. Time for drinks. Let's go, flatfoot."

"I could use a drink, but let me change out of my uniform. I'm not actually back until tomorrow."

With a scrunch of her nose, Nicole slips her notepad in her pocket before turning to Waverly.

"Coming?"

It's all Waverly can do to stay calm as she shakes her head. "You guys go ahead. I'm gonna take some files home and look them over."

"Yeah. Ok." Wynonna doesn't push. "Don't work too hard."

Waverly has no intention of actually working. She just needs to be away from the two. Not just Nicole, but also Wynonna who has somehow worked her way into becoming Nicole's best friend. When the hell did that happen? She just wants some micron of quiet, to process everything.

She's thankfully driven her own jeep. She can't even imagine being in the car with Nicole and Wynonna. She doesn't even make it back to the homestead before the tears start.

Waverly knew seeing Nicole again would be hard, but she thought it would be hard on them both. It was selfish of her, she knows that, but she wants Nicole to be hurting as well. She's completely jealous of the carefree attitude and the redhead's ability to move on.

When she pulls up to the family residence, she's thankful Gus has gone home, but on the porch is Doc, rocking in one of the chairs Wynonna had stolen from some revenant's place. She rubs away the tears, but there's no hiding the fact that she's been crying. No doubt, being in the barn, he's already heard everything that's happened

Sliding out of the Jeep and approaching the porch, she gives him an amused look in hopes of disguising her emotional distress. "You know, for someone who's avoiding my sister, you don't choose the best places to hang out."

Doc lets his eyes drift over her, but doesn't comment on her runny nose or red eyes. "I reckon you are correct, but I do believe today is Thursday, the day in which those fiery chicken wings Wynonna is mighty keen on are being served at a discounted price. I would not expect her to return from her nighttime revelry for quite some time." He rocks slightly. "Besides, it is hotter than a devil's codpiece in the barn."

"Tracking her eating habits... they call that stalking, ya know?"

"It was merely an observation of her very predictable nature."

Waverly purses her lips. Doc's presence had been scarce ever since the day she'd been rescued. She doesn't blame him really. With the stone witch being the only one capable of casting out the ancient presence that had taken root within Waverly, her sister did go behind his back in making a deal with Constance Clooty. "You know I'm the one you should really be upset with, right? She did what she did to save me."

"Wynonna does what she does because she's Wynonna." Doc objects. "I can no more blame you for the decisions she came to than I can blame Dolls for wooing her in my absence."

"So it's not just the stone witch you're mad about?" Waverly snorts. "You did pack up and leave, ya know."

"And no more than two nights passed before Wynonna focused her attentions on another suitor."

Doc lights a cigarette, his frustration showing. "Lest I bring up once again that I was on my way back the very next day, only to be held up by the very revenant that assisted in the poisoning of the entire town."

Waverly rolls her eyes, opening the front door of the homestead. "I'm pretty sure your previous commentary on the whole dating situation went somewhere along the lines of 'sex alone, a relationship does not make.'" She mimics his accent. "Avoid her if you want, but it would probably help if you just talked to her... just a thought."

Doc watches as she enters, the door closing behind her. "One might benefit from heeding their own advice," he comments to no one in particular as he rocks in the chair, looking out at the land that had begun to turn brown since the seasons changed. He can feel the dryness in the air and the way it wicked away any drop of sweat that might have emerged.

It's going to be a hot Summer, he thinks.

## Chapter 4

*"Please." Waverly looks between her two sisters. "I love her." She whispers, pain in her voice. She's never spoken the words to Nicole, doesn't even say it loud enough for the officer to hear, but it's an admission she's making to one of the most important people in her life. She can see the conflict in Wynonna's eyes. There's no way Wynonna will let Willa shoot her... is there?*

*Willa is counting down, seconds that feel shorter than they should be.*

*Waverly can feel their future possibilities ticking away, their destiny dwindled down to this single moment where a barrel of a gun threatens to take away what she's beginning to realize is the best thing to happen to her.*

*"Alright."*

*Just one word and Waverly is so overcome with emotion, she doesn't register what her sisters are saying, all she can see is the relief in Nicole's eyes. She's convinced Wynonna to trade possibly the end of the world for the redhead's life, and she doesn't feel an ounce of regret until suddenly the room is filled with a loud bang and the seconds that had previously flown by seem to last an eternity. The smell of sulfur fills the air as she watches Nicole's body get tossed back against the wall from the impact of the close-ranged shot, crumbling to the tile floor in a motionless heap.*

*"No no no." The words slip from her lips as she rushes to the officer's side. Her dress complains but she's kneeling on the floor, expensive beading digging into her skin, her eyes burning with tears as she rolls the woman over. She knows the scene is completely wrong the instant she sees the crimson pool that streaks against the dark blue uniform. "No." Her voice is a bare whisper as the buttons of the uniform pop open to reveal an undershirt that would be white if not for the hole that's pumping out blood. "Why aren't you wearing your vest?" She cries as she presses a palm against the slick stain that's spreading across Nicole's chest. She can feel the heartbeat slowing beneath her touch.*

*Nicole looks up at her with confusion in her eyes, pupils unfocusing. She coughs, blood staining her lips as she struggles to speak. "I knew... loving you... would get me killed."*

"NO!" Waverly shoots up from her bed, gasping frantically. Looking around, it takes a minute for her to realize where she is. Her pajamas, damp with sweat, cling to her skin and she cradles her pounding head in her palms. She'd drunk most of what was left of her bubblegum sake the night before and she can feel a burn fighting its way up her esophagus. "Fuck." It's a word that rarely slips from her mouth, that she's saved for special occasions like heartache and hangovers. Her heart is still racing as she wipes the tears from her eyes with trembling hands.

A small beep from her nightstand gets her attention and she sighs, moving to the edge of the bed. Her muscles ache and her mouth is dry, but she pushes it all aside, reaching for her phone.

*"Time to catch some revenants. Bring donuts."*

Her stomach churns at the thought of pastries. It gets even worse as she remembers the tall redhead that had returned the previous day. She would be at the station. After a dream like that, seeing the officer is the last thing she wants to do... but also the only thing. She wants to make sure the woman is alive, that she's severed their ties early enough to guarantee Nicole's safety.

"Time to put on your big girl britches, Waverly." She speaks to the room, pushing herself up on unstable legs. The room tilts slightly and she winces. "Aspirin first, then shower." She decides

with a groan.

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"SHIT!" Wynonna just barely blocks the knee heading towards her abdomen, managing to wrestle free of the hold that's started to overpower her. Her skin is slick with sweat, but so is the tall opponent she's trying to take down.

Gone are the usual barriers she's used to, the walls that protected her in a fight as a woman against a man. In their sparring matches, Dolls was always pulling his punches, always afraid he would hurt her because she has tits and a nice ass. He was the easiest to take down in a fight because he was ruled by his cock and preconceived prejudices.

Doc flat out refused to fight her. He believed it would be "ungentleman-like" to hit a "creature of the fairer sex." She hates it. She hates him and all of his 1800s bullshit that makes him think he's better than her. She hates the way he thinks he's got proprietary rights to revenge.

Wynonna's fist hits flesh and she barely has time to celebrate before a hand grabs her wrist and twists, while an arm wraps around her throat, holding her in place. She gets an elbow into the bare abdomen behind her and she breaks the hold, turning to see carmel eyes narrow in her direction.

Nicole has no such hesitations. They're on equal ground, neither holding back, both fighting their own personal battles. She knows why the redhead is frustrated, even if she says she's fine. She can see the pain and doubt in those big eyes every time they fall on Waverly, but she doesn't take it easy on the officer. They both need this.

Wynonna gets a lucky hit in, a right hook that would normally take Dolls down. She either overestimates herself, or underestimates Nicole because the woman's head turns to roll with the punch, and before she knows it Wynonna's feet are being swept out from under her. The air is knocked out of her from the impact, or maybe from Nicole suddenly on top of her, pinning her to the ground. Strong thighs clamp tight against her hips and she finds a hand on each of her wrists pinning her to the ground.

"Fuck." Wynonna tries to struggle against the hold but it's solid and the long fight has wrung the strength from her limbs. "I yield."

Nicole's eyebrows raise almost to her hairline, still leaning over the brunette. "Wait... I'm sorry I didn't hear you. Say that again."

"Fuck off. You heard me." Wynonna laughs. Once again she finds herself glad she's still able to keep her friendship with the redhead despite her strained relationship with Waverly. She totally thought Nicole was right, that Waverly was being completely unreasonable, but she would have to take her sister's side if made to choose. Earps stuck together even when they were being asinine.

Nicole gives her an innocent look. "I don't think I did. Surely the legendary Heir of Wyatt Earp yields to no one."

"Well this heir doesn't do shit like she's supposed to, unless you haven't heard." Wynonna struggles again. "I said I yield now get the hell off me."

Releasing her wrists, Nicole leans back to sit on her heels, laughing as she reaches up to touch her cheek, wincing slightly. "I think you just gave me a black eye. It's totally going to..."

"Wynonna?" The door opens suddenly and Waverly freezes in place, her eyes darting back and forth between the two. She's balancing a cup holder loaded with four cups of coffee on a bright pink box and her mouth drops open for the briefest of moments before snapping shut, teeth clenching.

Nicole instantly pushes herself up off the floor, wiping the sweat off her hands nervously.

Wynonna raises an eyebrow as she pushes herself to her elbows. "Hey Waves. Are those my donuts?" She notices the way her sister's eyes travel over the tall frame of the redhead who's just in a pair of workout shorts and a sports bra, but there's a cloudy look in her eyes, eyebrows furrowed. "Baby Girl?"

"Why are you two...?" Waverly finally asks, shifting the load in her arms.

"Just some sparring." Nicole grabs a small towel to wipe the sweat from her neck before stepping towards her. "Let me help you with that."

"I'm fine." Waverly snaps, stepping out of Nicole's reach. Her entire body is tense and it takes a moment for Wynonna to figure out why. God her sister is such a bonehead. "Nothing like working up a sweat with a little girl on girl action." She wiggles her eyebrows at her sister who begins to turn as red as Nicole's sudden blush.

"I'm... I'm gonna shower." Nicole comments, giving the youngest Earp a wide berth as she exits the room.

"What the hell, Wynonna?" Waverly yells as soon as the door closes.

Wynonna smirks as she pushes herself up. She wants to laugh but she remembers the day she returned to Purgatory and the gunshot that had nearly beheaded her when her sister got jealous. And that was just Champ. "What?"

"You are being completely inappropriate."

"Oh am I?" She snorts, grabbing her own towel to wipe away sweat she's sure isn't just her own. She tries not to think about it too much. "I mean.. she's pretty hot. I know for a fact she thinks my ass is top shelf. She told me herself." She can feel the energy bristling off the shorter woman but she's enjoying herself too much. "It's not like you're interested..."

Waverly tenses, even more than Wynonna thought possible. She's sure if her younger sister were a puppy, her hackles would be standing straight up "What? Having Dolls AND Doc on your beck and call aren't enough? You have to go after the one woman I..."

"Love?" Wynonna cuts her off. "That's funny, because you'd think if you loved her so much you'd... I dunno... want to be with her..." She knows her point is made by the way her sister deflates, usually confident shoulders slouching in defeat, her chin meeting her chest as she drops her eyes to the floor.

"It's not that simple. I thought you of all people would understand that." Her voice is a bare whisper, just a hint of a tremble beneath her words.

Wynonna moves to stand right in front of her, reaching out to curl a finger under her sister's jaw, forcing her to look up. "Isn't it though? I mean... love is love and all that shit. You two are totally gone on each other and you stupid heads are just hurting for no reason."

Waverly snuffles, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "If it's so easy, why haven't you got your own crud sorted out?"

That's the last thing Wynonna wants to think about. It's so much easier to focus on Nicole and Waverly's relationship since the answer seems so obvious for the two. "Ok, first off we're totally not talking about me. Second, that's none of your business and totally classified."

Now Waverly laughs, sniffing loudly. "I'm sorry, Deputy Marshall Dolls. I thought I was talking to my sister."

"Please." Wynonna puts on a faux disgusted look. "Dolls wishes he was as hot as me." She pulls the woman in for as much of a hug as a handful of coffee and donuts would allow, pressing a kiss to her forehead. It lasts only a brief moment before she's being roughly shouldered away.

"Ugh you need a shower." When Wynonna grins, Waverly quickly narrows her eyes. "After Nicole is done, you pervert."

"You sure are controlling for someone who's NOT her girlfriend anymore." Wynonna comments, snapping her towel at her. "Now gimme my damn donuts."

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Wynonna has barely eaten half a powdered donut when Dolls strides in and unceremoniously tells her that they need to investigate Gwendolyne Lafayette's former house of ill repute.

"That dump?" Wynonna asks, bits of sugar flying out of her mouth to Dolls' and Waverly's disgust. "No one could possibly be there. A stray fart could literally knock it down."

Dolls sighs. "It may be dangerous for a human, but not a revenant."

"Do we have to go right this instant? I haven't even showered."

"And that's stopping you now because...?"

Wynonna flips Dolls the bird while he walks to the bulletin board and unpins the blurry photo of Lafayette. He slides it into a manila folder and hands it to Waverly. "Earp, you and Haught talk to the locals near the crime scenes. See if you can find anyone who might have seen Lafayette or one of the victims."

Heart rate ticking up at the thought of working with Nicole, Waverly peeks into the folder and saw 5x8 prints of the victims' driver's license pictures underneath Lafayette's photo.

"Are you sure we can't switch or...?"

"Oh, don't be such a pussy, Waves," Wynonna says, polishing off the rest of her donut and licking her fingertips. Dolls raises an unamused eyebrow at Wynonna, who shrugs. "What? All you said was to stop saying vag." She pulls on her leather jacket.

Dolls shakes his head, lips flattening into a straight line. "If the revenant *is* at the Price Building, then it'd be safest for Wynonna and myself to go. Unless, of course, you'd rather Officer Haught go with Wynonna."

The scene she had interrupted earlier flashes through Waverly's mind, with a panting and sweaty Nicole straddling an equally panting and sweaty Wynonna. Even though she's pretty sure her older sister doesn't swing *that way* (at least she hopes) Waverly can't stop her stomach from

churning with lingering jealousy, like the bad indigestion she gets whenever Doc insists on sharing his favorite pork and beans with her.

"No, no," Waverly answers a little too quickly. "That's fine." She clears her throat and ignores the smirk Wynonna throws in her direction. "Does Nicole know already?"

"You can brief Officer Haught," Dolls says, already moving toward the door with Wynonna in tow. "Report back at 1700 hours."

"Sir, yes sir," Waverly says with a lazy salute when they're gone, nervously fiddling with the edge of the folder. She sets it down on the desk before she can give herself a paper cut.

She suddenly feels too wired. Too antsy. Too jittery. Investigating with Nicole should be no big deal, Waverly tries to lie to herself. Maybe she's had too much of the iced coffee - she had downed it quickly without realizing it, subconsciously motivated by thoughts of Nicole's toned, glistening abs. It was filling her up with anxiety as much as it was stretching her bladder.

Groaning, Waverly leaves the office and makes her way to the public restroom, which of course is closed for cleaning. With a deep sigh, she doubles back through the municipal offices and heads toward the single-occupancy bathroom the deputies usually use, only to be cut off unceremoniously by Officer Hawk, who mutters something about "respecting your elders" before shutting the door right in Waverly's face.

Normally, Waverly might have thought something unkind about the elderly deputy, something that might have made Wynonna proud, but her current predicament left her unable to focus on anything but the growing pressure in her bladder. Her only other option is the locker room. She's technically not allowed there, but necessity knows no law. She'd be in and out, and no one would be the wiser. She enters and is immediately blanketed by humidity fueled by shower steam. It smells sharp, like bleach and warm sweat, but underneath it all, Waverly can make out hints of vanilla and spice from Nicole's body wash. Closing her eyes briefly at the familiar scent, Waverly beelines to the stalls to take care of her business before Nicole finishes her shower.

But she's not quite fast enough. By the time she finishes, washes her hands, and heads toward the door, Nicole's rounding the corner of the lockers wrapped in nothing but a white terrycloth towel. Waverly pulls up short, mouth going dry, eyes traveling up long, bare legs and barely concealed curves. She can't stop herself from imagining what it would be like to run her tongue along Nicole's skin and capture the rivulets of water that drip from her hair, down her shoulders, and between the valley of her breasts.

It's a moment of weakness; one that Waverly knows she has no right to indulge. But she's only human, and she allows herself a second to dwell in the fantasy and feel the pull of desire before Nicole sees her and Waverly snaps back to reality.

"Sorry," Waverly blurts out, sweat beading on her flushed face. "The other restrooms were unavailable and..."

"It's fine," Nicole interrupts, not unkindly, one corner of her lips quirking up. "You never used to mind the view."

"I don't." Waverly winces when she realizes what she just said. "I mean, I just... don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything."

"I'm not," Nicole says in the same increasingly infuriating calm manner that she's adopted with Waverly since her return. "Are you?"

Waverly can't quite hold eye contact. "Me? Pshaw. No."

"Like you weren't uncomfortable earlier."

"Yeah, about that," Waverly grimaces. "I'm sorry. I didn't have the best morning and I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

Brow furrowing, Nicole tucks the towel around her tighter. "Are you okay?"

Shame spreads hot throughout her chest at the concern in Nicole's voice. She's hurt Nicole, one too many times. She knows that. And yet Nicole only ever responds with kindness. She really doesn't deserve Nicole, Waverly thinks.

"No," she says, surprising even herself with her honesty. The nightmare she had still clings to the edges of her consciousness, a constant reminder of why she continues to keep Nicole at arm's length.

"Waverly..."

"But I'm *trying* to be." It's the truth, for whatever that's worth. She owes Nicole at least that much.

The confession shifts something between them, a subtle understanding that ripples in the surrounding air.

"Good." Nicole's expression softens as she smiles at Waverly. It's not the mannered upturn of lips that Waverly has been receiving of late. Nicole truly smiles, small but genuine, and Waverly feels herself melting, dangerously so. She needs to put some distance between them again before she does anything foolish.

"So, um, Dolls wanted us to see if anyone near the crime scenes might recognize Lafayette," Waverly says.

"Okay." Nicole nods. Waverly awkwardly shifts from one foot to the other, but otherwise doesn't move. Nicole lifts an eyebrow at her, hands moving to unwrap the towel. "Were you gonna stay and watch or...?"

Waverly tenses and ducks her head. "I'll see you in the office."

Scurrying out of the locker room, she hears Nicole chuckle as the door closes behind her, grateful for the air-conditioning out in the hallway to cool her overheated skin.

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Waverly's sifting through a large box filled to the brim with paper photocopies when Nicole returns. She's in her uniform, hair now dry but still loose, white stetson in hand. She looks so damn pretty that Waverly's heart throbs. Like it always does whenever she sees Nicole. Like it probably always will.

"What's all this?" Nicole asks as she sets the hat down on the desk and stands next to Waverly at a respectable distance, but close enough that Waverly catches a whiff of her fresh, sweet scent. Her proximity causes the fine hairs along Waverly's arms to rise.

"Oh, uh." Waverly grabs a stack out, hoping she doesn't sound as flustered as she feels. "When

Wynonna came back, I decided to supplement my research from Purgatory's archives by requesting microfiche copies of local newspapers where known revenants lived before moving here. I just never got around to organizing them all."

"So these are the files from New Orleans?"

"Yup. If anyone's gonna recognize Gwendolyne Lafayette, it's not gonna be from that crappy photo from our library."

Nicole nods. "All right, well, let me fix my hair and then I'll help you out."

"I could do it for you."

The offer comes unbidden and Waverly doesn't even know what possesses her to say it. Biting her bottom lip, she meets Nicole's surprised gaze.

"I mean, it'd be faster," Waverly tries to explain, but it sounds lame even to her own ears.

Nicole's light brown eyes dart across Waverly's face, searching for what, she's not sure. But right when Waverly thinks she'll be rejected, Nicole nods.

"Okay." She rolls out one of the chairs and sits, pulling a hair band from her wrist and handing it to Waverly, who slips it onto her own.

Waverly places her hands on the back of the chair and swivels Nicole toward the stacks of paper on the desk. "Make yourself useful."

"Yes ma'am."

Even though she can't see it, Waverly can hear the smile in Nicole's voice and she begins, combing her fingers through smooth auburn strands as Nicole leafs through the copied newspaper clippings. Her nails scratch lightly along Nicole's scalp and she swears she hears Nicole's breath catch, enough so that Waverly suspects that Nicole perhaps isn't as unaffected by her as she appears.

Waverly works quickly and efficiently, threading Nicole's hair into the tight braid the officer liked. When she's about halfway done, Nicole holds up one sheet.

"According to this, Lafayette and her husband started a burlesque club called *Champagne Imaginaire*," she says.

Hands stilling, Waverly squints at the picture. Like their other photo, Lafayette stands outside of a small building, this time with her husband. The couple is flanked by scantily clad dancers showcasing their long, shapely legs.

"We still can't see her face," Waverly comments with a shake of her head.

"Yeah," Nicole agrees and continues searching. "Nice picture though, murderer-turned-demon aside."

"Why, Officer, I never pegged you as someone who objectifies women."

"I'm not objectifying." Nicole tries to turn her head, but Waverly grips her hair tighter to hold her in place. "I'm just appreciating aesthetics."

Waverly hums. "So would you say their asses are top shelf?"

Nicole fumbles some of the papers, but quickly recovers and clears her throat. "They're not visible in the photograph."

"Uh huh." Waverly continues braiding, perhaps tugging harder than strictly necessary. Just a tad. "But Wynonna's is pretty visible, right?"

"I was trying to make her feel better." Nicole winces. "Dolls was gone. You were busy with your bridesmaid party. The town hated her. She was all alone and in obvious need of a friend."

Waverly couldn't fault Nicole for being her usual sweet self, but that didn't stop her for continuing to tease her.

"So you cheered her up by complimenting her ass?" She asks as she finishes and ties the ends of Nicole's hair.

"Well," Nicole coughs, "yeah." She reaches a hand behind her head and tentatively tests the braid. "Thanks," she mumbles, cheeks pink.

"You're welcome."

Waverly bites her cheek to keep from asking how her ass compares to Wynonna's; she's dying to know, even if it is a bit creepy as all get out. Instead, she rolls up another chair and sits, grabbing a different pile of paper.

They work silently and, for once, not uncomfortably. The sheets rustle between their fingers in a soothing kind of white noise. They share interesting articles they come across with each other, laughing at some particularly colorful women's advice and society columns in *The Picayune*, and Waverly marvels still at how Nicole's mere presence can put her at ease so effortlessly.

"Wave," Nicole tentatively says after several minutes, not looking up from her stack. "For what it's worth, it doesn't compare to yours."

"What doesn't?" Waverly asks, distracted.

"You really gonna make me spell it out? Your..."

"Oh. My. God."

"Shit. I crossed a line, didn't I?" Nicole backtracks. "I did. Just forget I said anything."

"What?" Waverly shakes her head. "No. Look at this." She slides a copy of a "Society Bee" column with the headline: *Natural Causes or Foul Play?* Beneath it is a large, and fairly clear picture of none other than Gwendolyne Lafayette. Dark hair frames an angular and beautiful face, her expression as austere as the choker necklace around her neck.

"Well I'll be damned," Nicole says. "Well done, Ms. Consultant."

Grinning, Waverly slides the printout into the manila folder, stands, and walks to the door. "Let's go, sweet talker." She's giddy with excitement; so high from the thrill of the mystery that she doesn't even think twice when she adds an extra sway to her hips and says: "Try not to stare."

She hears Nicole splutter and scramble to her feet behind her, and her grin grows even wider.

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They start in the neighborhood of Victim #4, aka Mr. Lanchester, going door-to-door to the immediately surrounding houses. The residents are mostly retirees, who delight in having visitors. One neighbor, Margaret Frazier, spends most of the time telling Waverly how she thinks the bingo machine at Shorty's has been rigged ever since Bobo Del Rey's ownership and that Gus needs to get it fixed already before she loses a customer.

"I'll be sure to tell Gus," Waverly promises Mrs. Frazier. She lifts up the picture of Lafayette. "But do you recall seeing this woman with Mr. Lanchester at any point?"

Margaret puts on her bifocals, which hang from her neck on a long chain, and squints at the photo. "Who is that, dear? Angelica Jolly? Why would she be with Stevie Lanchester when she's got that Chad Titt fella."

"That's a very good point, Mrs. Frazier." Waverly pastes a smile on her face to hide a grimace, while Nicole chuckles and hands the old woman a business card.

"If you remember anything suspicious, Mrs. Frazier, just give me a call," Nicole says politely.

"Suspicious? Now that you mention it, honey, there was one time..." Margaret talks their ears off for another 15 minutes until Nicole's portable radio crackles and she pretends she has to respond to some other emergency, rattling off random police codes.

Yet another neighbor, Mr. Kuhn, regales Nicole with his neighborhood watch efforts to stop hooligans from defacing his garden gnomes.

"What about Mr. Lanchester?" Nicole asks him. "Do you recall seeing anything unusual during your, um, patrols?"

"Dunno if I'd call it unusual, per se, but I did see him escorting a young lady to his house the other night."

"You did?" Nicole takes the photo from Waverly. "This woman?"

Mr. Kuhn stares at the picture. "Maybe," he says and Waverly's spirits rise and then instantly deflates when he adds: "Maybe not. It was too dark for me to really see. But I remember hearing really beautiful music."

"Music?"

"Yeah, I can't really describe it. It was like no instrument I'd ever heard. But it stopped once they got in the house." Mr. Kuhn's eyes turn glassy, a dreamy expression on his face until Nicole clears her throat and he shakes his head. "I did see the woman leaving his house in the middle of the same night."

"Do you remember which direction she went?"

He shrugs. "Back toward town, I'd assume. Though she went south on Maple instead of north. Not sure why she'd take a roundabout route."

Nicole thanks him and leaves her card before leading Waverly back to her patrol car.

"The no-tell motel where the female victim, Lourdes Smally, was found is to the south, just on the outskirts of town," Waverly observes as they both slide into their seats and buckle their seatbelts.

"Then that's where we'll head next," Nicole says.

When they arrive, the seedy motel manager, Walter Wackenhut, doesn't even look up from his copy of *Hustler* as he informs them in a lazy drawl that it'll be \$10 an hour or \$35 for four. He's chewing on a large wad of salt water taffy, mouth smacking as loudly as a masticating cow.

Waverly instantly goes red, but somehow maintains her composure enough to calmly say, "No, Walter, that's not why we're here." She pushes aside her involuntary mental calculations that, if she and Nicole were still together, they could easily spend over \$100 dollars, given Nicole's impressive stamina.

Walter, a regular at Shorty's, nearly chokes on his candy when he recognizes Waverly and the frowning deputy behind her.

"Oh, Waverly. Officer." He quickly closes his magazine and shoves it underneath his desk. "What can I do you for?"

Nicole steps forward and slaps the photo of Smally on the window separating them from Walter. "Remember her?"

"The girl who was murdered," Walter answers instantly. "I already talked to the Sheriff's office and that scary deputy marshall. Turned over our security camera footage too."

"Right," Nicole says. "We have a new person of interest in the case." She holds up the photo of Lafayette. "Do you recall seeing this woman at all?"

Walter blinks at the photo. "Can't say that I do."

"Do you remember hearing any music?" Waverly pipes up.

"Music? No." Walter's forehead scrunches up then smoothes out as he remembers something. "Although, I had fallen asleep. And I swear someone singin' woke me up. But I didn't have the radio or boobtube on. No one was around."

Waverly and Nicole trade looks and thank him for his time.

"A singing demon?" Nicole comments as they leave the motel and drive to their final destination: Purgatory's "red-light" district, where the first two victims had been found outside the PaperMoon "gentlemen's" club. "There's never a dull moment 'round here, is there?"

"No, there really isn't," Waverly says, thinking back to Gus's comments a few weeks ago. Death really does permeate all of Purgatory. If it isn't one demon, it's another trying to kill them all. And it wouldn't end until Wynonna breaks the curse. *If* she breaks the curse. Maybe then...

They fall into another companionable silence, neither one feeling the need to fill the space with unnecessary small talk. It all feels so normal. So *right*. That Waverly's nearly lulled into forgetting that they're no longer together. Stealing glances at Nicole's gorgeous profile-eyes tracing the smooth lines of her forehead and nose and lips.

Her gaze settles on the small bloom of bluish purple forming along her cheek bone, a souvenir from her sparring match with Wynonna. Waverly almost reaches out to skim her fingers along the fresh bruise, but catches herself fast enough to cross her arms and keep her hands from straying.

On the way, they pass through the town's industrial sector, which features a sewing thread manufacturer, a bottling company and other plants. The newest one, Waverly explains, is a small salt water taffy factory that went into production in the last few months.

"I used to love that stuff growing up," Nicole says.

"Yeah?"

"Ate it so much my older sister Hayley said I'd turn into one," Nicole chuckles at the memory. "I believed her too so I stopped. Little did I know she just said that to eat my stash. Sisters, right?"

"Yeah," Waverly murmurs. "It's kinda funny, you wouldn't think it, but Wynonna always looked out for me. Would always share her dessert with me or her Halloween candy. Willa though..." Waverly shakes her head and falls silent. Her chest still clenches painfully whenever she thinks about her eldest sister and the havoc she wreaked. And Waverly, Earp or not, intentionally or not, had followed right in her footsteps.

Nicole doesn't say anything, but merely lays a hand on Waverly's knee and squeezes gently. It's a simple gesture of kindness and understanding, and affection blooms in Waverly's chest, tendrils of warmth unfurling with every beat of her heart. Waverly only smiles in response and, taking a chance, lays her hand atop Nicole's and keeps it there, looking out the window and smiling when Nicole doesn't move either.

They maintain that position all the way to the strip club, both avoiding eye contact as they separate and exit the police cruiser. As they approach the entrance, the front door opens and a customer stumbles onto their path. A familiar customer with blond hair and muscles and little much else.

"*Champ!*?" Waverly asks incredulously.

"Oh, hey there, Wave," he says, not embarrassed in the slightest at being spotted at PaperMoon before noon. "Fancy meetin' you here." He notices Nicole and stiffens immediately. "Officer."

"Champ," Nicole greets brusquely, hands framing her belt buckle and straightening to her full height.

"Heard you two broke up," Champ snorts. "Guess you weren't so *hot* after all."

Nostrils flaring slightly, Nicole advances on Champ, who takes a step back, but Waverly holds her back with a hand to her bicep.

"Hey, why don't you go ahead and pop in and I'll join you in a few," Waverly says, hoping to diffuse the growing tension between her exes. Nicole looks like she's about to refuse, but Waverly slides her hand down to Nicole's forearm and squeezes. "Okay?"

Nicole stares Champ down, jaw clenching, but she nevertheless accedes with a small nod.

"Okay." She brushes past Champ and just narrowly avoids clipping him with her shoulder.

When Nicole disappears inside, Waverly rounds on a smirking Champ. "A strip club? Really?"

"Oh here we go," Champ rolls his eyes. "You know, that's one thing I always hated when we were together. How judgey you are."

Waverly holds up a hand and shakes her head. "Judgey?"

"Yes, judgey. There's no harm in going to a nudie bar. But you always think you're right and you get these ideas of how you *think* people should be. But you set the bar so high that no one can ever live up to it."

Waverly balls her hands into fists, counting to 10...in Latin...to keep her temper in check. She wouldn't let Champ get her goat. Not anymore. He no longer had that power.

"Look, I'm not here to fight with you." She takes a deep breath. "Just... be careful. There've been two murders near this club."

Champ's eyes widen at the news. "Seriously?"

Waverly nods. "I wouldn't want you to be the third." And she means it. They might not have worked out as a couple, but that doesn't mean she wants anything to happen to the doofus.

Champ blows out a puff of air. "Thanks Waves. Maybe you should let other people know too."

"It *was* in the paper, Champ."

"Oh." He looks confused but then shrugs. "Still. It'd probably help. Especially since chicks come here now too."

Waverly's brow wrinkles. "Chicks?"

"Yeah, I mean, like the new one who's been coming here lately."

Waverly's heart hammers in her chest. "What does she look like?"

"Like, completely bangable."

She nearly smacks him when Nicole reappears. Waverly snatches the manila folder out of her hand. She pulls out the photo of Lafayette and shows Champ.

"Like this?"

"That's her!" He exclaims. "Except her hair is different."

"Different how?" Waverly asks.

"It's like silver."

"And have you seen her recently?" Nicole interjects, quickly catching on to the conversation.

He scowls at Nicole but answers anyway, "Almost every night."

Waverly looks at Nicole, who meets her gaze, the implication sinking in for them both.

"Thanks Champ," Waverly says. "Remember what I said."

Champ nods once and, with one last glare at Nicole, continues down the sidewalk to his pickup truck.

"Dolls should be pleased," Nicole says as they walk back to the car, gaze lingering on Champ's fading tail lights.

"Yeah," Waverly agrees, pausing after she opens the passenger-side door. "We make a pretty good team."

"We do," Nicole says simply, eyes soft as she looks at Waverly over the top of her cruiser.

Waverly bites her lip, debating. She thinks about her earlier conversation with Wynonna and, despite her uncertainty, decides to go out on a limb. "We should do this again some time."

"What? Investigate demon serial killers?"

Waverly nervously chuckles as she settles into her seat. "Sure. Or we could just...hang out sometime."

"Hang out?"

"Yeah, like, tomorrow maybe. After your shift." Waverly's heart hammers so hard against her ribs that she's convinced her bones will crack as she waits for Nicole to respond.

Nicole doesn't answer for several long beats. "I can't tomorrow."

Waverly swallows past a lump in her throat. "No?"

Nicole starts the engine. "Yeah, I... I've actually got plans," she says tentatively.

"What, like a date?" Waverly means for it to be a joke, but it comes out a little too edgy, a little too concerned.

Nicole peels away from the curb and sets a course back to the station before she answers, "Something like that, I guess." She keeps her eyes trained on the road as she speaks.

"Oh." It feels like a blow to her solar plexus, and Waverly finds herself stunned. Air knocked right out of her lungs, she's momentarily unable to respond as she processes that Nicole has a date. Probably. Maybe. Most likely. A date with some other woman. "Okay. Another time then."

"Sure," Nicole responds, but it sounds so very much like the lie people tell each other when they really have no real intention of making good on their word.

Waverly sinks into the car's cushions, a deep ache spreading throughout her chest. When she had awoken from her nightmare that morning, she didn't think it'd be possible to feel worse. Oh how wrong she was. And now she has to remind herself to breathe.

## Chapter 5

"Strip club!" Wynonna hops off the table with a huge grin.

Waverly winces. She's explained their findings to Wynonna and Dolls, especially Champ's tip, and her sister is a little too excited about the prospect.

"We are not to enter the establishment." Dolls gives the Earp heir a stern look, slipping on his jacket and checking his side arm. "This is not going to be like the last time we went to a club, either. Just you, me, cold coffee, and stale donuts." He smiles, that boyish smile that he can barely contain when he's planning to do something "official".

Wynonna frowns. "You know we can stop somewhere to pick something up..." Her voice trails off at Dolls's stern look. "...fresh donuts..."

Waverly watches the two of them with a weary eye. She flips through the notes from the day before, trying not to think about the old woman sitting in the seat normally inhabited by Nicole. When she'd walked in that morning, Nicole's favorite coffee in hand and her mind made up to not give up on whatever was rebuilding between her and the redhead, she'd nearly stumbled seeing Gertrude taking up the front desk.

Her heart had sunk, learning Nicole had called out. Was it her fault? Was it because she'd asked to hang out? Maybe they weren't to that point yet... Or maybe... maybe she was really interested in the mystery person. Was this date so important that she needed the entire day to prepare for it?

Maybe Nicole had gone to the city to purchase a new outfit. Possibly get a haircut? Maybe a manicure to get her nails tended to in the event of...

Waverly shakes her head, focusing on the stack of papers in front of her. As she waves to Wynonna and Dolls who slip out the door still arguing, she knows she's being ridiculous, but her brain can't control itself.

That is the worst care scenario. The possibility that she's completely blown it terrifies her beyond words. Was it a first date? Was it a possible one night stand or an old flame? Someone who knows Nicole way better than anyone in Purgatory ever could? Maybe while Nicole was back home, something had happened.

She's feeling the darkness consume her again, not like before, not like the heat that had taken over her completely, but a cloudiness that drags her thoughts to a place she tries not to think about.

Waverly finds herself back where she was the day she broke up with the deputy, overwhelmed once more by shame and self doubt. Who would want to be with her anyway? She's damaged. She'd hurt so many people, it was safer for Nicole to be far away from her.

Nicole deserves to be happy and safe.

As for herself, Waverly acknowledges, she deserves to be alone.

The despair doesn't stop her heart from beating faster as a shadow fills the frosted door, a slim form wearing a hat that raises her hopes before the door opens and a mustached face pops in.

Doc drags his eyes around the room and Waverly swears she sees disappointment in his eyes.

"She's not here." She knows who he's looking for, who he's always looking for.

Stepping fully into the room, Doc closes the door behind him. "If you are insinuating I came here just to see your sister, you are quite wrong. This is, after all, none other than the office of one Deputy Marshall Dolls." He says with certainty. "As it would be, I happen to be privy to some information that would prove quite important, regarding one Mrs. Gwendolyne Lafayette."

Waverly perks up. "Well, they're on a stakeout. Nicole and I found out she frequents the PaperMoon almost every night so they're gonna see if they can track her." The officer's name tastes bitter in her mouth, reminding her of her predicament.

"That seems like such an awful waste of one's time considering I have managed to procure the location of our perpetrator's preferred domicile." When Waverly raises an eyebrow at him, he nods. "Through means in which I would rather not discuss, I have convinced not one, but three separate inhabitants of the trailer park, once ruled by the recently departed Bobo Del Ray, that it is in their best interests to tell me where such a woman might find respite. As luck would have it, she has taken up residence in her previous home known as Lafayette's."

Her brows furrowing, Waverly shakes her head. "Dolls and Wynonna already checked out the Price building. They said no one was there."

"As talented as the Deputy Marshall is at getting captured, and with as much faith as I have in Wynonna's ever so focused investigatory skills, I think it would be worth our while to perhaps take a closer look."

Tired of leafing through files and lingering on thoughts of Nicole on some date, Waverly stands up. "Alright. Let's do this."

Doc freezes, his mustache twitching. "Now when I said we, surely I..." Waverly glares at him and he clears his throat. "Perhaps we might wait for your sister or the Deputy Marshall to accompany us?"

"Or maybe you could grow a pair." Waverly throws his way before grabbing a flashlight.

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Doc watches as the brunette takes charge, her lack of caution as she squeezes her way into the dilapidated building just a tad worrisome. He's noticed the change in her the past week, the way she seems to have shut the entire world off. Previously, he had begun to see a little bit of the light she once possessed, returning to her eyes. Now, he notices just a weary uncertainty there, a thin layer of ice on the river just waiting to break and swallow her whole.

In his long life, he's borne witness to many trials. While he spent over a century alone, trapped in the darkness of the dried up underground river, he'd gone through a myriad of emotions. He knew guilt, despair, loss, sorrow. He knew what it was like to live with the consequences of his own decisions without the possibility of ever making up for any wrong doing. He went into the well one man, and emerged another.

They couldn't risk those emotions interfering as they entered what was no doubt enemy territory.

Darkness consumes him as he slips into the building, wishing he had been allowed to bring a lamp. Instead he's forced to work with a directed beam of light that fails to illuminate the entire area as he would prefer. There are many changes that have occurred in the world, some that he admits have been quite an improvement, but this is one he feels is completely unintelligent.

"Be careful there." He tells Waverly who's made her way to the center of the room. She's

inspecting some overturned tables without any care of her surroundings.

It's dangerous, the distraction in her eyes. He knows he has to put a stop to it, to get her back into the present danger that surrounds them. "Waverly, I cannot help but notice you are not entirely in the moment right now. Perhaps one would benefit with remaining in the vehicle while I look around."

Waverly freezes, turning to narrow her eyes at him. "Did you just tell me to wait in the car? That's pretty sexist of you."

One hand settling on his hip, he tips his hat back just a bit to look her in the eyes. "This has nothing to do with you being a lady, Miss Earp." He blows some dust free of his mustache, wrinkling his nose at the scent of mold. "I have known many fine and brave members of the fairer sex, but I must point out that since you and Officer Haught have, for some unknown and no doubtedly ridiculous reason, parted ways, your focus has been, dare I say, less than adequate."

"Ridiculous?" Waverly huffs. Her body has gone rigid with defense. "You don't know what you're talking about. Besides, you're one to talk, considering you've all but given up on Wynonna." She shakes her head.

Doc shines his light around the room, knowing this is probably not the place to have this discussion. He certainly doesn't want to have it with Waverly. Pouring out his frustration about Wynonna's betrayal by freeing the stone witch? Or talk about the entire predicament with Wynonna and Dolls? To her little sister? Not likely.

"My relationship with your sister does not compare to your own with the lovely officer." He makes sure to be on the lookout for any revenant presence, tracking the inadequate beam of light up the stairs that leads to the balcony that overhangs half of the room, his memories painting the walls with fresh paint and upbeat melodies pouring from the piano that now sits lifeless in the corner, having caved in on itself years ago. "I have never seen anyone so far gone for another person as Officer Haught is for you and she simply has eyes for no other. The same cannot be said about Wynonna."

Waverly seems to pause, looking down at the rotted floor. He hopes his words have penetrated her morose shell but she shakes her head. "I can't be so sure about that anymore. She has a date tonight." She shines her light around the room but Doc can see her eyes have stopped actually any sort of observation. "It's probably for the best. With what I've done to her..."

Doc huffs. He knows they need to get this out of the way, lest the youngest Earp get them killed with her nonchalant investigation. "What you've done?" He realizes she's remembered more than she's spoken about. He had been against keeping the truth from her, but Wynonna had insisted that none of them speak of it. She'd pulled the sister card and he knew when his hand was bested, but now, the cards were on the table.

"You speak as if you were in control of your own actions."

Waverly shrugs in accepted defeat. "Control or not, they were still my actions." She leans against a table, her arms crossing over her chest. The wood groans just slightly, but it holds her weight easily. "No one wanted to tell me, but I remember it all. I remember hurting everyone. I remember the fear in her eyes, in Wynonna's, in yours..."

Doc can't help but laugh, and he sees the surprise in her face. "Well there's your problem. If you honestly believe that fear might be stricken into me by such a tiny bit like you," he shakes his head in disbelief, "you have lost your senses. I thought you were the intelligent one of the Earps." Taking his hat off, he runs his hand through his damp hair, the heat of the enclosed building

bordering on sweltering. "You misunderstand completely and had you bothered to inquire to the nature of said terror, any one of us would undoubtedly have explained that the fear you so easily claim as directed at you, was in fact, FOR you."

Waverly is silent, her eyes cast down as the toe of her boots scuff the ground.

He lets his eyes travel around the room, a quick scan of danger before focusing on the brunette once more. "You couldn't be evil even if you tried. You seem to remember all the damage that monster did and all the people it hurt, but you neglect the greatest victim of them all." Finally he gets her to look up, a question in her eyes. "You. No matter how many blows that beast dealt out, no matter what hatred it spewed or blood it spilled, its main victim was you." He shook his head solemnly. "What horror you must have experienced, locked away in such a manner as to lose all control, having to watch some beast attack everyone you love."

He watches as her eyes fill with tears and he feels a bit of discomfort. He doesn't handle emotions well. "You are a fine lady, Miss Earp, and while I have lived more years than I care to think about, I can say you are one of the bravest, most kind-hearted humans I've ever met and dare I say, I am proud to call you a friend." He expects it, but still the hug catches him unprepared. What was it about these Earp sisters that required so much physical attention? He quickly pats her back awkwardly before stepping back. "As much as I appreciate the sentiment, perhaps we should focus on the mission at hand."

Waverly nods, wiping away tears with the back of her hand.

Now that the emotional nonsense is out of the way, Doc gets back to business. "The upstairs has numerous rooms that could house our target. The floor level has nought but the bar and the storage room back there." He shines his light against a door against one wall that is slightly ajar.

Waverly at least manages a small smile. "So you um... you frequent this place often back in the good ol days?"

"Whether I did or did not is hardly the point of this visit, Miss Earp. You best keep your eyes open, lest you miss something your sister and Deputy Marshall Dolls failed to notice." While he appreciates that her mood has improved, he has no intention of answering in the affirmative, as one thing he's learned from the online thing is that such things are no longer acceptable in these days. How a country that was built on the monetary contribution of hard working women could dare outlaw such a fine profession, he doesn't know, but there are so many things he will never understand about the current century.

As they move to the door, he feels that something is amiss. There's a thickness of anticipation in the air, and he wonders if it is his own, Waverly's, or perhaps something else completely. As Waverly inspects the door, he lets his light travel over the balcony above them, the wood rotted from years of exposure and neglect. The hair on his arms raise and he feels the thrill of danger. "Waverly. I think..."

That's when he hears it. With as many hangings as he's seen in his life, he recognizes the sound of rope going taut, followed by the sound of cracking wood. "Waverly!" He wraps his arm around her waist, quickly pulling her back and almost completely out of the way before the balcony collapses. They haven't gotten completely free and he feels an impact against his back.

For a second he's brought back to the well, trapped in a system of underground tunnels that are too far down to find a way out of. He smells nothing but dirt and decay and the loneliness he felt for over a hundred years returns. His consciousness lingers on darkness until the stale air mixed with dust and mold fills his lungs and it brings him back to the present. He's coughing, trying to find a clear breath of air in the clouded room.

"Waverly."

Doc grunts as he pushes back the rotted wood that has forced them to the ground. The collapsed balcony has missed them for the most part, but they are far from unscathed. His body has managed to protect most of Waverly, but blood wells up from a cut on her brow and she groans before opening her eyes. "Are you alright?" He notices the slight glassiness of her eyes and removes a handkerchief from his pocket, pressing it to her forehead.

"That was... not expected." Waverly's voice shakes just slightly as she blinks uncertainly. A quick check reveals a bump on the back of her head from the impact against the floor but nothing serious. "I don't think that was a coincidence."

"I do believe you are correct." Doc urges her to take the cloth from his hand before he absorbs the scene around them as the dust begins to settle. The second floor balcony has somehow fallen on them just at the moment they are under it? Not likely. He lets his eyes scan the area, careful of where he steps through the rotted rubble.

Something catches his eye and Doc kneels down, his fingers tracing a mark on one of the main beams. It's an even line cut into the wood, probably by a saw, and not a naturally decayed break. Further inspection leads to the other part of the beam, a rope, too clean to have been there for decades, is tied around the wood, the end disappearing into a mass of wreckage.

A trap. He knows that's exactly what it is. He'd been foolish enough to trust revenants and it had almost gotten Waverly killed. Looking around quickly, the anticipation he felt before is gone. Whoever it was that had pulled the balcony down, they're long gone.

With a shake of his head, he pushes himself up and moves back to the side of the youngest Earp. "I do apologize for dragging you into this, Waverly. It most certainly was a clever ploy, no doubt set up by those hooligans at the trailer park."

"Unless you actually pulled the roof down on us, it's not your fault." Waverly groans. She's getting a headache and the smell of the rotting wood is causing her stomach to revolt. "Just a suggestion but... maybe we should... not be here anymore?"

"I couldn't agree more, Miss Earp." Doc rescues his hat from the ground, dusting off shards of moldy wood before setting it on his head and wrapping an arm around her waist for support.

They manage to escape the building without further hassle and Doc can see Waverly is spent, leaning against the Jeep. Without much hesitation, he snatches the keys from her hands.

"Hey."

"I'll not have you killing us with your scrambled noggin right now. Just relax. I've been practicing." He starts the Jeep up, waiting for Waverly to buckle herself in before he puts it in drive, the gears grinding loudly.

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"Clutch!" Waverly yells again before the grinding is silenced. Not much longer and the jeep jerks to a stop, a cloud of dust surrounding them as the Jeep sputters a few more times before Doc shuts the engine off. She's nearly vomited no less than three times from Doc's driving and she's sure she'll have to take it in to get the transmission checked out. She's had a dilapidated building try to take her out but the most dangerous thing she's experienced all day was Doc trying to drive. "You definitely need more practice."

Prying her eyes open, she winces at the brightness. Her head is pounding and she wants nothing more than to lay down. Looking down, she's covered in dirt and her clothes are stained by rotted wood and blood. She smells horrible and she knows it. They're in front of the station and thankfully, the building has a shower and she doesn't care if she's not supposed to use it. The last thing she needs is for...

"Waverly?"

Waverly freezes as the station door opens and Nicole steps out. The officer is lacking her uniform, instead wearing a pair of jeans and a sleeveless white top covered by a long green vest. Auburn hair is out of its normal braid, framing her face in the way Waverly loves so much. Even with a black eye that's darkened nicely, she's gorgeous. This was definitely the last thing she needed. "Nicole..."

"Oh my God, are you ok?" Nicole looks like she's about to reach forward, but stops, her hand dropping to her side. "What the hell happened?" When Waverly doesn't answer, she directs the question at Doc who's standing behind her in the same state of disarray.

Waverly sees nothing but concern in carmel colored eyes and she feels a wave of relief that the woman doesn't hate her for the previous day. "I'm ok." She smiles weakly, trying not to let on how comforted she is just to be in the woman's presence. "We were inspecting Lafayette's after we got a tip that the revenant would be..." Her words trail off as the sheriff's door opens again and a blonde steps out. The tall woman looks around for a moment before turning towards their small group, her hand settling casually on the officer's shoulder.

"Nic, I cannot believe you..." Her voice sound ridiculously heavenly and trails off as light hazel eyes rake over Waverly. "My God. Are you alright?"

Waverly feels a grip in her chest as she realizes the woman is with Nicole. The nausea she felt subsiding comes back with a vengeance as she takes in the lithe form. The woman is tall, and not just because of the heeled ankle boots. She's wearing tight jeans that sheathe perfect curves like a second skin and a shirt that's slightly transparent enough to see the outline of her bra. This woman, who is so casual with Nicole, has the most gorgeous blonde curls she's ever seen and a face that could launch a thousand ships.

Covered in dirt, blood, and God knows what else, Waverly gets slightly lightheaded.

"Wave? Are you okay?"

"She's fine, just a bit disoriented." Doc is quick to respond, which is fortunate since Waverly has lost the ability to move. "She just hit her head, that's all."

"Maybe I should take a look? I am a doctor and you might have a concussion."

Of course she is, Waverly thinks. Gorgeous, educated, impeccable. Waverly feels as though there's some cosmic scale of her and this woman and as a simple waitress in a backwater town, things are tipping against her favor.

"I'm fine." Waverly quickly interjects, surprised at the anger that's suddenly filling her. Was this the date? Nicole seems unconcerned by how close the blonde intruder is standing beside her. Has the woman never heard of personal space? "Who are you again?" She doesn't mean to sound rude...or maybe she does. Something inside her begins to unfurl, a beast that takes control of her mind and intentions, clouding her vision with shades of green.

"Oh!" Nicole has the nerve to blush, as if she hasn't noticed Helen of Troy standing beside her.

"Chloe, this is Waverly. Wave, this is my...friend from back home, Chloe. She's just visiting for a few days."

Waverly's eyes narrow at the way Nicole trips over the word friend. There's something she's holding back and it sits uneasily on her consciousness.

"Oh." Large eyes that sparkle in the sunlight widen just slightly. "You're Waverly. It's quite a pleasure..." The blonde invader holds out her perfectly tapered fingers with her perfectly manicured nails in greeting, but when the gesture isn't reciprocated, she lets it drop. "I'll... I'll wait for you in the car. It was nice to meet you." She smiles half a smile, as if she knows she's won, as if she knows how much better she is than Waverly.

Waverly wishes she had her shotgun.

"I'll... see you inside." Doc mumbles, circling the pair and escaping into the building. Waverly can't not notice the way his eyes linger on the blonde's ass. No one ever looked at her that way. Not that she wants Doc's attention, but she had always been the cute one. Little adorable Waverly too short to reach the top shelf, always the one told to wait in the car or hide in the closet. Imperfect Waverly that gets kidnapped and possessed by demons and needs to be rescued all the time.

"Are you really ok?" This time Nicole actually reaches out, but Waverly steps back, arms crossed over her chest.

"So, this *friend*. Is she the one you're going on a date with tonight?" What hurts the most is how much it makes sense, how much Nicole would be better off with someone not wrapped up in the bullshit that revolves around her family name...Wynonna's family name. Not hers. Not anymore.

Nicole raises her eyebrows. "She's just a friend, Waverly, but yes. We do have plans for tonight."

"Is that what you were doing when you went home? Who you were doing?" She doesn't even know why she's saying that. It's like she can't control herself again, but the only thing possessing her is her own insecurity. "She seems mighty comfortable for this to be a first date."

Nicole gives her an incredulous look. "It's not like that, Waverly. We haven't dated in years. She's just a really good friend."

Waverly's eyes narrow once more. Her rage is irrational, she knows it, but she can't stop herself. "So let me get this straight. You're going on a date tonight with your ex? You can't really expect me to believe that you're *just friends*."

Now it's Nicole's eyes that narrow. "Yes. That's exactly what's going on." Her nostrils flare and she takes a step back, putting even more space between them. In its place lays a galaxy of longing and desire, uncertainty and hurt, betrayal and confusion. "Quite frankly I'm not sure how any of that is your business."

Waverly feels the bite in the words. She rarely sees Nicole upset and she's unable to fight back the emotions that take over. She loathes the idea that Nicole is choosing this perfect Barbie doll over her, but she knows there's nothing she can do about it. This is all her fault. She's the one that broke things off.

"You're right. It's none of my business." Waverly's eyes suddenly brimming with tears, the last thing she wants is Nicole seeing her cry. She pushes past the tall woman, not wanting to deal with the situation anymore. Pulling the door open, she rushes inside, ignoring the sound of her name on the wind.



## Chapter 6

Gus McCready loves the Earps. She truly does. Loves them like she popped 'em out herself, like her own flesh and blood. But every so often, she wants to smack 'em. Give 'em one good wallop to knock some sense back into 'em.

She would never raise a hand to the girls, of course. But that doesn't mean she's never tempted.

The majority of the time, it's Wynonna who's on the receiving end of Gus's ire. It's so very rarely Waverly. And yet, Gus thinks the moon must be full and blue tonight because she feels an overwhelming urge to slap Waverly upside her pretty head if she doesn't quit wallowing in her self-created pity and get her shit together.

"You should have seen her, Gus," Waverly moans, forehead pressed down on the just polished mahogany bar. She's been moping all morning long, sour from meeting Nicole's ex. Gus had thought she'd get over it eventually, whenever eventually arrives. No such luck. "She was like a freakin' supermodel. With her stupid golden curls and golden eyes and gorgeous face."

"I didn't believe you the first three times," Gus says, wiping down a wine glass and hangs it upside down from an overhead rack. "But it's startin' to sink in. Now you gonna help me with these or what? We've got 10 minutes 'til opening."

Waverly lets out a muffled groan. "I'm not scheduled today."

"No, but if you're gonna sit here whinin' you might as well work to get your mind off things." Gus throws a clean rag at Waverly and it lands on her head. Grumbling, Waverly pulls it off and slides off her stool to join Gus behind the bar.

They work in tandem for several minutes, listening to Eric Clapton belt out *Layla* from the crackling speakers of the old jukebox.

*What'll you do when you get lonely  
And nobody's waiting by your side?  
You've been running and hiding much too long.  
You know it's just your foolish pride.*

Gus hums along, thinking she'll have a few moments of peace before hungry customers invade the saloon and clamor for their lunches, when Waverly quietly asks: "What am I going to do, Gus?"

Gus sets down her last glass and turns to Waverly. "Seems to me you've done enough already," she comments, leaning a hip against the edge of the bar sink. "And by the same turn not enough at all."

She doesn't mean it unkindly, but she knows the words sting as she watches as Waverly's jaw tenses and the muscles of her throat constrict. "I know you all think I made the wrong decision with Nicole, but I did it to protect her."

"Her?" Gus crosses her arms. "Or you?"

"That's not fair, Gus." Waverly shakes her head. "You know what happened. What I did to her. To all of them."

"Yup, I do." Gus bobs her head up and down once. "So what?"

Waverly's lips part in disbelief. "So... so look what happened to Curtis. To Shorty. If you could have saved them, wouldn't you have?"

Gus sighs. "You know I would have, if I could. But here's the thing, kid. We can't avoid pain. No matter what. No matter how hard we try to protect ourselves or the people we love. Shit happens."

"Yeah? Well shit seems to happen a whole lot more around me and Wynonna. I don't want that for Nicole."

"And what about what *she* wants?"

Waverly breaks eye contact, twisting the rag between her fingers, seemingly unable to respond as she stares at the floor. Gus takes a step forward and gently grasps Waverly's shoulders.

"Listen, I know Purgatory is dangerous. When Curtis was still kickin', I understood that either of us could go at any time, whether we were together or not. But I also knew we could lose each other in any other mundane way possible; ways that have nothing to do with revenants or witches or whatever the hell else is out there." Gus shrugs. "I mean, for all I know, Curtis could have gotten hit by a car crossing the street one day. I guess what I'm trying to say is, despite all that, we both *chose* to make a life together. Do you understand?"

Gus isn't sure her words are sinking in or not, but she takes some small comfort in the fact that Waverly doesn't seem to be withdrawing into herself - like she had done after her rescue. Waverly still doesn't immediately meet her gaze, but she eventually nods, quickly wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"What if..." She swallows hard and finally looks up, eyes unsure and misty. "What if it's too late? What if she's already moved on?"

Gus almost laughs in Waverly's face. "Honey, that girl looks at you like the sun shines right outta your ass." She lightly nudges Waverly's chin with her knuckles. "But you're never gonna know unless you talk to her." She steps back and chucks her head toward the saloon's double doors. "Now why don't you open the place up and get outta here. I think you know what you have to do."

Waverly launches herself forward and wraps her arms around Gus, knocking the old woman back slightly. "Thanks Gus," she mumbles against her shoulder.

Gus hugs Waverly back briefly before letting her go. "Go on now. Git."

She watches Waverly take a deep breath, steeling herself. With one last brave smile and nod, she disappears out the entrance.

Gus isn't particularly religious by any stretch of the imagination, but she throws up a little prayer to the universe anyway for Waverly and Nicole. Lord knows the two knuckle heads are gonna need it.

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Waverly can't very well go have "a talk" with Nicole while she's on duty, so she decides to grab lunch at the Purgatory diner. She hates to admit that the food isn't as good as when the Tates had owned it (that is, before Wynonna sent them all back to hell), but it's still the best place for a quick club sandwich.

The tinkling of a tiny bell announces her entrance as she pushes open the door, and her stomach instantly growls from the smell of sizzling meats and frying oil. She's so eager to order that she almost misses the blonde sitting at the counter. Even from behind, Chloe is striking, with her hair

streaming down her back in a cascade of curls. Waverly has half a mind to turn right back around before Chloe notices her, but a waitress spots her before she can flee.

"Hey there, Baby Earp," the portly server greets. "The usual?"

"Uh, yeah, thanks Dottie," Waverly answers, hiding a grimace as Chloe swivels around on her stool and catches sight of her.

"Comin' right up, darlin'." Dottie scribbles the order in her notepad, tears off the page and passes it on to the short-order cooks in the back, completely ignorant of the tension between the two women in front of her.

Chloe levels Waverly with a cool look as she approaches, and Waverly by habit responds with her patented smile and wave. Waverly has had so much practice being nice to people she never quite liked (RIP Stephanie), that she now has it down to a science. But truth be told, Waverly does feel a tad bit guilty with the less than hospitable welcome she had given Chloe yesterday. Nicole's friend/ex/*whatever* had nothing to do with her current relationship predicament, Waverly reminds herself. There's no reason for her to be unkind.

"Hi Chloe," Waverly says when she reaches the counter.

"Waverly." Chloe inclines her head forward slightly, the lilt of her voice smooth and polite.

"Listen, um," Waverly runs a hand through her hair, "I think we got off on the wrong foot. I was... a little out of sorts yesterday."

"Obviously."

Waverly's hackles rise faster than mercury on a scorching summer day, but she doesn't take the bait. She did sort-of deserve Chloe's barb after all. So she presses on.

"Right, well, if you're willing, I'd like to start over." She sticks out her hand. "Waverly Earp. Yes that Earp." *Sort of.* "If you come by Shorty's and drink where Wyatt drank, I'll sneak you a free whiskey."

*Hope you don't mind, but I'm also stupidly, crazily, madly in love with your ex-girlfriend,* she silently adds.

Chloe examines her hand at length, as if it's some curious specimen, and Waverly's stomach twists at the prospect of getting a taste of her own medicine. But eventually Chloe gives her a small smile and shakes her hand.

"Chloe Mitchell." Her grip is firm and brief and surprisingly warm. "Make it a glass of vintage Bordeaux and I will definitely stop by Shorty's."

"I don't know if we have anything better than red table wine," Waverly says honestly, "But I'll see what I can do."

A less tense, but still unpleasant silence falls between them as they not-so-subtly size each other up. Chloe looks as glamorous as she did the day before, this time in form-fitting maroon jeans, knee-high boots and a black-and-white patterned silk blouse. Waverly, who's wearing a casual floral-print dress, feels dowdy in comparison. But at least she doesn't have dust and woodchips in her hair, and no longer stinks of rotted earth.

Chloe bites the corner of her bottom lip, locked in some internal debate before she comes to a decision. "I just ordered, if you'd like to join me." She gestures to an empty seat to her right. "That

is, if you're not busy."

Waverly knows that she should say no; that having lunch with her ex's ex isn't exactly the wisest decision. But her traitorous mouth accepts with a, "Sure, thanks," and before she knows it, she's hopping onto the stool and Dottie's sliding her a glass of ice water.

"So," Waverly says after thanking Dottie. "How're you liking Purgatory so far? I'm sure it's probably a shitberg in comparison to Chicago."

"No, not at all," Chloe shakes her head and, to Waverly's surprise, she actually sounds genuine. "It reminds me a lot of the town where my grandparents lived."

"Oh yeah? Where was that?"

"Tuscola. About two hours south of Chicago. My parents divorced when I was young, so I split my time between Montreal with my mother and Chicago with my father. When he was too busy for me or just didn't want to be bothered with parenting, which was often, he'd drop me off with my grandparents."

"Absent and emotionally unavailable father?" Waverly swipes her finger down the condensation forming on her glass. "I've definitely been there. Did you like Tuscola?"

"I did." Chloe nods. "It was small, close-knit, friendly."

"But?"

"But I suppose my heart lies in big cities."

"Where you met Nicole?" Waverly doesn't know what possesses her to ask that question and she mentally kicks herself.

"Yeah," Chloe says simply. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that."

"I wouldn't mind." *Because I'm a glutton for punishment.* "I mean, unless you don't want to talk about it."

"There's really not much to say." Chloe shrugs one shoulder. "I was interning at UIC Medical. One night, a criminology student was wheeled into the ER after catching a mugger on campus. She claimed she was fine. Just had the wind knocked out of her. But she ended up having a concussion and a hairline fracture in her hand."

Chloe smiles affectionately at the memory and Waverly can't help but return it, her heart warming as she imagines a younger Nicole trying to protect the city by stopping one crime at a time and playing off her injuries. But then Waverly's stomach clenches as she remembers how Nicole had insisted that she was "just a little bit bruised" after Willa had shot her; how that actually turned out to be cracked ribs and a deep contusion spread across her chest, dark purple and painful. Waverly had cried when she saw it, pressed her lips lightly against the bruised flesh, and Nicole had simply kissed her tears away with an unconcerned smile.

"That sounds like Nicole," Waverly says, pushing the memory away and taking a sip of water. "And I guess the rest is history?"

She tries not to think about how charming Nicole must have been with her dimples and her laid-back drawl, a twinkle in her eye that made a girl feel special; how she and Chloe must have flirted with each other with soft looks and touches before giving into their attraction. She tries not to imagine Nicole and Chloe with each other intimately, making love, coaxing gasps and moans and

shuddering breaths from each other.

Waverly tries and fails, her heart splintering from jealousy.

Oblivious, Chloe hums. "Not for very long though."

"No?" Waverly half hates herself for the way her heart practically leaps at that bit of information.

"We dated for about a semester before we decided we worked better as friends."

"Why is that?" Waverly winces and shakes her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. That's a totally inappropriate question. Forget I asked that."

"It's fine." Chloe waves her off. "I suppose you could say we just wanted different things at that point. I was planning on doing my residency in Toronto and she was planning on going to a police academy. We didn't see the point of staying together just to stay together."

Waverly nods, fixated on how, *at that point*, doesn't necessarily have any bearing on the *here and now*. "So it was just... bad timing?"

Chloe studies her for several long seconds, understanding dawning in her hazel eyes. "Waverly," she says, her voice soft and melodic, tentative but kind. "Nic and I, we're ancient history. But I still look out for her. We look out for each other. I just want her to be happy."

Waverly isn't sure how much Nicole has told Chloe about her, about *them*, but something in the blonde's expression suggests that she's at least aware of the precarious state of Waverly and Nicole's current bond.

"I want her to be happy too," Waverly says, low and sincere. "I want nothing more."

Exhaling deeply through her nostrils, Chloe smiles. "Good."

Despite her initial hostility toward Chloe, Waverly finds herself relaxing in the blonde's presence and understanding just what Nicole had seen in her all those years ago.

Dottie reappears then, carrying two plates: a mixed-green salad with grilled chicken in one hand and a club sandwich surrounded by a mountain of fries in the other. She sets the dishes in front of the women and Waverly manages not to groan at how unhealthy her lunch is when placed next to Chloe's.

Unfazed, Chloe picks up her fork and knife. "Bon appétit."

They dig into their meal, both chewing thoughtfully out of hunger and a desire to escape from small talk, at least momentarily. Waverly's about to start the second half of her sandwich when Chloe speaks again.

"Would you happen to have any sightseeing suggestions?" She asks as she spears a cherry tomato with her fork. "I'm not sure how long Nic's working and I'd love to take a look around."

"Sure. Um, there's the old fort, if you're a history buff. Swan Reservoir, if you're into nature. I think the new salt water taffy factory does tours, if that's up your alley."

"Did you say salt water taffy?"

"Yup." Waverly pours out a glob of extra ketchup onto her plate for her fries.

"Nicole loves taffy." Chloe pops the tomato into her mouth. "Maybe I'll stop by there and get her

some."

"Depending on where you're staying, you could maybe even walk to there. Are you at the Wainright or...?"

"I'm staying at Nicole's actually."

"Oh." Waverly tamps down the irrational jealousy that spikes through her at the thought. She picks up a fry, drowns it in ketchup, and stuffs it in her mouth, chewing vigorously and hoping that the taste of potato, vinegar, and tomato will help her swallow down the bitter realization that Nicole and Chloe spent the night together.

"I told her a hotel would be fine." Chloe rolls her eyes, not picking up on Waverly's discomfort. "But she insisted it'd be safer, whatever that means."

"Yeah..."

It makes sense, Waverly concedes. Revenants love to target out-of-towners. And given that Chloe is *close* to a known friend of the Earp Heir and member of a demon-hunting government agency, Chloe might as well have a large X painted on her back. It's no wonder Nicole wants to keep Chloe close. Still, despite Chloe's reassurances about her intentions toward Nicole, Waverly's stomach bubbles with unease at the idea of Chloe and Nicole alone together in a tiny apartment that doesn't have a guest room.

Waverly clears her throat. "You'll definitely need to drive if you want to go the factory."

"Anything to keep me out of the apartment while Nicole's working," Chloe says. "The cat hates me."

"Calamity?" Waverly picks up the rest of her sandwich.

Chloe nods. "Always has. Not sure why."

That surprises (and secretly tickles) Waverly. Nicole's creamsicle maine coon had taken to Waverly the minute she set foot in Nicole's apartment for the first time. She makes a mental note to drop off some extra treats and catnip for Calamity.

"She stared at me the entire time I was on the couch last night," Chloe says. "I was afraid to close my eyes. Not that it would have been easy to sleep in any case. Nicole has a death trap masquerading as furniture."

"It *is* kind of uncomfortable," Waverly agrees. The couch is lumpy in some places, saggy in others. One time a spring poked her right in the ass while they were watching Netflix and Nicole went out of her way to soothe away the pain.

"I should just find a couch off the street and put it in my loft when she visits," Chloe says as Waverly takes a bite of her sandwich. "Revenge will be sweet."

The muscles of Waverly's neck and shoulders lock up and she nearly chokes. "Nicole's going to Toronto?"

"For a weekend next month. You know, to test the waters."

"Test the waters?" Her stomach sinks, as if her lunch transformed into a hunk of metal in her digestive track.

"She can't very well stay in Purgatory forever," Chloe says matter-of-factly as she continues to eat. "It'll be good for her to have a plan when she's done getting the experience she needs here."

"Right." Waverly sets down the rest of her sandwich. "Right. Of course."

She stares blankly at the half eaten lunch on her plate, her appetite now completely gone, much like the rest of her hope.

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Waverly doesn't really remember finishing the rest of the meal or parting ways with Chloe, who kissed her on each cheek. She's in a daze when she finds herself back at Shorty's, helping herself to a bottle of the saloon's best whiskey. Gus doesn't say anything, just lifts one brow in obvious disapproval.

Waverly downs her first glass in one gulp. The alcohol's so strong she gags when it hits the back of her throat. She blinks back tears as it sears to her stomach. When the heat in her chest subsides and she's sure she won't upchuck the whiskey, she pours herself a second glass. Just as she's about to bring it to her lips, someone snatches it right from her hand.

"Slow down there, baby girl," Wynonna says, knocking back the drink with smooth, practiced ease. "Gotta pace yourself." She smacks the glass down on the bar and motions for another.

"What are you doing here?" Waverly asks as she retrieves a new glass for herself and tops them both back up. "Thought you were still staking out the strip club with Dolls."

"After that stunt you and Doc pulled, Dolls thought it'd be best if someone kept tabs on you both now that revenants are apparently setting booby traps."

"So you're not here to lecture me?"

"No, Wave, I think you already know what you two did was boneheaded."

"Guess I learned from the best," Waverly deflects.

"Don't let it become a habit." Smirking, Wynonna clinks their glasses together and takes a sip. "So let me guess." She tilts her head toward the whiskey bottle. "Does this have anything to do with the blonde bombshell I saw walking with Nicole this morning?"

Waverly's jaw tightens, fingers squeezing her glass. Everyone has an opinion about her and Nicole, and Waverly's tired of it. Wynonna. Doc. Gus. Hell, she's surprised that Dolls hasn't gotten in on the action. She doesn't want to hear it anymore. Doesn't want to be reminded about how she royally fucked things up with Nicole, possibly beyond repair.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Wynonna's eyes soften in sympathy. "Say no more, lil sis."

They finish nearly half the bottle before Wynonna's cranking up the jukebox and starting an impromptu dance off. Waverly feels like she's floating, mind fuzzy and blood buzzing. She doesn't think about Nicole or Chloe or revenants or curses. For these songs, she's not Waverly Earp who nearly killed everyone she's ever loved. She's just a girl, losing herself in the music and the driving beats that reverberate in her chest.

At some point, Wynonna disappears, but Waverly keeps going. She even lets someone pull her into his arms, allows his sweaty hands to grab her hips. He grinds himself against her backside and presses his lips to the side of her neck. His prickly stubble scratches her skin, and it suddenly feels

all wrong. Where she's pressed to hard muscle, she should be pressed to soft curves. Where his unwanted touch is demanding and sliding roughly up toward her chest, she should be held tenderly. She tries to move away, but he tightens his grip.

"Come on, baby, don't be like that," he whispers into her ear. His breath is foul and Waverly feels like she's going to be sick as she struggles to push him away again.

She's about to stomp on his insole when she hears him yelp and feels him let go. Staggering forward, she regains her balance and whirls around to see the man crumpled on the floor, hands cradling his nose, blood oozing between his fingers. Above him stands a familiar uniformed figure, her hands clenched into fists.

Nicole looks back at her, eyes flashing with a dark anger that Waverly's never seen before, and she takes an unsteady step backward. Nedley appears out of nowhere with Gus in tow and stands between his deputy and the decked-out customer.

Every beat of Waverly's heart pounds blood between her temples. Air squeezes from her lungs. Waverly teeters and totters as the room tilts and spins and she has to get away. She turns and heads toward the entrance, stumbling up the steps and pushing out the double doors into the waning light of the approaching dusk.

The cooler air is a relief against Waverly's heated skin and she feels like she can breathe again. She gulps it in greedily, doubling over and bracing her hands on her knees, dry heaving from the strain of trying not to vomit. She fails, and spills out the bitter remnants of her club sandwich and four shots of whiskey onto the pavement. Once it's empty, her stomach thankfully stops roiling even though she still feels dizzy, like she's stuck on a perpetual merry-go-round.

"Waverly?" A gentle hand lands on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She's been craving that touch. Has ached to feel it again. But the alcohol has ramped up her long-simmering rage at *everything* into a roiling boil, and she slaps Nicole away with a wide arc of her arm.

"Don't."

Nicole backs off, palms up in a placating gesture.

"I don't know what the hell that was in there," Waverly spits out. "But I didn't need your help."

The concern on Nicole's stupid, beautiful face melts away into something more neutral. "No?"

"No," Waverly insists. "I had it under control."

"Coulda fooled me." Nicole's voice is tight, with a harder edge she's rarely directed at Waverly.

"Just leave me alone." Face flushing, Waverly shakes her head and stalks off, careful to step around the splatter on the cement. She sets a course for her Jeep, which is parallel parked down the street. Nicole's boots click after her.

"Waverly, where do you think you're going?"

"Home."

Nicole easily overtakes her with her damned long legs and stands in front of the driver's side door. "If you think you're getting behind this wheel, you've got another thing coming," she crosses her arms, daring Waverly to get past her.

"What are you going to do? Arrest me?"

"If I have to," Nicole says. "And, believe me, this time you *won't* enjoy the handcuffs."

Heat sings the tips of Waverly's ears at *that* particular memory-of cold metal and blindfolds, slick skin and one of the most pleasure intense nights she's ever had. She shakes her head and tries to stare down the other woman. But Nicole in Officer Haught mode looks so authoritative. So solid and strong. Waverly, who wants to cling to her indignation, hates that she still finds it incredibly sexy.

"Fine," Waverly says, tamping down a sudden and swift need to grab Nicole by her unbuttoned collar and kiss her senseless. She blames the whiskey-the devil's water-and manages to dial up enough self-control to pivot on her heel and walk the other way.

"Fine," Nicole repeats. "And just where are you going now?"

"Quite frankly I'm not sure how *any* of that is your business," Waverly throws Nicole's words from yesterday over her shoulder.

Nicole exhales forcefully, but lowers her voice to not call the attention of passersby. "Yeah? Well I beg to differ."

"Oh, so *now* you're concerned?" They reach an intersection and Waverly doesn't bother to wait for the crosswalk signal. But no matter how quickly Waverly walks, Nicole effortlessly matches her stride for stride. She matches Waverly stride for stride

"Are you kidding me right now?" Nicole asks, incredulous. "Waverly, you can't ask me for space and then get upset when I give it to you. That's not fair."

Somewhere in the back of Waverly's whiskey-addled mind, she knows Nicole's right. But she'll be damned if she admits fault. Still walking as quickly as possible, she ignores Nicole's statement to pull out her phone and autodial Wynonna, only for the call to go straight to voicemail. Waverly curses.

"If you're looking for Wynonna, she left with Doc a while ago," Nicole says. "I don't know where."

Waverly frowns at Nicole. If she had seen Wynonna, then just how long had she been at Shorty's and why didn't Waverly notice her?

"Why don't we grab some coffee or something, sober up a bit, and I can drive you?" Nicole asks, bringing her temper back under control, her voice returning to that infuriating even keel.

"No thanks," Waverly says through grit teeth. She continues onward, forcing a smile at the people they pass while Nicole tips her hat at them.

"Why not?"

"Because..." *Because I can't be alone with you. Because I don't know what I'll do.* "Because I can just as easily wait for a ride with Wynonna at the Black Badge office."

Nicole throws her hands up. "I swear to God you Earps are the most stubborn women I have ever met," she mutters, but she doesn't try to change Waverly's mind.

The brisk walk helps Waverly feel more sober with every step and, before long, they've reached the red-brick buildings that house the county's municipal offices. Waverly makes her way through

the sheriff's department hallways. Officer Gertrude Hawk, wearing her trademark long v-neck cardigan over her uniform, glowers at Waverly like always, looking like a cross between Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch. But the old woman brightens when she sees Nicole and actually *smiles*. Because *of course*.

"Back so soon, Haught?"

"Oh, you know me, Trudy. Just can't get enough of this place." Nicole shines a winsome smile at Hawk, who practically giggles like a schoolgirl. Waverly's mouth drops open. "I'll be in the Black Badge office if you need me."

Hawk nods at Nicole and then shoots Waverly one last dirty look before Nicole places a hand on the small of Waverly's back. Even that small bit of contact makes Waverly's eyes momentarily flutter closed as Nicole ushers them toward the spare office that serves as Dolls's makeshift base of operations.

"You know, she never used to mind me before," Waverly comments as they enter and Nicole shuts the door. "But now I swear that woman downright hates me."

"Who? Trudy? Nah, she loves everyone." Nicole walks to a water cooler in the corner and fills up a small paper cone.

"Everyone but me." Waverly mumbles, heading to one of the filing cabinets and retrieving a vodka bottle from Wynonna's not-so-secret office stash. She sits down on Dolls's chair and, despite her stomach's protest, takes a healthy swig, the alcohol sanitizing her mouth with a sharp burn. "I swear she's even nicer to Wynonna."

Nicole laughs and when Waverly glares at her, she quickly covers it with a cough into her fist. "Sorry." She leans a hip on the center table, half sitting on it, careful to keep a respectful distance from Waverly. Although Nicole eyes the vodka, she doesn't comment on it and instead silently offers the water to Waverly. If Nicole had demanded, Waverly might have been more inclined to object out of spite. But Nicole doesn't, and Waverly reluctantly caps the bottle and accepts the cup.

"Trudy. She, uh," Nicole scratches the back of her neck sheepishly, "she might have seen me the day after we..."

Waverly holds her breath.

"...you know," Nicole finishes lamely. "I probably should have stayed home. But I came into work anyway and," she waves her hands aimlessly, as if trying to grasp the right words from the air, "let's just say I wasn't in the best of ways. And I guess Trudy's just a little... overprotective."

"I see," Waverly breathes out, downing the water to soothe the guilt aching through her chest. "I guess everyone's a critic." She inches her chair closer to the desk, busying herself with tossing the used cup into the trash and straightening out the papers and folders. "You know, you don't have to keep an eye on me. I won't try to drive. I promise."

"That's not why I'm still here."

Waverly chances a glance at Nicole, who nervously rubs her hands down the front of her khaki trousers. "Waverly, what was all that?"

"What?"

"Back at Shorty's." Nicole meets her gaze head-on. "The drinking. That guy."

Scoffing, Waverly leans back in her chair and crosses her arms, as if that will protect her from the conversation she had wanted to avoid. "What, are you my mother now?"

Nicole cants her to the side, pursing her lips in annoyance. "No, of course not. But that wasn't you."

"How would you know that?" Waverly snaps. "If you think about it, we barely know each other."

Nicole blinks back a subtle flash of pain, but she doesn't break eye contact. An awkward silence wraps around them, thick with unease, like muggy humidity that sticks to the skin in the dead of summer.

"You know that's not true," Nicole whispers after a few long, torturous seconds.

Waverly does know, and she has to consciously keep herself from squirming in her seat. She's always felt like Nicole was the first person in a long time - if not ever - to truly see her. The real her. And Nicole pins her with a stare so potent that Waverly feels like she's melting, like the walls she's erected around her heart are made of nothing more than snow and ice shrinking under the blaze of a deep red sun.

It's too much, and Waverly has to stand and get away from Nicole, needing to put distance between them in order to calm her rapidly increasing heart rate. She walks to the tri-fold bulletin board, eyes trailing over the assorted newspaper clips, photos and other evidence related to Gwendolyne Lafayette.

"Nicole, I can do whatever I want," Waverly says, sending one last-ditch volley to keep Nicole at bay. "With whoever I want. Wherever I want. Just like you."

"Is that what this is?" Nicole asks quietly. "Is this about Chloe?"

"No," Waverly half lies. It's not just about Chloe. Not completely. It's about well-intentioned choices gone horribly awry; about getting so wildly off-track that Waverly doesn't know how to fix it. Chloe is but one component of a larger disaster known as Hurricane Earp that Nicole-good, sweet Nicole-has gotten swept in.

She hears Nicole approach and stand just behind her. She can feel the heat radiating off her body, and Waverly shuts her eyes against the rising tide of her yearning.

"I told you we're just friends."

"Oh yeah?" Waverly turns and faces Nicole. They're so close, too close, that she can see the gold flecks in Nicole's irises. "Then why are you going to Toronto to," Waverly uses air quotes, "test the waters."

Nicole freezes, eyes widening slightly. "Waverly."

"Look, I know I asked for space. But I didn't mean run off to a new city."

"That's not what I'm planning to do." Nicole steps even closer and the warm scent of vanilla spice nearly makes Waverly's knees buckle.

"Isn't it?" Waverly tries to move away again, but Nicole holds an arm out, bracing it against the board to stop her.

"Wave, you've always set the pace for us," Nicole says, words puffing gently against Waverly's

face. "To be together or not. And I've gladly gone along with it because all I ever want is to make you happy."

Waverly can't stop her eyes from honing in on the movement of Nicole's lips, finding it harder and harder to breathe.

"Whether I'm your friend or your girlfriend, I want you to be happy. But... it hurts, Wave," Nicole continues, voice hushed and swollen with emotion, and Waverly lets out a shuddering breath as her heart contracts painfully. "I meant what I said at the Homestead. I'll always be here for you. But I've gotta look out for myself too. Not being with you. Not being able to help you. It's *killing* me. And I..."

Waverly can't take it anymore and she swallows the rest of Nicole's sentence in a scorching kiss, fingers digging into her braid as Waverly cups her jaw between her hands, alcohol-fueled basic instinct seizing control of her actions. Nicole gasps, and Waverly takes the opportunity to dip inside Nicole's mouth. Nicole tastes even sweeter than she remembers, a hint of liquor on her tongue, potent and intoxicating. Waverly moans when Nicole grasps her forearm and curls an arm around her waist to pull their bodies flush together. She swears she can feel Nicole's heart pounding against her ribs, matching her own heart's wildy stuttering rhythm.

Waverly pushes Nicole backwards, lips not breaking contact until Nicole falls onto a chair, which rolls to a stop against the table, knocking loose papers to the ground. Not wasting time, Waverly straddles Nicole's lap and dips her head for a deeper kiss. She tugs off Nicole's hair tie and loosens Nicole's braid, tangling her fingers in smooth strands. Tilting her head, Waverly presses her lips against the corner of Nicole's jaw and, encouraged by the sharp intake of breath it elicits, trails them down the length of her throat, hands dropping to unbutton Nicole's shirt. She pauses to lightly suck at Nicole's fluttering pulse and then nip at her clavicle before continuing to the exposed skin of Nicole's chest.

Nicole squeezes Waverly's hips and pulls away slightly. "Waverly, wait," she says weakly, breath ragged, pupils so wide her eyes look black. "We should... we should stop. We've been drinking and..."

Waverly rests their foreheads together. "If you want to stop, we'll stop," she manages to say, voice trembling with want. Waverly nudges the tips of their noses together and Nicole whimpers. "But, God, I *want* you. If you don't want me..."

Groaning, Nicole captures Waverly's lips, frantic and desperate, hiking the skirt of Waverly's dress up so she can slide her fingertips up her bare legs. Nicole's touch sets off thousands of pinpricks that tingle just below the surface of Waverly's skin, every nerve sparking like a live wire, bright and intense. Nicole cups her ass and guide their hips into a long, slow grind. Pleasure courses through Waverly, thighs clenching and toes curling from the delicious friction. It's been so long and Waverly doesn't think it'll take much to push her over the edge.

Nicole slips a hand between them, inching it higher and higher up Waverly's thigh.

"Yes," Waverly hisses, arching forward. And just as Waverly's eyes roll back from the first brush of Nicole's thumb against her center, the door swings open with a loud bang and a started voice calls out:

"Whoa, holy shit!" Wynonna holds a hand up to somehow block the view of her kid sister getting it on. "My eyes! They burn!"

Waverly nearly screams in frustration as Nicole withdraws her hand and practically shoves her off her lap. Somehow, Waverly manages to not fall completely on her ass and scrambles to her feet,

smoothing down her dress and raking her fingers through her mussed hair. Her entire body is on fire as she takes in Wynonna's partly-amused, mostly mortified expression. To make matters even worse, Doc is standing behind Wynonna, the brim of his hat pulled down low, moustache twitching. Waverly feels like she's about to spontaneously combust from embarrassment, and she wonders if this is how the revenants must feel when Peacemaker sends them back to hell.

"Jesus, Earp, do you know how to knock!?" Nicole exclaims, fingers fumbling to button her shirt back up. Like Waverly, her face and ears are completely red.

"I dunno, Officer McBootyCall, do you know how to get a room!?"

"Wynonna, now might not be the appropriate time for levity," Doc mumbles, still keeping his gaze averted.

"Ugh right," Wynonna grimaces. "So, you're not gonna like this. You might want to sit down, er, keep sitting down."

"What's going on?" Waverly manages to find her voice, trying and failing to ignore the way the apex of her legs continues to throb with unreleased tension.

Wynonna holds up a lock of familiar blonde curls along with a crinkled note, and Waverly's blood flash freezes in her veins. "Looks like our revhead wants to make a little trade."

## Chapter 7

Wynonna's had her fair share of awkward moments. She'd even go so far as to say she's had enough to fill several lifetimes worth and then some. But walking in on Waverly and Nicole in the middle of a live reenactment of a Skinemax softcore porn? *That* takes the motherfrikkin' cake.

To make matters *even* worse, she's the one that had to tell her kid sister that her ex's ex had gotten kidnapped by a revenant because Doc was too chicken shit to break the news himself. She watches as a still-flushed Waverly reads Gwendolyne Lafayette's note, her eyes rapidly scanning the wrinkled paper. Next to her, an equally red Nicole examines the golden lock of hair in her hand with an unreadable expression, fingers smoothing down the curls.

"Where did you get this again?" Waverly' brow furrows.

"Some rando stuck it to a brick and threw it through the front window at Shorty's while Doc and I were upstairs," Wynonna says. "Gus went apeshit. I'd steer clear of her for a while."

Waverly narrows her eyes at them. "What were you doing upstairs?"

Doc clears his throat. "Investigating a noise."

"Churning butter," Wynonna responds at the same time.

Her eyes doubling in size, Waverly has to shake the image from her head. "So let me get this straight," Waverly looks up. "Lafayette wants to trade Chloe's life for Peacemaker?"

"Yup," Wynonna answers, popping the p at the end. There's nothing quite like kidnapping and blackmail to diffuse any lingering sexual tension in the room. "Tomorrow at high noon. In the middle of the town square where it'll be too crowded for us to make a scene."

"Well contrary to what Mrs Lafayette may believe, that is not how the Earp heir operates," Doc comments from where he's leaned up against the wall.

"These revenants never seem to learn their damn lesson," Wynonna agrees, patting her gun. "I give this baby up for no one."

"But you *did* once," Nicole suddenly chimes in. "For me."

Wynonna tenses slightly, but tries to shrug it off. "Well, yeah, but that was only because Waverly..." she clams up when her sister shoots her a warning look. "I mean, you know, that was different."

"Was it?" Nicole asks blankly.

Doc clears his throat. "I do believe we are *all* well aware of what may happen should Peacemaker fall into the wrong hands. Voluntarily relinquishing it to a foe does not a viable option make."

"So what do we do?" Waverly sets down the note and sits on the side of the table, hands gripping the edge. "We can't just let Lafayette hurt her."

"Of course not," Wynonna says. "We're just gonna have to rescue her before then."

"How?" Waverly asks. "We don't know where they could be or where to even start looking."

"I believe we are, as Wynonna would say, on a pickle," Doc observes.

Wynonna closes her eyes for a minute before giving him a wry look. "*In* a pickle, Dude. In a pickle." With a shake of her head, she worries her bottom lip. "Listen, when Dolls gets here, we'll figure something out. Like we always do."

"And surely by that you mean a strategic plan of attack will be agreed upon by our collective minds, which you will clearly ignore and do whatever it is that you think would be the proper response, no doubt complicating matters beyond words," Doc quips with a not-so thinly veiled barb that makes Wynonna inwardly sigh.

She knows he's still pissed at her for releasing Constance Cloutie. But she refuses to apologize for it. In fact, if given the option, she'd do it again and again if it meant saving Waverly.

"Throwing stones in glass houses, are you Doc?" Waverly sticks up for Wynonna. "Your track record for being selfless isn't exactly pristine."

"Guys, this isn't helping." Wynonna steps between them. "Everything's going to be fine, okay? We all just need to calm down." Wynonna can't believe that *she*, of all people, is currently being the goddamn voice of reason.

Waverly reluctantly nods while Doc tips his hat down in acquiescence. Nicole is the only one who doesn't respond.

"You all right there Haught?" She asks, noting the way Waverly's eyes trail over Nicole with concern. "Your friend is gonna be okay. You know people get kidnapped all the time around here. It's like Purgatory's way of saying 'Welcome to Town.'"

Nicole suddenly sets down the hair, her face an unreadable mask. "I think I just need some coffee or something. If you'll excuse me." She brushes past Wynonna and out the door.

Waverly's about to follow, but Wynonna holds a hand up to stop her. "We're gonna need that big brain of yours to figure out where Lafayette went," she says. "Why don't you and Doc get started. I'll go check on Nicole."

Waverly's lips part, like she's about to argue, but then thinks better of it. She purses them instead and nods. "Let's get to work," she says to Doc.

"You behave now, kids," Wynonna says as she walks out the door, heading toward the faint sounds of banging and cursing coming from the break room.

She rounds a corner and stops in the doorway, watching as a scowling Nicole fiddles with the ancient coffee maker only for it to gurgle and hiss for a few seconds before shutting off yet again.

"You know, I honestly think that thing is a lost cause." Wynonna crosses her arms.

"No, I can get it to work," Nicole stubbornly grits out, jiggling the power cord.

"It's okay to throw in the towel sometimes. I can just run out and get us coffee to-go."

"I'm not giving up on it," Nicole insists, her voice rising in a frustrated way that makes Wynonna suspect they're not just talking about a piece of shit appliance that Nedley probably bought in 1994. Nicole rattles the machine one last time until the power light miraculously flicks on and stays on. "There."

"Nice." Wynonna nods, mildly impressed. "Guess Waverly's not the only thing you can turn on."

Nicole's head snaps toward her, cheeks darkening in an impressive blush. "You're never gonna let that go, are you?" She slides a chair out from beneath the small round table near the refrigerator. Its aluminum legs screech across the tiled floor as she sits.

"Never," Wynonna promises, taking the opposite seat, turning it backwards, straddling it, and folding her arms across its back. They say nothing more as the hiss of steam and the aroma of cheap, drip coffee fills the air.

"So," Wynonna ventures when it becomes clear Nicole isn't going to start a conversation any time soon. She wishes she had brought an extra bottle of booze.

"So?"

"You gonna tell me what that was all about?"

Nicole shrugs. "What what was all about?"

Wynonna cocks her head to the side. "Don't play dumb."

"I think it's pretty obvious, wouldn't you say?" Nicole deflects. "It's not rocket science."

"No, but it's probably just as complicated."

Nicole averts her gaze toward the tabletop, seemingly fascinated by its peeling laminate.

"So are you two back together again or what?" Wynonna asks.

"No."

Wynonna lifts a skeptical eyebrow, drumming her fingers against her elbow.

"I mean, I don't know." Nicole stands back up and walks to the dish rack by the sink, pulling out four mugs and lining them up on the counter.

Wynonna sighs and runs a hand through her messy mane. "Look, whatever's going on with you and Chloe, that's none of my business. But Waverly is. And I know she hurt you and it's as fair as a heaping pile of shit. But..."

"I honestly can't think about all that." Nicole bows her head forward, bracing her hands against the edge of the counter. "Not now. Not when Chloe's in danger."

"We're gonna save her," Wynonna says firmly.

Nicole gives her a small, sad smile over her shoulder. "Thanks, but you don't know that."

Wynonna's about to respond when a soft knock raps against the door. They both turn to see Waverly standing timidly at the threshold.

"Hey," she says with an awkward wave. "I thought maybe you guys could use a hand with carrying the coffee."

It's as lame an excuse as Wynonna's ever heard, and she barely resists the urge to roll her eyes.

"Tell you what, you help Nicole," Wynonna says as she gets to her feet, not wanting to be a third wheel for what was sure to be a painfully awkward conversation. "I'm gonna check-in on Dolls to see why the hell he isn't here yet."

She throws Nicole one last *look* before she leaves and gives Waverly a light clap on the shoulder on her way out, thinking if those two can't make things work out, the rest of them were doomed.

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Waverly leans against the doorframe, arms folded across her chest as she lets her eyes travel up the long frame of the officer who's turned away from her, apparently making sure that each drop of coffee makes it into the dented metal pot. She doesn't say anything and neither does Nicole. Her head is throbbing despite still feeling the heaviness of intoxication and to top it all off, her body has yet to catch up with the fact that she was no longer straddling the redhead's lap.

She still feels the hum of need in her bones, warm hands caressing her skin and sliding between her thighs. This close to Nicole, her irrational desire is warring with her sensibility. But seeing Nicole's state of duress is putting a damper on her desire.

It's not the time or the place. It wasn't before and it certainly isn't now. Chloe is missing, and she can tell by the way Nicole keeps straightening the coffee cups that the woman doesn't really know what to do with herself.

Waverly doesn't know what to do with herself either. She wants to reach out and comfort her, but she's not exactly sure where they stand. She shouldn't have jumped on the officer, but Nicole is a weakness she hasn't yet learned to control. "Nicole..."

"Don't."

Waverly freezes. There's an unfamiliar tone in the officer's voice. It's one of weary defeat accompanied with a forced control. "About earlier..."

"Please, Wave." The drip finally stops and Nicole removes the pot, starting to fill each mug. "I just... anything you have to say about what happened earlier... what's happening between us now... I can't focus on that right now."

Stepping up beside her, Waverly reaches into the cabinet for sugar and creamer, beginning to mix the various cups. Black for Doc. A little cream and a lot of sugar for Wynonna. She knows they have to talk about it, before assumptions are made. She knows Chloe is missing. She knows the woman is in danger. But still, she can't not talk about earlier. "I just don't want you to think..."

"Waverly." Nicole cuts her off sternly... maybe a little too sternly. Her frame is rigid, as if she's trying to hold back her words. "I know you're just dying to over complicate everything..."

Waverly freezes, her mouth opening in surprise.

"And yes we have to talk about earlier, but Chloe is missing. I get that shit like this happens pretty much every day for you and your family, but Chloe is not an Earp."

*Neither am I.* Waverly doesn't say the words because they're not important at the moment. She's not exactly sure where Nicole is going with this, but she feels a pain twisting in her heart. She can feel the Chloe-sized ocean that's coming between them, pushing them further and further apart.

"We need to find her, and until we do, I can't waste time going over whether or not you did what you did because you're drunk, because if you say no, that's a very long conversation. If you say yes...well that's a whole 'nother story." Nicole releases a frustrated breath. "You and I... Wave... we're complicated... and I cannot let that interfere with me finding her. Chloe has to be my main focus."

With a nod, Waverly doesn't say anything. She's afraid she'll say something she shouldn't. Part of her understands what Nicole needs. She understands what Nicole is saying. But there's also a part of her that's completely irrational, coming to the conclusion that Nicole is putting Chloe before everything else because Chloe means much more than the officer is telling her. There's something within her telling her that yes she should expect a bit of panic, a bit of a reaction, but this much is excessive.

She's never seen Nicole like this. Nicole is confident. She is strong and patient and collected. Nicole has always been... well... Nicole. The Nicole she sees now is overrun with emotions, fretting nonstop.

Without saying another word, Nicole takes two of the mugs, leaving the others for Waverly to grab.

Waverly sighs, collecting the cups and following. She nearly drops the cups when there's a loud impact in the BBD room. "What in the world?"

"Earp! If you're done playing house in the kitchen, we could use some help here." Dolls unloads another box from the dolly, setting it on the table with a loud thud. "Since you and Old Boy over there decided to destroy the only real residential evidence we had of our perp, and Wynonna somehow managed to distract me from following Lafayette when she showed up at the strip club, we need to find out where she's hiding now."

"What the hell? I wasn't even there." Wynonna gives Dolls a disbelieving look. "What was I supposed to do? Not tell you someone was kidnapped? It's not my fault you don't know how to multitask."

Passing Wynonna her coffee, Waverly picks up one of the files from a box and notices it contains the Purgatory land deeds. "Dolls these files are land records." Her eyes raking over the boxes, a realization hits her. "These are legal documents. You can't just remove them from the municipal building. This has got to be a felony."

"A misdemeanor at most." Wynonna unscrews a flask, pouring the amber liquid into her cup. When Waverly narrows her eyes at her, she reaches over and pours a bit into her sister's coffee, smirking when she gets no objection.

"It's not a crime if you have a badge and a key." Dolls flips through files without a care for their order.

Doc scowls at the box of files. "Never have I ever seen a more futile exploration than this here mountain of papers. What, Deputy Marshall Dolls, are we looking for exactly?"

"Land deeds... any sort of recorded purchases or sales that would indicate another residence for Lafayette, other than the brothel."

"Guess she had to have somewhere to rest her head when it wasn't banging against a headboard." Wynonna mumbles into her cup, lazily flipping through a folder.

"Despite her hidden nefarious intent, a prostitute she was not." Doc interjects. "If memory serves me correctly, she was nothing but the most elegant of women with a knack for charity and public service."

"Except for the whole exploiting younger girls and massacring people thing." Waverly responds tersely, still not over the fact that Dolls basically gutted the county records.

"Well, that wasn't exactly common knowledge at the time, now was it?"

"Why don't you offer something useful?" Nicole growls, not finding anything in the box she's looking through. The officer's body is set with frustration and Waverly's brows furrow. "If you guys put half as much effort that you put into arguing into actually finding an answer, Chloe would be safe right now."

"Officer Haught..." Dolls gives her a warning tone.

Waverly is ready to step in. As infuriating as Nicole is being, she doesn't need to be the target of a Dolls lecture. Surprisingly, it's Doc who speaks up.

"Actually, now that I know what needle you were hoping to locate in this here pile of horse-trodden hay, information I do have if you would simply just ask." Doc leans back in his chair, taking a sip of his coffee. "While not busy overseeing the lovely ladies of her fine establishment, Mrs. Lafayette would spend all of her off time in a homestead located not far from here, the location of which once laid just North of the Earp land."

"There isn't any homestead north of Earp land." Wynonna grumbles, propping her feet up on the table. Shifting something in her pocket, her eyes light up as she retrieves a piece of candy.

Dolls retrieves a file from his stack of discarded folders. "Wait wait. I just..." He finds what he's looking for and flips through it. "There's no homestead there because the land was taken by eminent domain."

Waverly's mind is reeling, taking in the information and trying to fit the puzzle together. What was north of the homestead? Looking at Wynonna, her eyes double in size as she snatches the candy out of her sister's hand. "Where did you get this?!"

Wynonna shies away from her sister. "I found it?"

That's when the connections start to form. She remembers her sister rooting around at the motel, something slipping into her pockets as they investigated the body. "You took it from the crime scene..." Waverly exclaims. "I know what's north of our home."

"Well... according to the documentation, the land was turned into the industrial sector and now there's..."

"Fudge! Fudge fudge fudge!" Waverly's hands come up to her forehead as she starts to pace in frustration. How could she have been so stupid?

"Actually, it's a taffy factory." Dolls raises an eyebrow at the youngest Earp sister.

"Oh my god, Nicole. You have to understand that I didn't know." Waverly is quick to say, moving to the officer's side. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Nicole leans away, her brows furrowed in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I didn't know it had anything to do with this and when she asked for something to do of course I suggested a tour cause I mean there isn't anything really to see around here."

"Wave! What happened?"

"I sent Chloe to the taffy factory."

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Wynonna sets the cup of coffee down on the table, looking at the trainwreck that's unraveling before her.

Nicole paces back and forth, mumbling to herself. There's a look of desperation in her eyes that is mildly familiar, back when it was Waverly that had been in danger - when Waverly had been *the* danger.

Waverly is watching the officer, her head tracking the pacing back and forth like a sad puppy while gnawing at her nails.

Wynonna can't lie. It's a pretty messed up situation and she's wondering how she let the boys stick her with the misery twins while they went off to do "reconnaissance." More like running away from having to deal with the drama.

She so doesn't get paid enough for this. Actually... she doesn't get paid any more than Officer Haught, and she's the freaking Earp Heir. Unless you counted coffee and donuts, which are always a bonus.

Wynonna purses her lips. Really, how many times has she saved Purgatory? There should be some sort of financial bonus to that, shouldn't there? Like maybe a grand or so every time she takes out a revenant. 77 revheads for 77k. Sounds pretty fair, right? She'd also be willing to knock it down to 70 since the first 7 were purely a personal mission.

"Where the hell are they?" Nicole suddenly yells, startling everyone in the room. She's obviously reached a breaking point.

Wynonna puts a settling hand on her sister's shoulder, Waverly having nearly jumped out of her own skin. "You wanna settle down there, Officer Haught? They've been gone less than an hour."

"Do you know all the shit that could happen in an hour?" Nicole is still pacing, her arms crossing over her chest.

Waverly is staring at the table, suddenly interested in the cheap furniture. She hasn't spoken much since the taffy connection was made, since Nicole had told her it wasn't her fault.

Well... it kind of was but Wynonna wasn't gonna say that out loud. "The note gives us till high noon tomorrow."

"I just don't understand why we're wasting time. We should be at the factory now."

"We don't know that she's really there. That's why we investigate."

Nicole let's out a frustrated sigh. "I just need some air." She growls, stepping out of the room.

Wynonna rolls her eyes, debating if she should deal with problem one or problem two. Hearing the soft snuffle from Waverly ends the debate for her. "Waves..."

"She's gonna hate me forever."

"What?" Wynonna pauses, trying to wrap her mind around the ridiculous statement. "Ok, seriously. She couldn't hate you even if you took Chloe hostage yourself. She's just... worried."

Waverly shakes her head, curling up on the chair and pulling her knees up to her chest, making herself look incredibly small. "I've never seen her like this."

"Like this?" Wynonna scoffs. "This is nothing compared to what she was like when... you

know..."

Stained red eyes looked up, Waverly wiping away a tear. "What do you mean?"

"Dude I sometimes forget you weren't actually... here. Nicole barely slept the entire time. Man she was kind of spastically irritating." Picking up her coffee, she takes a long sip, feeling the heat of bourbon sliding down her throat. "She was unbearable."

Waverly is quiet for a moment, obviously withdrawing into herself. Finally she shrugs. "Doesn't matter now." With a sudden resolve, she sits up, wiping the back of her hand over her eyes. "Chloe is important to her so... we have to find her."

Wynonna just shakes her head. When did her sister turn into such an idiot? Either way, she'll take motivated Waverly over sobbing Waverly, even if her motivation was completely misguided.

But still... "Look, Baby Girl..."

"I cannot believe you!"

Both women jump when yelling voices come down the hall towards the office.

"What the hell now?" Wynonna rolls her eyes as the door opens, letting in Dolls and Doc.

"You had no right!" Doc's form is rigid with anger, rubbing his wrists.

"I was doing my job. You had no right to attempt to interfere!" Dolls responds.

Wynonna notices that both men are standing with chests puffed inflated, shoulders thrown back like fighting chickens ready to peck each others' eyes out. She's long ago accepted the fact that these two will just never get along.

"Do it again and so help me, I do not care what demon blood flows through your veins, I will end you without mercy."

She can see the fire in both their eyes and she knows she has to step in. "Whoa whoa whoa." Wynonna stands, hands up. "Nobody is dealing out endings but me... ends... Look I'm the one with the magic gun, so what the hell is going on?"

"Why don't you ask the Deputy Marshall here?" Doc growls, his arms crossing over his chest.

Dolls rolls his eyes. "Upon investigation of the factory, it would appear that it is where Lafayette is holding Chloe."

"Ok..." Wynonna looks back and forth between the two of them, knowing there had to be more.

"While we were there, Chloe was tied up in a corner and Lafayette was not alone." He clears his throat as he moves over to the safe, opening it up and beginning to take supplies out. "Observing her behaviors and methods of coercion, it is my belief that she is much like the creature known as a siren. She lures her victims in through the use of her voice, consummates the relationship, and when they start to struggle, apparently has the ability to fill their lungs with saltwater."

Waverly observes them two, noticing the way Doc was looking at the Deputy Marshall with expectation. "That's really creepy. How did you save him?"

"Yes, Deputy Marshall Dolls. How did you save him?" Doc repeats the question.

Wynonna sees the look in Dolls's eyes as he purses his lips. She's seen this before, remembering

Shorty's death and she scoffs. "You didn't did you? You let him die."

"What?" Waverly's face fills with shock.

"We had to find out how she was luring people in and the extent of her powers."

Shock turns to horror as Waverly looks at Doc. "Why didn't you do something?"

"Don't you go blaming me." Doc lifts his hands up, revealing red marks on each wrist. "He handcuffed me to a pipe!"

Wynonna shakes her head. How many months had they been working together and still Dolls pulls this self-justified bullshit. "You never change."

"Now we know how she attacks, we can avoid it." Dolls gives her a neutral look. "Where did Officer Haught go?"

"She just stepped outside to get some air." Waverly comments, trying to sound calm but failing miserably.

Grabbing a few extra clips of bullets, Dolls pauses. "Her cruiser wasn't outside."

Wynonna looks around the room as everyone seems to settle on the same conclusion. "Son of a biscuit!"

## Chapter 8

Chloe Mitchell drifts back to consciousness, carried by the sweet aroma of sugar and butter and vanilla. Her hazel eyes crack open as the last vestiges of an unsettling dream dissipate from her mind like water slipping through her fingers. At least, she thinks it was a dream.

In it, she remembers a beautiful woman with pale white skin, long platinum hair, and unusual lavender eyes. She sang in ethereal soprano, weaving an angelic melody so pure that it brought tears to Chloe's eyes and made her heart soar. She would have done anything for that woman. Anything. That is, until the dream turned into a nightmare. The whites of the woman's eyes darkened to black and her irises glowed an unnatural red. And then came the screams—a man's cries of terror that morphed into choked gurgling and thrashing into, finally, nothing. Nothing but stillness. The silence of death.

Chloe lifts her head from its awkward slump and groans when pain shoots down her stiff neck. The sound is muted by a gag between her lips, the cloth wrapped tightly behind her head. Jolting up, Chloe blinks as she gets her bearings and finds herself inside a small, non-descript office. She tries to move, but can't. She's strapped to a chair by thick braided ropes that bind her wrists to the armrests. Panic rising, she attempts to free herself, wincing as the rough twine bites into her skin.

"You struggle in vain," a woman says, bare hints of a Cajun accent in a lilting voice.

Chloe whips her head around and freezes.

Standing by the doorway is the woman from her dream, her lavender eyes piercing.

"I suggest you make yourself comfortable and in no way burdensome," she says. "Lest you wish to join our recently departed friend."

The woman gestures to a man lying on the floor, his glassy eyes open but unseeing. Lifeless. Chloe lets out a muffled scream as the woman approaches, her movements so smooth she could be gliding across the floor. Chloe jerks her head away, but can't escape the single finger the woman trails down her cheek. She trembles from the icy touch.

"Though," the woman says, bringing her lips to the shell of Chloe's ear, "I have no doubt I would enjoy you before the end."

"How 'bout you enjoy *this*, revenant?" A new voice cuts in, followed by three deafening blasts of gunfire. Chloe shrieks as the shots hit the woman, who crumples to the ground, and then cries out in relief when she sees Nicole step through the doorframe, her sidearm raised. Chloe doesn't remember Nicole ever looking as dashing as she does now, like a modern knight in her police uniform. Quickly holstering her weapon, Nicole rushes to Chloe, sidestepping both bodies and crouching down.

"Chloe, are you okay?" Nicole asks, sounding calm and confident despite the worry in her brown eyes, which dart across her face and torso to check for any apparent injuries. Nicole unties the gag and removes it.

"I'm... I'm f-fine," Chloe manages to say even though her tongue feels like cotton and her bones rattle uncontrollably. "Nic, who... what... is that?"

"I'll explain later," Nicole says, removing a pocket knife from her utility belt and unfolding it. She cuts through the rope quickly and grasps Chloe's hand. "Right now, we have to get out of here."

Nicole tugs her to a standing position, but Chloe's hit by a sudden rush of vertigo. Her knees wobble and she loses her balance, pitching forward only to be caught by Nicole.

"Whoa," she says, holding Chloe with steady, strong hands. "Easy now." She brushes her hair back. "You okay?"

Chloe braces herself against Nicole's shoulders, soothed by Nicole's gentle touch and her familiar scent of vanilla. She had forgotten how much she missed both.

"I'm fine," Chloe insists. "Just a little shaken up."

"We've gotta keep moving before Lafayette comes to," Nicole says, leading Chloe by the hand through the door.

"Come to?" Chloe asks, throwing a confused glance over her shoulder at the woman Nicole shot. "Isn't she dead?"

"Sort of," Nicole says cryptically as they emerge on the second floor of what Chloe recognizes as the taffy factory, overlooking a sprawling production area. "Let's not wait to find out."

Chloe would have asked more questions if not for the fear squeezing at her pulsating heart. They walk as swiftly as Chloe's legs will allow, their steps echoing eerily in the empty plant as they follow the path of a metal railing, bypass a freight elevator, and go down a flight of stairs. Nicole zigzags through a maze of conveyor belts, cauldrons, and taffy pulling and wrapping machines.

The path confuses a breathless Chloe, who half wonders if Nicole is lost until Nicole squeezes her hand and says, "Almost there."

They're less than 10 meters from the red-glow of an exit sign when the singing starts - the same haunting refrain from Chloe's dream. It fogs her mind and makes her feel like she's floating, reminiscent of the time she had vaped marijuana with one of the hippy interns in Toronto, against her better judgment. And her heart? It feels so full that she's sure it'll burst. She's positive she's never loved anyone as much as she loves the singer. Chloe pulls them to a stop and Nicole drops her hand, apparently caught in the same thrall. Turning, she sees Lafayette nearing, hands outstretched and beckoning. Chloe goes to her without hesitation. It's not until she's at Lafayette's side that she realizes Nicole isn't with her.

She looks back and sees Nicole with her hands and knees on the ground. Lafayette's voice grows stronger still, and Nicole clenches her jaw so hard her teeth clack loudly, sweat breaking out on her forehead as she labors to breathe. She tries to reach for her gun, but she can barely lift her arm.

"Curious," Lafayette says, breaking her song. "No one has ever resisted my call." She crouches in front of Nicole and tilts up her chin, gazing into defiant brown eyes. "You must love someone quite deeply."

Chloe's heart involuntarily flutters at those words even through the haze of Lafayette's compulsion.

"I loved someone once too," Lafayette continues, her voice a silky purr. "I broke the one who took them from me. My husband. Soaked his bones in the Bayou for his transgression."

Nicole draws back, straining from the movement, and spits in Lafayette's face. Chloe watches as Lafayette's eyes narrow dangerously before she smirks and stands back on her feet.

"I shall savor breaking you too." Lafayette flicks her wrist, long, delicate fingers summoning Chloe to her once again.

She caresses Chloe's cheek and presses a kiss to her lips before nodding. And Chloe willingly, happily, bends down toward Nicole and unhooks a taser from her utility belt.

"Chloe, you don't have to do this," Nicole grits out. "You can fight it."

But Chloe doesn't answer except to charge the weapon and pull the trigger.

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Channeling years of training, Dolls keeps his expression impassive as Wynonna and Doc slip out the back of his SUV. He keeps his jealousy at bay, taming it like the other monster hidden deep inside him, and pretends he's unfazed by the sight of the two of them together. Next to him in the passenger seat, Waverly rolls down her window so that her sister can peer inside.

"So we stick to the plan," Wynonna says. "Doc and I lure Lafayette out with Peacemaker while you two find Haughthead and Chloe."

"I'm not the one who has problems sticking to plans, Earp," Dolls deadpans, lifting an eyebrow at Wynonna and throwing a glare at Doc, who stands behind Wynonna and glowers right back at the deputy marshal. "Need I remind you of what happened in the big city? Or the Pine Barrens? Or..."

"Yeah, yeah" Wynonna interrupts. "But at least *I'm* not the one who lets innocent people die to prove theories."

Dolls would never admit it, but the look of disappointment in Wynonna's blue eyes stings, the hurt compounded by the fact that Wynonna had sided with the gunslinger. Lips forming a thin line, he doesn't respond. He refuses to apologize for doing what was necessary to defeat Lafayette. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary for victory, to protect the people you love.

"Guys," Waverly cuts in. "No one else is dying, okay? Let's just get this done."

Dolls nods imperceptibly, loosening his death grip on the steering wheel, while Wynonna softens as she regards Waverly.

"You sure you wanna do this, Waves?" Wynonna asks. "I'd feel a lot better if you sat this one out."

Waverly shakes her head. "I already told you, Wy. I got Chloe into this. And Nicole." Her knuckles blanch as she squeezes the door handle. "I have to help."

It's a conversation-borderline argument-they've been having since they realized Haught had left the police station, and Wynonna sighs in defeat. She glances back at Dolls. "You keep her safe."

"With my life," Dolls answers with more conviction than he normally gives anything. He's always had a soft spot for the youngest Earp. And he'd be damned if he let anything happen to her. Would even allow Wynonna to put a bullet between his eyes if Waverly got hurt on his watch.

Wynonna nods at him and he rolls the window back up as he pulls the vehicle from the curb. They're several blocks from the factory and he cuts the headlights, navigating the car through the darkness toward the employee entrance in the back, where they come across Nicole's abandoned police cruiser. Dolls parks next to it and turns off the engine, pulling out his Glock and checking the clip.

"Ready?" He asks Waverly, who nods and adjusts the strap of her short-barreled shotgun.

They exit and Dolls rounds the squad car, placing a hand on the engine hood. The metal is cool to the touch.

"She's been here a while," he comments, looking back at Waverly, who stares at the driver's seat forlornly.

"I don't understand," Waverly says softly. "Why didn't she at least call for backup?"

"Agent Haught knows regular police officers won't stand a chance against a revenant. She probably didn't want to put them in danger."

Waverly's eyes find his in the dimly lit parking lot, her worry clear. "*She* doesn't stand a chance against a revenant." She shakes her head. "Why didn't she wait?"

Dolls lets out a slow, steady breath. He doesn't do emotions. They're too messy and he'd rather avoid them all together. It's simpler that way. But that doesn't stop him from wanting to comfort Waverly, even if he's treading well outside his comfort zone.

"Sometimes we do irrational things out of guilt and wanting to make things right," he says.

Waverly's lips part, but she says nothing as his words sink in..

"Let's go," Dolls says, holding his gun at the ready. They move onward, creeping along the side of the factory, passing underneath a mural of the company's slogan (Purgatory Taffy: Too Sinful for Heaven, But Too Good for Hell!), until they reach the back door, its lock cleanly picked.

Dolls's eyebrows rise and he wonders what other skills Haught has been hiding. He glances at Waverly, who's already reaching for the knob, and holds his hand out to stop her.

"We should wait until Wynonna's diversion," he explains and she nods, taking a step back.

They don't say anything further as they wait for the signal, hidden in the shadows and pressed up against a cement wall. Dolls closes his eyes and hones his senses, listening for any movement but hearing nothing out of the ordinary. Everything is still and quiet in the industrial sector with all the other manufacturing plants closed for the night. And they're too far away from the town proper for him to pick up any noise pollution. All he can hear is Waverly's breaths, which grow shallower and shallower the longer nothing happens.

"Something bothering you, Waverly?" Dolls asks casually, even though he already knows.

He prides himself with his ability to read people, and Waverly Earp is one of the easiest to read, what with the way she almost always wears her heart on her sleeve. And her heart always beat strongest for Nicole Haught. Anyone with two eyes and half a brain could see it.

"I broke up with her because I thought it would keep her safe," Waverly confesses. "And she's in danger anyway."

"That's the risk we all take in Black Badge, regardless of relationship status," Dolls says simply.

"Do you think..." Waverly starts, but then stops with a shake of her head.

"What?"

"Do you think Nicole will ever forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he answers matter-of-factly. "There's no way you could have known

about Lafayette's connection to the taffy factory."

Waverly ducks her head down, long hair falling forward and partially obscuring her face.

"You don't mean the kidnapping, do you?" He asks, half dreading her answer.

Waverly shakes her head, and Dolls stifles a sigh. He doesn't do relationships either. Or at least he didn't before he came to Purgatory. But something compels him to keep going, and he convinces himself that he just needs to keep Waverly's mind in the game. It'd do no one any favors if she's distracted about her love life.

"You did what you had to do," Dolls says. He knows a thing or two about pushing people away to protect others... and himself. He suspects that played a much bigger role in Waverly's decision than she may realize herself. "Sometimes people get hurt as a result. But that doesn't automatically mean you made the wrong choice. Your intentions were good."

"Yeah?" Waverly looks back up at him. "You know what they say paves the road to hell, right?"

Dolls cracks a small half smile. "I've met lots of folks who are on that road and belong there. You most definitely are *not* one of them, Earp."

He observes the way Waverly stiffens when he uses her last name, like she's been doing for months. It had piqued his curiosity when he had first noticed it several weeks ago. Initially, Dolls had speculated that perhaps Waverly felt unworthy of her Earp heritage following her possession. He never had the opportunity to dwell on it for long, though, not when his attention constantly was pulled away by weekly revenants and Wynonna shenanigans. But now is as good a time as any to get to the bottom of it.

"How could you know?" Waverly asks. "We're all capable of darkness."

"That's true." Dolls doesn't sugarcoat it. They all have their demons, literal and figurative. He has injection scars and invisible scars to prove it. "But you wanna know the difference between the good guys and the bad guys?"

Waverly hesitantly tips her head forward.

"The bad guys don't worry that they're bad," he says. "Waverly, what happened with the Old One wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" She asks, despair in her eyes. "I didn't have control when it was in me. But I had control leading up to it. I *chose* to touch the demon's blood, consequences be damned, because I..."

"Because you?"

She falls silent again and Dolls takes the opening. "We all make mistakes," Dolls says. *Even me*, he silently adds. "But mistakes don't make you a bad person. They don't make you any less of an Earp."

He's taken aback when Waverly's eyes fill with tears and she runs a frustrated hand through her hair. "That's the thing. During the solstice, before you guys stopped Bobo and Willa at the Gateway, I.."

"What?" Dolls coaxes as gently as possible

"I met with Bobo."

That is definitely not what he had been expecting to hear. "Okay."

"He told me I wasn't an Earp," she says it so quietly that Dolls almost misses it. But when he does, he laughs. A genuine bark of a laugh, deep from his belly, that startles both him and Waverly in its unexpectedness.

"And you believed him?" He asks, his entire body shaking with rare mirth.

Waverly's mouth opens and closes several times, unable to get any words out.

"He's lying," Dolls says bluntly.

Waverly shakes her head. "H-how do you...?"

Dolls sobers quickly, wiping a stray tear from the corner of his eye. "Everyone associated with Black Badge undergoes genetic testing, whether they're full-time employees, part-timers, deputized agents, and, yes, even research consultants."

"But I never submitted a DNA sample."

Dolls shrugs. "I never said it was necessarily voluntary, but your genetics-along with Wynonna's-were analyzed long ago. And you are most definitely sisters. God help you."

Waverly slaps a hand over her mouth, stifling a strangled sound that's part laugh and part sob as she slumps back against the wall.

A strange sort of warmth unfurls in Dolls's chest at the relief on Waverly's face; at the way some long-lingering tension seeps from her tiny frame.

"Not that blood matters," he says. "You and Wynonna, you're both worthy of the Earp name. More than worthy. I'd go so far as to say the name isn't worthy of *you*."

"All this time," Waverly says, swiping at her eyes. "I'm such an idiot. I..."

Whatever she's going to say is swallowed by the crack of gunshots echoing in the distance. He can make out the sound from two, possibly three, firearms.

"That's our cue," Dolls says, flicking his gun's safety off and racking the slide. "You ready?"

"Rock steady ready." Waverly cycles the action of her shotgun with a single pump.

With a nod, Dolls swiftly pulls open the door and enters, Waverly right on his heels. The production area is dark and empty and Dolls sweeps their immediate surroundings before coming to a stop.

"Clear," he says. "According to the factory floor plan, there's an office on the second floor, as well as a storage area on the ground. If I was going to hold people prisoner, that's where I'd keep them."

"We should split up," Waverly says, already heading toward the storage room.

"No, Waverly, we should stick together..."

"Dolls, you and I both know we don't have the time for that. We don't know how long Wynonna and Doc will keep Lafayette distracted. This is the most efficient option."

She's right. Dolls knows it. There's confidence in Waverly's gaze once again, a steely determination that had been missing these past few months, and Dolls feels oddly proud of her.

"Okay, Earp," he agrees. "Meet back here in five."

Waverly grins at him and takes off. He's about to turn and head for the stairs himself when he hears his name.

"Thank you," Waverly says when he looks back over his shoulder.

With that, she disappears around a machine. Now that he's alone, Dolls doesn't hide the rare, full blown smile that stretches across his face.

---

Lafayette smiles languidly as she circles the sheriff's deputy hanging from a ceiling pipe, her hands cuffed above her head, body convulsing. The officer known as Haught is a very fine specimen indeed, Lafayette thinks, even as she coughs and sputters up water, soaking the front of her uniform.

Haught had resisted Lafayette's powers admirably, but humans could only last so long, and Lafayette had been on the verge of *enjoying* her new plaything, flooding her lungs with the sea, when the first shots had rung out. Lafayette had retrieved Haught's weapon and handed it to Chloe, compelling her to "take care of our guests."

Chloe is dispensable now that Lafayette has an even better prize with which she can barter for safe harbor from Peacemaker.

"If only we had more time," Lafayette whispers in Haught's ear, yanking her head back by the hair and enjoying her pained gasp. "We would have had much pleasure."

Releasing Haught, whose head slumps forward, Lafayette conceals herself behind gigantic bags of sugar, melding herself with the shadows, biding her time. She doesn't have to wait long for the fly to come right to the honey, and a thrill shoots through her at the knowledge that she had been right.

Waverly Earp cautiously enters the storage area, shotgun raised, no doubt in search of her lover.

Lafayette had observed Haught and the Earp heir's younger sister when they were searching for her at the PaperMoon a few days ago. Had guessed (correctly) that they shared a connection despite the tension between them.

And now Haught would be the key in allowing Lafayette to snag the biggest prize of all outside of the heir herself.

From where she's hidden, Lafayette watches Waverly freeze and take in a sharp breath as she comes across Haught.

"Nicole!" She cries out, slinging her weapon back and rushing forward.

Haught groans weakly when Waverly tenderly smooths her hair away from her forehead and cradles her face between her hands. "Wave?"

"It's me, Baby," she says, wiping away excess seawater from her chin. "Shit, did that bitch try to drown you?"

Nicole struggles to shake her head. "Waves, you have to get out of here."

"It's okay. We're gonna get out of here together."

"No, Waverly, behind you!"

But it's too late. Lafayette has stepped out from the darkness and begun her song; a song that had been ingrained in her being ever since she heard it for the first time, when her true love had sung it in the French Quarter; a song she now sang to reconnect with a faded dream, long since unattainable, ripped from her grasp by her murdering husband.

Lafayette smiles in satisfaction as Haught's eyes roll back, once again choking as liquid pushes the air from her lungs. She grins even wider as Waverly stiffens and slowly, oh so slowly, turns on her heel to face her, a blissful expression on her face.

She beckons the Earp forward. One step. Two. Until she's within a few meters of Lafayette. But just as she's about to reach for her, Waverly takes a swift step backward and pulls up her gun.

"Drown this out."

Lafayette's song is cut off by an earsplitting boom and the last thing she sees is Waverly's smile as she's blasted backward by a hail of buckshot pellets.

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Waverly is quick to fish Nicole's keys from her pocket to pop open the handcuffs. She's not strong enough to catch her, but at least slows her descent to the ground. She drops to her knees, finding Nicole struggling to catch her breath as she coughs up water. She knows they don't have much time before Lafayette gets up, but she slides her hand over the officer's back.

A few more struggling coughs and the officer rolls over. Gasping for air, Nicole looks up at the brunette. "How?..."

Reaching up, Waverly removes earplugs from her ears, tucking them into one hand before reaching up to move a lock of red hair from the officer's face. "If you'd stayed around long enough for Dolls and Doc to come back from their recon, you would have known about her being a siren and singing." She chastises out of frustration, offering her support as the officer tries to stand. "You are such an idiot." She doesn't mean it, but finding the woman slowly drowning to death, she doesn't know how to deal with emotions that are overwhelming her. This is certainly not the place to break down crying. "Don't ever do that again!" She finds herself yelling at the helpless redhead.

"Hey." Nicole stands on unsteady feet, exhaustion evident in her sluggish movement. "I'm sorry." She reaches a hand out, catching the single tear that slides down Waverly's cheek.

Waverly can't bear to look up at her, doesn't want to see the "friendly" expression she expects to see, but a finger curls under her jaw, forcing her to look up. She sees eyes shaking with something in their depths. Her eyes fall to Nicole's lips and she knows she can't let this happen. "We have to get out of here." They're not the words she wants to say, but they're the only ones she's able to. "There could be..." Lips press against her own and she feels the kiss through her entire being. She closes her eyes tight, hoping she could just hold on to the moment so that no matter what happens, she would at least have this tiny slice of perfection.

She nearly forgets that they're in a factory, that there are others in danger, that a revenant who can only be killed by Peacemaker is lying no more than a few feet away from them. She nearly forgets that she and Nicole have broken up, but it's the taste of the kiss that reminds her. The subtle saltwater reminds her that Nicole has nearly been drowned because of her, needing to rescue Chloe.

The moment is not nearly long enough, but she regretfully pulls away, licking the salty memory of Nicole's mouth from her lips. Looking to the side, her eyes fall on the spot where Lafayette had landed, the empty spot, and a cold thrill goes through her as she tucks the plugs back in her ears. "Shit. Come on Nicole. Let's get you out of here."

She wishes she could say it's a quick trip to the door, but Nicole is weak and stumbling, her steps heavy as they make their way to the exit. She's supporting the officer, an arm around the strong waist, the woman's arm over her shoulders.

They're almost to the cruiser when they hear a series of gunshots starting up again.

"Chloe!" Nicole stops, wanting to turn around and head back into the factory.

"Nicole, no." Waverly stops her, a hand wrapped around her bicep. "You can barely stand." She pulls the woman towards the car, getting her in the back seat. "I'll go make sure Chloe is ok." She takes a moment to push red hair behind Nicole's ear. "Please stay here." It takes everything in her to resist leaning forward for another kiss. She needs to help everyone and save Chloe.

Nicole nods.

"I'm serious." Waverly gives her a look. "I don't want you nodding just to go running off into the factory the second I'm out of here."

Nicole smiles just a little, nodding again.

"Good girl." Waverly gives her a weak smile before turning back to the factory.

With a few perfectly executed yet completely misguided shots, the factory has come to life, mechanically dispensed ingredients merging to start creating the sticky treat the company was known for.

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"This shit is bananas." Wynonna hides behind a tankard, the sudden stirring of the fragrant, yellow candy causing the drum to vibrate.

Doc gives her a look, pointing to his ears which are safely plugged.

"God damn it." Wynonna sighs heavily. "What's the point of coming up with completely awesome puns if no one can hear you?" She comments to herself, jumping when a bullet impacts the tankard again, sending a shower of sparks over her. In the center of the room, the tall blonde was randomly shooting in their direction. "How many bullets does she have in that thing?" She knows she can't just open fire on Chloe. The woman, as aggravating as her presence was to their little family, is still innocent.

"What to do, what to do..." Wynonna holds peacemaker in her hand, as if it would provide her with the answers. Maybe she could get Doc to shoot the gun out her hand. That's what he was good at right? Yeah. She turns to Doc, about to yell when she sees him fall to his knees, his hands coming up to his throat as he begins to cough. "Shit!" She suddenly sees the revenant, all pale skin and white hair, eyes the color of fresh lavender. The front of her dress is stained a dark red that's close to black, and she's favoring her left side. She's seen the spray pattern before. *Waverly*. She feels a spike of fear drive through her, wondering what could have happened as she raises Peacemaker.

In that moment, Lafayette must predict it because Wynonna gags suddenly. She tries to breathe in but there's a heaviness, a pain searing through her chest as she tries to cough, the taste of salt on

her tongue. She can't cough. She can't scream. She can only fall to her knees, dropping Peacemaker as she reaches for her throat.

Wynonna is spitting out water, trying to clear her lungs, but more water just fills her chest. With her earplugs in, all she can hear is the sound of her own retching and the strangled sound of water bubbling from her throat. Her hands fall to the ground as she keeps herself from collapsing. Her head is starting to spin, her chest burning. Her consciousness is bordering between light and darkness until she sees the tall revenant suddenly crumple to the ground. A hand is on her back, hitting her firmly as she's coughing, finally able to pull air into her lungs.

"Wynonna!"

She hears the familiar voice even if it's muffled, and she looks up to see Dolls kneeling beside her with a worried look, his hand still stroking her back. "I'm fine." She gasps, grabbing Peacemaker as she struggles to stand. She sees Doc beginning to rise himself, seconds before Lafayette begins to move.

---

Waverly heads towards the gunfire, which is actually quite hard to distinguish in the large factory that seems to have amazing acoustics. It's strange the way the shots seem to come in timed intervals, as if it's automatic. She wonders who it could be. Dolls? Wynonna? Doc? Lafayette?

The revenant doesn't seem like the type to pick up a gun, but none of the Black Badge members would have a shot as repetitious and predictable as that.

When she slips around a large drum, she's surprised to see Chloe standing in the open, holding what Waverly recognizes as Nicole's sidearm. "What the hell, Barbie?" She mumbles right as Chloe pulls the trigger again. She seems to be aiming at another one of the drums.

Waverly risks sliding a little closer, trying to see what the woman is shooting at. Just behind the drum, she sees Dolls pulling Wynonna and Doc back behind the makeshift shield, Lafayette on the ground but starting to move. They can't get to Lafayette with Chloe still firing at them. Both her sister and Doc seem a little out of it and Waverly knows she has to give them a little time.

Her eyes falling on the blonde again, Waverly shifts her grip on her shotgun, shoulders set in determination.

---

Wynonna is still gasping for air, her hands shaking unsteadily as she tries to get a good grip on Peacemaker. Her throat is burning and she feels like there's a horse sitting on her chest.

There's another shot and they duck behind the drum. Dolls fires a shot at the revenant as she stands, bringing her to her knees again.

Wynonna can't get a good shot and the blonde bitch keeps firing at them. She can't believe they're getting pinned down by a Barbie doll and an old hag that doesn't realize the goth look went out over a decade ago. After another shot comes, she risks looking around the drum. She doesn't expect to see a very familiar form suddenly appearing, shotgun in hand. It brings a smile to her face, watching Waverly in action, something she hasn't seen in quite some time.

She could say it was almost an art, watching as Waverly moved with certainty, her shotgun being raised. In one swift swing, the brunette brings the butt of the gun against the back of the blonde's head, sufficiently knocking her out.

Waverly looks up, as if completely surprised by her own actions, her eyes meeting Wynonna's. Her sister's eyes grow wide, pointing.

Turning, Wynonna sees Lafayette standing once more. Now that she isn't being fired on, Wynonna grins and steps closer, lifting Peacemaker till the end of the barrel is just inches from the pale forehead. Even with her shaking hands, she knows she won't miss at this range. "Make your peace." The tip of her gun glows a bright orange, symbols lighting up against the metal just before she pulls the trigger.

She knows it can't hurt her, the way the ground opens up to swallow the revenant, but still she steps back. She imagines she can feel the heat of hell on her skin, but a hand on her shoulder gets her attention. Reaching up, she removes the earplugs, finally glad to hear again.

"Good job, Earp." Dolls gives her a gentle squeeze before heading over to Waverly.

Wynonna strides over to her sister's side as Dolls kneels beside Chloe. She slings her arm over Waverly's shoulder. "So I'm betting we're not telling Nicole about this tiny bit?"

"Oh God, what did I just do?" Waverly has a stricken look on her face as she looks from the gun to the blonde.

With a roll of her eyes, Wynonna shakes her sister's shoulders. "You saved our asses, Baby Girl." She places a kiss to her temple just as a groan comes from Chloe.

"It's ok. You're alright." Dolls reassures Chloe as she sits up.

"Nicole!" The blonde looks around in a panic. "Where's Nicole?"

"She's alright." Waverly answers when everyone turns to her. "She's right outside. She's really worried about you."

"Are you alright?" Doc asks Wynonna and Waverly, his voice raspy.

"Totes." Wynonna clears her throat, still feeling the tightness in her chest.

It's a short trip to the exit, but takes a while as Dolls helps Chloe.

Nicole is still outside, but she's managed to stand, although a bit precariously leaning against the cruiser, and the moment they step outside, Wynonna watches as sharp eyes take in the sight. Nicole's gaze darts to Waverly first, trying to find any indication of injury. When she's satisfied, her eyes fall on the blonde who's a little more worse for wear. "Chloe!"

Wynonna feels Waverly tense as they watch the blonde stumble into the redhead's arms, beginning to cry. "Come on... it was just a light tap to the head." She whispers for only her sister to hear.

Waverly's face is a mask, her mouth pulled in a tight line as she refuses to comment.

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"Hey Waverly!" The older woman brightens at the presence of the youngest Earp. She sets aside the book of crossword puzzles she's been working on and pushes her glasses a little further up her nose. It's no use because they slide back into the divots that are now permanently located on either side of her nose from the heavy lenses.

"Hi Marsha." Waverly feels a little uncertain, her eyes moving around the small floral shop. One wall is covered in stuffed animals and cards, but she moves to the opposite site of the room, her eyes drifting over the premade bouquets.

"Your sister isn't hurt again is she?" Marsha moves over to her side, hands braced against her back as she winces slightly, no doubt some old age pain nagging at her.

"No." Pursing her lips, she ignores the bunches of carnations. "A friend... well... more than a friend... I hope." Waverly's made the decision. After nearly losing the redhead, she's decided to not let the past stand between them anymore. There's nothing she can do to take back everything she's done... no... everything The Old One has done... but she can sure spend the rest of her days making up for it... if Nicole would let her.

"Oh honey. Men aren't too excited by flowers. Maybe some candy? Can he have candy? He's not in the ICU is he?"

"She actually." Waverly blinks. She'd have sworn the whole town knew about her and Nicole, especially after Champ's dumb ass outed them at the party. "And no, she's not in the ICU." She's not sure of the reaction she'll get, but to her surprise, Martha's eyes seem to light up.

"Oh well then!" Martha pulls her over to a section full of roses. "'Does she like roses? What sort of flowers does she like? Lilies? Maybe some daisies? They're not fancy but I happen to know that some women would rather have a nice handful of wildflowers over long stem roses any day."

Waverly is a little taken back and she chews on her bottom lip. She hates to admit she has no idea what flowers Nicole likes. They hadn't really gotten around to talking about it before she had been possessed, and later they had broken up. "I don't know..." Her defeated tone must be reflected in her expression because Martha wraps an arm around her shoulder.

"I'm sure we can find something. Don't stress." Martha looks around at the selection. "What sort of perfume does she wear?" When Waverly gives her a confused look, the older woman smiles. "Well, you don't want to give her something that contrasts. Scent is the most powerful of senses and you want everything working in your favor, don't you? Come on now, what does she smell like?"

It's an oddly personal question and Waverly feels her cheeks redden. "Vanilla... like a spicy vanilla."

Martha seems to think about that before nodding. "Ok, so she's not an overly floral person. We can deal with that. There are lots of flowers that don't have much scent at all."

By the time she walks out, Waverly has a custom bouquet made of daffodils and tulips in a clear vase. She's oddly pleased by the look of it and can't help but think it will be perfect for the officer. She knows Nicole is supposed to stay overnight for observation, to make sure she doesn't suffer any lasting effects from the near drowning, but when she gets to the room, it's empty. Not the type of empty that says she's checked out - the bed is messy and the bag with Nicole's personal effects is still in the closet.

Waverly frowns, setting the vase on the bedside table before looking either way down the hall. She makes her way to the nurse's station where she's relieved to find someone she knows. "Hey Bobbi."

The small woman who's the same age as Waverly looks up from her computer. "Hey Waves. I haven't seen you since Champ put his foot through that window."

Ugh. Champ is the last person she wants to talk about. "I know, it's been forever. Hey, have you seen where Ni...Officer Haught went?"

"Sure! That's a feisty one. She's been giving us a hard time, if you know what I mean, but she's in

302, with that blonde friend of hers."

"Chloe." Waverly speaks, more to herself than to the nurse.

"Yeah! God she sure is pretty. You think those curls are natural?"

Waverly winces. "Probably. She's pretty perfect." She looks down the hall to where the door is located, the long corridor suddenly expanding with foretold doom. "Thank Bobbi. Tell your mom I said hi and I miss her pies."

The nurse rolls her eyes. "Come over and tell her yourself and she'll bake any pie you want. You know she loves you more than even me." She gives Waverly a dismissive wave, indicating she's joking.

Turning down the hall, the smile drops from Waverly's face as her arms cross over her chest. She remembers hitting the blonde from behind, and the way the woman crumpled to the ground. What the hell was she going to tell Nicole?

Counting down the numbers, she's almost to 302 when she hears the familiar timber of Nicole's voice.

"This place is nothing like Indiana," comes from the door that's hanging slightly ajar. "And we agreed never to mention that disaster of a trip again."

Waverly doesn't want to spy, but she finds herself leaning against the wall beside the frame, not making a sound.

"This place is crazy, Nic. I have been here for only a few days and already I've been kidnapped and nearly killed. You were almost killed." Chloe sounds exasperated. "And I didn't even get to buy you any taffy."

"I don't need candy. I'm just really happy you're safe." There's a brief pause before the officer continues. "Purgatory isn't always like this. It's mostly... great." There's a hesitation in Nicole's voice and Waverly isn't the only one to hear it.

"Don't give me that nonsense." Chloe huffs and Waverly feels a chill go down her back. "I know you're not happy. I've seen you happy, Nic. You're miserable here."

"It's complicated," is all Nicole says. She doesn't try to defend the town any more than that. Doesn't say the blonde is wrong. She certainly doesn't say she's happy.

Waverly feels the small pinch in her sinuses as her eyes begin to water. How can Nicole be happy? After all the officer's had to go through with the town, with revenants... with her, she isn't surprised.

"It's not complicated." Chloe responds. "You were happy when we were hanging out back home. You can be happy all the time, you know."

The dash of jealousy piles on to the misery that's taking over Waverly. They were together when Nicole went home. That's why the officer was away for so long... why she came back in better spirits.

"Well I was drunk most of the time." Nicole's attempt at a joke falls flat.

"Come to Toronto."

"Chlo..."

"Not to visit." Chloe quickly adds. "Come to Toronto. You can live with me if you want, or we can find you an apartment. I know some people on the police force there and I can make something happen."

There's silence for a minute. Waverly is silently begging Nicole to say no. Just the thought of the redhead leaving sends a sharp pain through her chest, making it hard to breathe, as if Lafayette were standing in front of her, flooding her lungs and drowning her slowly.

"Nic... I love you and I want you to be happy. Come to Toronto and you can have a fresh start..." there's a pause and Waverly swears she can hear her own heartbeat. "We can have a fresh start."

Waverly feels like her world is caving in, she feels her knees turning to jelly and the wall is barely keeping her upright.

"Chloe..." Nicole's voice is soft, barely detectable.

Waverly hears the way the bed creaks, identifying the sound of springs being compressed. The soft sound of a kiss ghosts past her ears and she feels her stomach beginning to churn, acid bubbling up in her throat as tears are forming a small river down each cheek.

"You're right. Being around you will always make me happy, Chloe, and I love you..."

It's all Waverly can stand to hear. She barely makes it to the bathroom, almost doesn't get into a stall before the misery takes over and she empties her stomach into the porcelain bowl. She falls to her knees, taking deep breaths of air that smells of bleach and vomit. It's been hours since she's eaten and all that's coming up is bile until she's left dry heaving.

With a weak and shaking hand, she reaches up to flush the toilet, hoping it hides the sound of her sobs, unable to hold back the torrent of emotion that's pouring out of her.

## Chapter 9

Dry lightning splits the sky, illuminating the dark horizon in brilliant streaks of purple and white when Wynonna finds Waverly alone in the barn. Her sister sits up beneath the rafters, staring out the hayloft door facing west. It was Waverly's favorite spot growing up, Wynonna remembers; the place where the youngest Earp would retreat to hide from Willa or to avoid their father when he was on one of his frequent benders.

"Hey," Wynonna greets softly as she clears the last rung of the rickety wooden ladder up to the loft, patting her hands against her jeans to dust off loose dirt and splinters.. "What're you doing back here so soon? Thought you'd be at the hospital with Nicole."

"Why would I be at the hospital with Nicole when she has Chloe?" Waverly doesn't turn around, but Wynonna knows that she's been crying again based on the thick, watery timber of her voice.

Wynonna sighs, shoulders dropping. She hates to see Waverly hurting. "What are you talking about?"

Waverly swipes at her eyes as Wynonna joins her on the sill, legs dangling out in the breeze from the approaching storm.

"I overheard them," Waverly says. "Nicole's gonna leave. With her."

"What, the hospital?"

"Purgatory," Waverly snuffles.

Wynonna scrunches up her face. "Nicole said that?"

"Not exactly."

Wynonna angles her body toward Waverly and folds one leg underneath her. "Then what *exactly* did she say?"

"Chloe asked her to move to move to Toronto. To start over."

"That bitch." Wynonna slowly shakes her head. "We should have let Lafayette mag-vag her."

Waverly giggles despite herself though it quickly morphs into a quiet sob that makes Wynonna's heart crack.

"Did Nicole agree?" Wynonna asks tentatively.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I might have left before she answered."

Wynonna laughs, marveling at how someone so smart could be so incredibly dumb sometimes. She slips an arm around Waverly and pulls her close. "After everything that's happened, what makes you think Nicole would leave?"

Waverly leans her head against Wynonna's shoulder. "After everything that's happened, why

would she stay?"

*You didn't.*

*Mom didn't.*

Waverly doesn't say it, but those truths hang in the air, suspended around them like the scent of musk and hay and petrichor. Wynonna has no answer, so she remains silent. The fabric of her sleeve grows damp where Waverly has her face pressed against it, eyes closed. Kissing the crown of Waverly's head, Wynonna rubs a hand up and down Waverly's arm, hoping to soothe her sister with her presence where words would fail.

"She's gonna leave," Waverly repeats, words muffled.

"You don't know that," Wynonna rebuts. "And if she tries," she shrugs, "stop her."

Waverly scoffs, straightening back up. "You say that like it's easy."

"Because it is," Wynonna says simply. "Waves, you know I love you, but you're the only one making this difficult." Behind Waverly, Wynonna catches sight of two headlights glowing in the distance. "If there's anything I've learned since coming back, it's that you've got to fight for what you want. And if you want Nicole... give her a reason to stay."

"But how?" Waverly asks. "Where would I even start?"

"I dunno, how 'bout with the truth?" Wynonna takes Waverly's hand and squeezes it.

Closing her eyes, Waverly swallows and nods. "I'll think about it."

The lights shine brighter and brighter the closer the car gets, its tires kicking up a cloud of dirt in its wake. Squinting, Wynonna can just make out the lightbar mounted across its roof and her muscles relax in relief.

"Better think fast. You've got maybe five more minutes to figure it out."

"What?" Waverly's eyes snap open.

Wynonna tilts her head toward the approaching car, which crosses over the wooden bridge onto their property, gravel crunching beneath it as it slows to a squealing stop. Waverly stiffens when she sees the squad car, breath catching as Nicole steps out in jeans and a simple gray t-shirt. She's about to head toward the porch when Wynonna calls out.

"Up here!"

Nicole spins around, searching for Wynonna, who waves an arm to get her attention. When her eyes land on the sisters at the barn's loft door, she lifts a hand in greeting.

"Shit," Waverly exhales. "What do I do?"

The desperation in Waverly's voice makes Wynonna chuckle. "I think you already know." Wynonna presses a kiss to Waverly's temple and gets to her feet. She starts climbing back down the ladder, shaking her head at the way Waverly frets and runs her hands over her face and combs her fingers through her hair.

Nicole's stepping inside the barn by the time Wynonna's feet land on the dirt.

"Haught."

"Earp."

"Chloe okay?"

Nicole nods, slipping her hands into her back pockets. "A little shaken up and confused, but otherwise in one piece."

"And you?"

"'Bout the same. Minus the confused." The corners of Nicole's lips curl up, eyes drifting to the loft, a determined expression on her face. "If you get my drift."

There's never been any love lost between Wynonna and the police, but damn if Wynonna doesn't feel a surge of affection for this particular deputy.

"Glad to hear it." Wynonna walks past Nicole, but pauses at the door. "I'll be in the house with my big ass gun. If you get *my* drift."

Grinning, Nicole cants her head forward and chuckles. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

Wynonna closes the barn door behind her and crosses the yard to the house, her mind on Waverly and Nicole, making a mental note to have her own talk with Dolls and Doc sometime soon. Maybe. When she reaches the porch, she sneaks one glance backward, smiling as she watches Waverly turn from the hayloft door.

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Waverly's pulse pounds with every step Nicole takes up the ladder, her entire body thrumming with anxious anticipation, Wynonna's advice echoing in her mind. Her hands are cold even though the loft is almost uncomfortably warm from the early summer heat. She thinks maybe she should sit back down on the dusty wooden planks. Perhaps lean against the hayloft door's frame in a sad attempt to look casual. But her indecision costs too much time and Nicole's standing in front of her, as gorgeous as ever, before Waverly can take any action.

"Hey there," Nicole greets with a tentative smile.

"Hey yourself." Waverly wraps one arm around her and gestures vaguely at Nicole with the other. "How's your... everything?"

"Fine."

"Really?"

"Really."

Waverly lifts an eyebrow. "Knowing you, that probably means you have pulmonary edema or something."

Nicole laughs. Truly laughs. And Waverly's heart leaps in her chest. She can't remember the last time she's heard it, so crystal clear and lovely, and she realizes just how much she's missed it. Craves to hear more.

"I swear I've got a clean bill of health," Nicole insists. "They wouldn't have discharged me if it was serious." She steps closer, ducking her head slightly so she doesn't bump it on the slope of the

roof. "You, uh, left the hospital before Chloe could thank you. Before I could thank you."

Waverly shifts her weight from one foot to the other and she shrugs a shoulder. "No thanks necessary."

"Of course it is." Nicole shakes her head. "Waverly, you saved our lives." Her lips quirk up slightly. "I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything." Waverly turns away to look back out the hayloft door. The storm has almost reached them, the rippling wind and sour smell of ozone a harbinger of the impending downpour. The rusty weather vane atop the barn squeaks as it spins and spins and spins.

"The way I see it, I owe you one for, like, forever." Nicole moves to stand next to her, tall enough to rest her forearm against the top of the frame.

Waverly observes Nicole out of the corner of her eye, tracing her delicate profile: the slope of her forehead, the straight bridge of her nose, the curves of her full lips, the still present bruise on her cheek. Her loose hair billows in the wind and she's so stunning it makes Waverly ache, knowing she could truly lose her.

Waverly's heart feels like it's lodged in her throat and she swallows past it. It's now or never. "Hard to pay someone back if you're not around."

Nicole's head whips toward her, brow wrinkling. "What do you mean?"

Turning toward Nicole, Waverly captures her gaze head on, somehow finding the courage to start the conversation she's been dreading since Chloe waltzed into town with her perfect face and perfect curls and perfect opportunity for escape.

"You didn't drive out all this way just to thank me, did you?" Waverly feels like she's standing in a plane at 10,000 feet, ready to jump. Amazingly, her voice doesn't waver even though nerves have numbed the tips of her fingers and toes.

Nicole's dark irises flash from a crack of lightning, her stare boring through Waverly. "No, I didn't. I came to-"

"Say goodbye," Waverly finishes, taking a deep breath, finally ready to be brazen and leap, even if it means opening herself up to the possibility of having her soul shredded to pieces.

Nicole's brow scrunches in confusion. "What?"

"I heard you and Chloe talking about Toronto."

Understanding dawns on Nicole's face. "You think I'm leaving with Chloe."

Waverly nods and whispers, "Please don't." Her eyes sting from keeping more tears at bay. "I mean, I get it." Shrugging her shoulders up, she lets out a strangled laugh. "Relative safety with a beautiful woman versus danger and revenants and the chance of death." She bobs her hands up and down as if they're weighing scales. "The choice is obvious."

Nicole blinks at her slowly, brow smoothing out. "Is it?"

"It is," Waverly says, bracing a hand back against the door. "But I... I don't want you to leave."

A peal of thunder crashes, so close it startles Waverly. She feels it reverberate deep in her bones. Nicole, however, remains unfazed. "Waverly..."

"I know that's incredibly selfish of me, after everything I've put you through, but..." Waverly takes another deep, shuddering breath. "*Please stay.*" Nicole's lips part, and Waverly pushes forward before she can respond. "I'm sorry, Nicole. I'm sorry for hurting you. For pushing you away because I thought I was protecting you when really... I was protecting myself."

It all comes out in breathless rush. Waverly can't stop herself now that she's opened the floodgates. "I'm sorry for not *talking* to you. For not giving you a say. For thinking I knew what was best for us and not trusting that we could get through things together."

Her apology sounds so inadequate to her own ears. It's nowhere near enough to make amends for the hurt she's caused them both. But it's a start. And she hopes with all her being that it'll be enough. For now.

"If you give me another chance, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you."

Nicole stares at her for a long time, long enough for Waverly's stomach drop. She steadies herself by placing a hand back against the door for the inevitable rejection, vision blurring from the tears she's trying so hard not to shed.

"We all deserve to be happy," Nicole finally says.

"We do," Waverly agrees. *You especially.*

"With the people we love."

"Right." She breaks eye contact, deflating. "You should be with... who you love."

Nicole surprises Waverly by stepping into her personal space. The fragrance of vanilla spice envelops Waverly as Nicole lifts her chin with gentle fingertips.

"Glad we agree."

Dipping her head forward, Nicole brings their lips together, achingly tender, just as the hiss of rain surrounds them. It's barely even a kiss, a mere ghost of a caress, but Waverly feels like her entire world has bottomed out. She closes her eyes, a few tears slipping free. The roar of the storm isn't nearly as deafening as the pulsing rush of blood in Waverly's ears.

"Waverly." She can feel Nicole breathe her name even as a gust of wind sprays them both with raindrops. "Look at me."

Waverly's eyes flutter open and she swears her heart stutters to a stop at the soft expression on Nicole's face.

"Do you know who I thought about the entire time I was in that factory?"

Waverly's too stunned to respond; too afraid to acknowledge the modicum of hope blooming in her chest.

"You," Nicole murmurs. "I didn't come here tonight to say goodbye." She brushes her knuckles against her cheek, wiping at the wetness she finds there, and Waverly shivers. "I came here because I'm done fighting how I feel about you."

"Nicole..."

"Let me finish. Please." Nicole slides her fingers along her jaw and cradles Waverly's face between her hands. "Waverly Earp. I came here tonight to fight for you. To fight for *us*. Because,

goddammit, *I love you.*"

At the sound of those three words, Waverly's heart expands, spreading warmth throughout every inch of her body.

"I tried so hard not to," Nicole continues. "Tried to throw away my feelings for you, but they just kept coming back, again and again." She smiles that dimpled smile Waverly loves so much, the one reserved just for her, the one that makes her stomach flip and knees weaken. "I want you, Waverly, and everything that entails. Whether it's revenants and curses and Black Badge and hell, even Wynonna and Doc and Dolls. The ups and downs. I want it all. And if you're saying you want me back, Waves, then I'm all in. I'm all yours."

Waverly can't hold back any longer and she cries. Because Nicole - sweet, beautiful, courageous Nicole - is laying herself bare and vulnerable before her when Waverly feels like she did nothing to deserve it.

"I've never wanted anything more in my life." Waverly shakes as she pulls Nicole closer. Feels Nicole tremble in response. Sees drops of moisture clinging to her eyelashes. "I love you *so much*, Nicole. I can't imagine life without you."

Nicole watches her with wide-eyed astonishment. "So you're saying? Are we...?"

"I'm saying, when I think of the future, all I see - all I *want* to see - is you and me."

Nicole surges forward and Waverly meets her in the middle, their lips fusing together. Nicole tastes like rainwater and salt. Like hope and promise that cleanse Waverly's soul, searing away guilt and pain and regret.

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"I wouldn't go in there!" The voice is barely heard above the sound of the rain.

Doc stops halfway to the barn, tipping back the rim of his hat. He quickly heads to the covered safety of the porch before taking off his hat and shaking off the heavy raindrops. "Dare I ask why?"

Wynonna shrugs from her rocking chair, taking a swig of amber liquor from the bottle in hand. She doesn't seem to be affected in any way by the storm. "Waverly and Nicole are...talking."

He's about to ask a question when he stops himself. "You Earps do have the poorest sense of personal space I've ever seen."

Another shrug and Wynonna takes another pull from her bottle. "What can I say... we get what we want when we want it."

Doc walks over to her, liberating her of the bottle and taking a pull of his own. "And what is it you want?" He hands the bottle back to the outraged Earp.

"I want you to stop acting like a dick." She answers easily.

There are so many answers Doc could give her, so many witty comebacks that could continue their back and forth bickering, but he's grown tired of it. Fighting with a woman who never backs down is beyond exhausting and he moves over to the bannister, leaning against it and crossing his arms over his chest. He's about to say something when Wynonna beats him to it.

"Look, I know you're pissed, shit I would probably be pissed at me too, but I did what I needed to do to save my sister. Maybe you don't know what it's like, or maybe you just don't remember after being trapped for so long but... men come and go in this life. You. Dolls. You may not like it, but your feelings will never come before my baby sister. My family will always come first." Taking a swig from her bottle, she leans forward and offers it to Doc.

Doc grabs the bottle but finds Wynonna's grip still on it, her eyes staring deep into his.

"If you can't accept that, and don't stop acting like a dick, you won't even come in second." Releasing the bottle, she leans back in her chair, rocking gently.

Doc takes a pull from the bottle, feeling the burn slide down his throat. He doesn't respond verbally, instead cants his head to the side before offering the bottle back to her.

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Falling backwards, Nicole doesn't give a second thought to whose bed they're on, as long as the danger of splinters in sensitive places is far far away. She's not even sure how they've managed to descend the ladder without falling on their asses, both determined to prove the extent of their love for the other. She slips Waverly out of her top before pulling the brunette to her. All she can think about is stripping away the layers of clothes that are in her way, in Waverly's way. She tries not to think about the last time they'd been in this exact position, with Willa interrupting them. She really hopes no one else tries to walk in because there's no way she would be stopping.

"Tell me again." Waverly mumbles against her lips, straddling her thighs. She's in an advantageous position of pinning the officer in place, her hands exploring every inch of skin she can reach.

Nicole inhales sharply, the brunette's fingers trailing a path of fire across her skin. "I love you." She whispers into the kiss, her hands gingerly caressing soft cheeks. "I'm not leaving you." She's not sure which statement the youngest Earp needs to hear so she offers them all. How many nights had she spent dreaming of exactly this the past few weeks? She's tried to be patient, tried to hide from the misery and grief back home behind overpriced martinis and cheap beer, but no sooner could she stop breathing than could she stop wanting the short woman whose hands are sliding up her ribs. She's missed everything about Waverly. From her cheesy jokes to her insatiable curiosity; from the sound of her voice to the taste of her skin.

Nicole's not exactly sure where her own clothes have gone, doesn't remember their lips separating long enough for the material to be discarded, or the minutes it should have taken to remove shoes and jeans. It's not important. What's important is the way dull nails rake across her ribs. What's important is the certainty in Waverly's movements, the undeniably needy way she presses against Nicole.

Nicole wants to give her the right of way, to let her take her time and refamiliarize herself, but instead she slips her arm around Waverly's waist and turns until she's pinning the shorter woman to the bed, savoring the electrifying feel of bare skin against bare skin. It's easy to cover the smaller frame with her own, Waverly's knees bent up, thighs pressing against either side of Nicole's hips.

"I love you," she repeats, just because she likes the way the words taste sweet on her tongue, the way she imagines a miracle would taste. She presses her forehead to Waverly's, brushing the tips of their noses against each other's.

Waverly smiles, not the saccharine smile she reserves for the townies and the lot, but the one she

saves for Nicole alone, where her eyes turn into crescent moons, the bridge of her nose scrunches and one corner of her mouth lifts higher than the other.

"I've missed you," she whispers, as if speaking too loudly would destroy the moment. Her hand comes up to brush aside red hair, tucking a lock behind Nicole's ear. "This is right... right?"

Nicole can't resist the soft lips that beckon to her, luring her in for another kiss. "It's very right," she replies between kisses. She presses her hip against the brunette's heated core, smiling at the whimper that emerges. She could die listening to that sound and it would be as close to heaven as she'd ever get. "See how well we fit?" She brushes her lips down the smooth skin of Waverly's throat. "Perfect."

Waverly nods, tipping her head back to give the officer room.

Nicole can't seem to get close enough. Even as a leg wraps around her hip and their bodies have begun a slow and teasing rock against each other, it's not close enough. It's nowhere near it. She brings her hand up to gently caress the line of Waverly's jaw, her thumb tracing her bottom lip in wonder. Nicole nearly gasps as Waverly's eyes blink open, a look so profoundly emotional, she can feel herself sinking into the depths of the gaze.

The last month had been one of the worse of her life, and she'd been through a myriad of emotions, from heartbreak to anger to hopeless despair. She would do it all again if it meant she would end up right here in this moment.

Waverly reaches up, her thumb tracing the darkened bruise around Nicole's eye, as if she's been wanting to do it for days and the officer can't help leaning into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed. With the gentlest of pressure, Waverly pulls Nicole down, brushing a kiss against the bruise, against her eyelid, against her temple.

Nicole smiles. It could be a thousand kisses and it would never be enough. She would never grow tired of them, just as she would never grow tired of soft skin beneath her fingertips. She caresses the length of Waverly's torso in reverence, intending to never take this for granted again.

A month has done very little to degrade Nicole's memory of her favorite terrain and she easily traverses the expanse of flesh. There are few things that can pull Nicole's attention away from Waverly's lips and she cannot decide what the better distraction is, the contrast between pillow soft breasts and hardened nipples against her tongue, or the feel of glorious heat as her hand dips between their bodies, brushing against the brunette's arousal.

Waverly's back arches as a hot mouth and confident fingers move against her. "Shit." The word slips from her mouth and Nicole smiles.

Watching how Waverly's head tips back, her bottom lip captured between white teeth, Nicole can't tear her eyes away from the sight. A month feels like a year when she considers all the days and nights she's missed. She thinks about all the moments in which she's lost the opportunity to lavish breasts with her full attention, and all the moments in which she's been denied the opportunity to press deep into Waverly's slick depths, hearing her moan and whimper with each thrust.

Waverly's fingers tangle in red locks and with a gentle tug, urges Nicole back up, their lips meeting in a searing kiss. Her tongue teases the officer's lips as her hands cup flushed cheeks.

Nicole smiles into the kiss, feeling the body beneath her beginning to tremble. Maybe it's the overwhelming emotions, or the month long separation, but it doesn't take long for Waverly's body to arch into her touch, eyes screwed shut with her head tilted back in a silent scream. It's beautiful,

and Nicole loves the feel of every tiny earthquake that courses through her lover's body. She loves the soft whimper that slips from Waverly's lips as her body collapses, spent and gasping for air.

Nicole presses her forehead to Waverly's, brushing soft kisses against still trembling lips. "I love you." She whispers into the air they share. A tear slips from Waverly's eye and she gently kisses it away.

"I love you too." Waverly's voice cracks with emotion.

With their bodies pressing together in the humid barn with the torrent of rain coming down outside, her lungs still burning from the fight and Waverly's fingers that accidentally press too hard against the bruise on her cheek, there's no better word than 'perfect' to describe the moment.

---

When she wakes, the first thing Nicole sees is Waverly.

Everything's out of focus, like the blurred haze of a long lingering dream.

Everything but Waverly.

With the hayloft door being the main source of light and pointing to the west, the room is nothing but muted tones and warmth. Nicole smiles softly as she lays beside the smaller frame on Doc's bed. Waverly is laying stomach down, head pillowed against her crossed arms, a soft smile on her face even in sleep.

Although it's pretty dark in the barn with the main doors still closed, tiny beams of light come through the cracks of the barn's roof, daring to paint rays of light across the pale skin. Nicole lays on her side, her head propped up by her hand as she's mesmerized by the way the brunette's shoulders move with each breath. She's always loved the beautiful curves of strong muscles, the dip in the small of Waverly's back that leads to the curve of her ass.

Such beauty. She regrets the last month of being apart. She shouldn't have gone home.

*"Dude... forget about some backwater chick." One of her friends reached across the table, smacking her on the arm. The bar is loud and packed, just like the rest of Chicago and she found herself missing the solitude of Purgatory. "We can get you laid TONIGHT if you want."*

*Nicole winced, taking another pull from the bottle of the nutty flavored ale. She doesn't want to think about anyone else. "How can I ever forget? She's all I think about." The idea of forgetting Waverly forced a spike of pain through her chest.*

*"It will be ok." Chloe, who sat beside her, placed a hand on her knee and all Nicole could think of was Waverly, the curve of her knee beneath her own hands that day in the car when the brunette had first suggested they be just friends. "Just forget about her."*

*"I can't." Was all she says before the tears started again, tears that barely stopped the entire month she was home.*

Unable to stop herself, Nicole reaches out, tracing the center line of Waverly's back. It's as soft as she remembers, arches the way she remembers, and she knows if she leans closer, Waverly will taste just as she remembers. "Waverly."

Nicole knows she shouldn't wake the brunette. She knows, without even having to ask, the nightmares the woman has had and she deserves to sleep well.

But all she can think about now is the taste of the brunette. All she wants to do is run the length of her tongue along her spine, around her breasts, between her thighs. She's been denied such simple treasures for so long and she needs to feel her again.

"Waverly."

"MMmm." Waverly hums softly. In sleep, she reaches out a hand, settling against Nicole's waist and wiggling closer.

It's not what Nicole wants, but she'll accept it for now. She runs her fingers through brunette hair, smoothing it back over Waverly's shoulder. There's a small mark on her shoulder where she bit too hard the night before, and as sensible as she is, it makes her grin like a silly teenage boy who's given his girlfriend a garish hickey in some backseat makeout session.

She's a grown ass woman but all she can think is, *Mine*.

"Mmm, Mine." Waverly mumbles in her sleep, shifting closer and pressing her face against Nicole's collar.

Shit. Had she said that out loud? Nicole tries not to laugh, tucking her nose against the crown of Waverly's head. How the hell did she get so lucky? How could the brunette ever think she would want to be with Chloe? There was never a choice, never even an option. Chloe had never been in the equation and she couldn't believe Waverly would even think that.

She found it completely insane. Did everyone really believe she wanted anyone other than Waverly?

*"Nic... I love you and I want you to be happy. Come to Toronto and you can have a fresh start.... We can have a fresh start."*

*"Chloe..." Nicole sighed softly. The blonde looked so hopeful and tiny in her hospital gown.*

*Sliding off the edge of the hospital bed and moving to Chloe's side, she bent down and placed a soft kiss to her temple. "You're right. Being around you will always make me happy, and I love you..." Her words trailed off as she thought of the most tactical approach.*

*"But you love her more." Chloe supplied knowingly.*

*"It's not a matter of who I love more it's just..." She shook her head when she realized exactly what she had to do. "She's... it's not just love...she's everything I never knew I needed and maybe we weren't even together that long but... it was long enough to know that she's the love of my life. Just the thought of living without her, I can't even..." She pursed her lips, shaking her head. "I can't leave."*

*Chloe nodded, her eyes glistening with tears as she forced a smile onto her face. "I understand, Nic." She reached out to cover Nicole's hand with her own. "I want you to be happy, and if living in some crazy and strangely western themed Canadian backwater with crazy serial killers and..." She shook her head, her hand coming up to wipe away the tear that streamed down her cheek. When Nicole is about to say something, she waved dismissively. "What the hell are you even still doing here? Don't you have somewhere to be? Someone to talk to?"*

Nicole looks down at the woman curled against her. This is definitely where she needs to be.

Unable to resist, Nicole presses a kiss to the brunette's forehead, her fingertips moving down the compact frame. Even in sleep, the brunette tips her head back, giving Nicole more access.

Or maybe she isn't really sleeping, Nicole suspects as she hears a soft mew emerge from the throat she's currently kissing her way down.

Maybe if... she slides her hand between their bodies and nearly laughs when she feels thighs part just slightly. She traces the line of Waverly's sex, not pressing closer, just a light touch and she hears the frustrated whimper. "How long have you been awake?"

"Shhhh I'm not," Waverly responds defiantly, her voice still thick with sleep as her hand coming down to cover Nicole's, pressing her fingers closer.

"Oh you're not, huh?" Nicole dips a single fingertip into the surprising arousal already waiting for her. "You seem pretty awake to me." She comments as she circles a swollen nub.

Waverly's nostrils flare but her eyes remain shut, her head shaking.

"Well then..." Nicole slips her hand out from under Waverly's. "I guess I'll just have to wait till you wake up."

As if on queue, Waverly's eyes shoot open before narrowing in her direction, just in time to see Nicole's finger disappear into her mouth, a rather devious look in her eyes. "You're an asshole."

"Mmm yes." Nicole removes the finger from her mouth, the taste of Waverly still on her tongue. "But I'm your asshole."

Waverly smiles. "Yeah you are." She runs a fingertip along Nicole's clavicle, looking up through long eyelashes. "So... you're not really going to Toronto... to live with Chloe... are you?"

Nicole purses her lips, as if thinking about it. "I don't know. Are you going to break up with me again?" She captures Waverly's hand in her own, pressing a kiss to the back of it. "I think I've proven I'm perfectly capable of putting myself in danger without you."

Waverly shakes her head. "No. I'm not doing that again."

Nicole nods. Not that she thought Waverly was really going to insist on their separation, but it was nice hearing it out loud. "Good, cause in case you missed it, I love you, Waverly Earp."

The smile that lights up Waverly's face is dazzling. "I love you too, Nicole." She's leaning in for a kiss, rolling Nicole onto her back and settling on top the longer frame. Suddenly she's pulling back. "Wait... do you prefer to be called Nic?"

Nicole can't help but laugh. "Baby, you can call me anything you want." She answers before pulling the brunette down for a kiss, feeling a thigh slip between her own.

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#### ***4 months later***

Dolls huffs softly as he watches the scene in front of him. He's tried to pay attention to the file in his hands but it's hard to ignore them.

"I really don't know how to choose, there are so many..." Waverly has her elbows on the table, chin propped up in her hand as she looks over a book open on the table in front of her. "I feel like this is something people normally do in person." Her human chair shifts as Nicole adjusts her position.

"It is, but we live in Purgatory and it's not like they have a store here."

"What about this one?" Waverly points to a picture as she leans back, bringing the book with her, her fingertips brushing idly against the hand settled across her stomach just below the edge of her Shorty's t-shirt.

Nicole wrinkles her nose, her chin resting on Waverly's shoulder. "I don't know. That seems a little... masculine."

"Oh honey... not in your hands... all masculinity would disappear." With a chuckle, she flips to another page of photos, her finger landing on one. "What about this one? Maybe you should get something in like the silver..."

"That's not really...standard." Nicole's brows furrow.

"I know but I'm sure it sparkles nicely in the sun."

Dolls's brow furrows. What is it about these Earps? It's like they don't know an ounce of professionalism. They're hard workers, yes, but sometimes they're more of a distraction than anything else.

Nicole sighs softly. "This is kind of permanent. I don't want to just pick something non traditional on a whim." She purses her lips, reaching past Waverly to turn the page.

Dolls is just seconds from drumming his fingers on the table, his patience growing thin, something he thought would be impossible considering he'd been working with the Earp Heir.

"This one is cute." Waverly offers.

"That...is so tiny. How does anyone get their finger in that?"

Waverly snorts. "I dunno. You seem really good at slipping your fingers in...."

"Pick something else." Nicole cuts her off with a chuckle, the tips of her ears turning a bright red. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it would be better if we saw these in person..."

Dolls looks back and forth between the two finally giving in to his aggravation. "It's a gun, Agent Haight." He wouldn't be surprised if steam were coming out of his ears. "Just pick one that will stop criminals. You're lucky I'm letting you choose one at all."

Nicole hides her face behind Waverly.

Waverly huffs. "Hey you're the one that got her gun crushed."

"Right. Next time I see her about to get steam rolled by a revenant, I'll just let her."

"How about next time we see you...hey!" Waverly complains as she's pushed off her comfortable seat, standing fully with her hands on her hips as she glares at Nicole.

"You're going to be late for work. Let me walk you to the bar." Nicole is quick to stop the argument in its tracks, standing and straightening her uniform that has a Waverly shaped wrinkle in it. She slides into her jacket, watching as Waverly wraps the colorful scarf around her neck with a reminiscent smile.

Dolls can only sigh in relief as he's left alone in peace.

As the door closes behind them, Waverly slides her hand into Nicole's.

"Trudy, I'll be back in a few." Nicole calls out.

"No problem! Take your time. It's a slow day." The older Deputy gave them both a smile.

Waverly waves at the woman, glad when she gets one in return. Things hadn't gotten completely back to where they were before she broke up with Nicole, but at least the woman was no longer hostile towards her. They nearly run into...or rather get run into by a familiar truck that skids to a stop just before it can plow into the side of the sheriff's station.

Sliding out of the driver side, Doc tips his hat back. "Miss Earp, Officer Haught." He nods in their direction.

"You know one of these days I'm going to ticket you for driving without a license." Nicole comments wryly, slipping the Stetson on her braided hair.

Wynonna hops out of the passenger side, a sack full of Chinese food in one hand. "Come on, Officer Haughtpants. We're working on it. There are still a few stop signs still standing around town."

"You might want to watch out. Dolls is in quite an ornery mood today." Waverly gives her sister a knowing look.

"Maybe it's his time of the month." Wynonna jokes. "See you at happy hour."

Waverly gives her a dismissive wave before towing Nicole along with her. She watches as Nicole pulls her phone out of her pockets, a small smile tugging at the redhead's face. "What's going on?"

"Just a message from Chloe." Nicole comments. When she realizes what it sounds like, she turns the screen so the brunette can see. "Apparently she is fitting in at her new job quite well."

Waverly studies the screen, blonde curls mixed with brunette dreads in the close up selfie. She can't stop the smile as she grabs the phone. "Wow... they are complete opposites." She scrolls up a little. "*Becca?* Dreads... glasses... nose ring. She looks nothing like a *Becca*. She looks like she'd have some sort of hippie name like Willow or something spacey."

Nicole laughs, grabbing her phone back when the brunette starts scrolling a little further up. "Ok Snoopy McSnooperson." She leans down and presses a kiss to the brunette's temple.

Waverly fails to hide a smile as she concedes, tucking her arm around Nicole's elbow. "So... do you have any plans tonight?"

Nicole raises an eyebrow. "I thought you were coming over after work."

"Yes but were you planning anything?" It doesn't take long to get to the bar and they're swallowed by the dim interior.

"Something tells me that you are."

Looking around the still closed bar quickly, Waverly is glad to see Gus isn't anywhere to be seen. "Yes." She answers, turning towards the officer. She hooks a finger in the redhead's belt, pulling her closer. "Maybe when you're done work," she brushes her lips against Nicole's, a mischievous grin in place, "you can make sure you bring your handcuffs home."

Nicole grins, brushing the tip of her nose against Waverly's. "Again?" She chuckles softly.

"Mmm except I was thinking I could use them on you this time."

Nicole's eyebrows shoot up. "On me?" At the brunette's nod, she laughs, her cheeks coloring a soft pink. "Ok." She leans down, capturing Waverly's lips in a deep kiss.

"Did I miss the sign that marked this bar as *Lover's Lane*?"

Waverly laughs as she pulls away, turning to find Gus standing with her hand on her hip, tossing a towel over her shoulder. "I can put one up if you like."

"Or you can git down to the cellar and bring up what's left of that case of fireball. Figured we could have a special tonight to get rid of that nonsense." She shakes her head. "Goes to show never to let Wynonna help with orders. That stuff tastes like you're licking the Devil's nutsack."

"That's awfully colorful for you, Gus." Waverly comments. "I'll see you later, Gorgeous." She tosses over her shoulder to the redhead.

Nicole watches her disappear, a smile dancing across her features until she realizes she's been left alone with the Earp's guardian. "Gus." She nods, tipping the edge of her stetson. She's about to leave when she hears her name.

"Just a second, Officer Haught."

Turning on her heels, Nicole heads back to the bar, preparing herself for another motherly lecture like the previous ones she's been subjected to.

Eyeing the officer closely for what seems like forever, Gus finally breaks eye contact and sets two coffee cups on the bar. "Cappuccino for you, mocha for Trudy." She finally gives the officer a small smile. "You tell her I said thanks for the pie."

With a small wave of relief coursing through her, Nicole smiles, nodding as she picks up both. "Thank you, Gus. I'll let her know." It's a bit more of a relief as she escapes what could have easily been another scolding, heading back to work. The trip back to the station always seems twice as long without Waverly.

"Hey, Trudy." Nicole sets the cup down in front of the deputy. "Compliments of Gus. She says thanks for the pie."

"That is so sweet of her." The older woman smiles, taking a sip as Nicole turns away. She immediately coughs. "*Shit that's hot.*" She complains in a distorted voice that sounds low and layered.

Nicole raises an eyebrow at the odd sound. Turning, she swears she can see a tinge of red that Gertrude blinks away. "You alright?" The older officer looks completely human and Nicole guesses it's just her mind playing tricks on her.

The older woman nods, her hand covering her heart. "Goodness. Forgive me, but that was hotter than I expected." Her voice sounds completely normal.

Nicole nods before turning away with a shake of her head. "No way. You need to get some sleep, Haught." She laughs at her own speculation as she continues back to the Black Badge office.

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