

Riverbend High Happy Endings

Almost

MISSED

OUR

SHOT



Ivy & ND vs. the World
Novella



~~MC~~ DANIELSEN

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1

I adjust my helmet, the hard plastic pressing awkwardly against my ponytail as I squint at the row of horses before me. The afternoon sun spills golden light over the trailhead, where a dirt path disappears into the dense Washington evergreens. My fellow campers mill about, laughing nervously and snapping selfies with their assigned horses. Meanwhile, I stand frozen next to a towering, chestnut-colored horse whose name—according to the brass plate on his bridle—is *Beethoven*.

"Beethoven? Seriously?" I mutter under my breath, crossing my arms over my camp-issued T-shirt. The horse flicks an ear in response, his massive frame radiating an aura of calm indifference. "You're not exactly giving me symphonic genius vibes, buddy."

"Hey, North Dakota! You gonna stand there all day or hop on?" calls a boy from a few paces down the line. He is perched confidently atop a speckled gray horse named *Mozart*, his grin as cocky as his posture. His name is Liam—one of the percussionists from camp who always seems to have something sarcastic to say.

I shoot him a glare that could curdle milk. "First of all, it's Ivy. Second of all, not every girl from North Dakota is born a rodeo queen." I gesture vaguely at Beethoven's intimidating size. "This is... a lot of horse."

Liam smirks and leans forward in his saddle, resting his elbows casually on Mozart's neck. "I thought all you prairie folk grew up roping cattle or riding bulls or whatever it is you do out there in the middle of nowhere."

"Wow," I deadpan, rolling my eyes so hard I swear I see stars. "Your cultural sensitivity is truly inspiring."

Before Liam can fire back, one of the camp counselors—a wiry woman named Heather with an endless supply of energy and a clipboard permanently attached to her hand—claps her palms together loudly. "Alright, everyone! Mount up! We've got a beautiful trail ahead of us, so let's get moving!"

I turn back to Beethoven, who gazes at me with what I can only describe as mild amusement. "Okay," I mutter under my breath, gripping the reins like they might bite me. "Let's do this. How hard can it be? People ride horses all the time in movies—it's basically just sitting."

I place my boot in the stirrup and heave myself upward with all the grace of a baby giraffe learning how to stand for the first time. For one horrifying moment, I teeter dangerously close to falling backward into the dirt, but somehow—miraculously—I manage to swing my leg over and plop into the saddle.

"Nice dismount," Liam quips from Mozart's back.

"It's called mounting, genius," I snap, gripping the horn of the saddle like it's a lifeline.

Heather gives a quick safety rundown, but I barely register the words; I'm too focused on Beethoven's broad back beneath me and the sheer height between myself and the ground. My heart thuds in my chest as he shifts slightly, his muscles rippling under his glossy coat.

"Okay, Beethoven," I whisper nervously. "Please don't kill me."

The group sets off down the trail in single file, with Heather leading on a sleek black horse named *Bach*. The forest swallows us almost

immediately, its towering pines casting dappled shadows over the narrow dirt path. Birds chatter overhead, and somewhere in the distance comes the faint gurgle of a creek.

At first, I'm too preoccupied with staying upright to appreciate any of it. Beethoven moves with a slow, deliberate plod that sends jolts through my spine every time his hooves meet the earth. I cling to the reins like they're my only tether to reality.

"So," Liam calls over his shoulder from a few horses ahead. "What do you think? Ready to trade your cello for a lasso?"

"Ha-ha," I say flatly, though I can't help but feel a tiny flicker of pride that I haven't fallen off yet.

As we round a bend in the trail, Beethoven suddenly stops dead in his tracks. I lurch forward with a startled yelp, clutching at the saddle horn to keep from tumbling face-first into his mane.

"What now?" I groan, leaning sideways to peer around his massive head. That's when I see it—a squirrel darting across the path ahead, its bushy tail twitching as it vanishes into the underbrush.

Beethoven snorts loudly and stomps one hoof as if personally offended by the rodent's audacity.

"Oh my God," I hiss under my breath. "You're scared of *that*? You're a thousand-pound animal. It's like, *one* pound. Do the math, Beethoven." I pause, then smirk. "There's a relationship between music and math, right? Maybe crunch some numbers before you embarrass yourself any further."

Behind me, one of the other campers giggles. "Looks like Beethoven's more of a composer than a cow-horse."

I hear Liam smarting off again. "Maybe he's just channeling your energy."

I glare daggers at him but don't dignify that with a response. Instead, I tug gently on Beethoven's reins and give him what I hope is an encouraging pat on the neck.

"Come on, big guy," I say softly. "It's just a squirrel. You've got this."

To my surprise—and immense relief—Beethoven resumes walking with an almost imperceptible sigh of resignation. I exhale deeply and straighten up in the saddle.

By the time we reach a clearing overlooking a breathtaking valley dotted with wildflowers and framed by snow-capped peaks in the distance, I've started to relax—just a little. The view is stunning enough to momentarily distract me from how sore my legs are becoming.

"Not bad for your first ride," Liam says as we pause to take in the scenery.

I tip my head toward him and raise an eyebrow. "Not bad for someone who thought North Dakota was made entirely of cornfields."

"It *is* mostly cornfields," Liam counters with a grin.

"Oh Liam, Liam, Liam," I coo. "Where are you from?"

Liam scoffs.

"Florida. Land of sunshine, beaches, and, you know, actual tourist attractions."

I gasp theatrically.

"Ohhh, Florida. The land of oranges and Mickey Mouse. Tell me, Liam, what great historical figures trained their cavalry in Disney World? And aren't animatronic?"

Liam opens his mouth, then shuts it again.

I'm not done.

"North Dakota isn't just 'cornfields.' Ever hear of Theodore Roosevelt? Yeah, he basically credited this place with making him the leader he became. Medora, where he ranched. The Badlands, where he

toughened up. And the Rough Riders? Trained right there in North Dakota."

I give Liam a pointed look. "Meanwhile, your state gave us... alligators and theme parks."

"Well there's manatees."

"Okay, I'll cede you that point based on the ridiculous cuteness of Manatees."

Liam shakes his head "Not every woman from North Dakota is a cow-woman, huh. Are they all as snarky as you?"

I tip my head. "Nope. But every woman from North Dakota is tougher than a Florida boy who thinks gators are scary."

Liam holds up a hand. "Hey, gators *are* scary. They can outrun you on land and drag you underwater."

I raise an eyebrow. "Please. A North Dakota blizzard can freeze your car door shut, chase you down the highway, and bury your house overnight. And unlike gators, you can't just run away from it. Stay where it's safe. Mickey Mouse will protect you."

Liam smirks. "I think I can handle a little snow."

I let out a sharp laugh. "Oh, *you think?*" I turn in my saddle to face him fully. "Think you can listen to me describe a North Dakota blizzard in detail without experiencing hypothermia?"

Liam shrugs. "How bad can it be?"

My grin widens. "Imagine stepping outside and instantly regretting all your life choices. The wind hits so hard you lose feeling in your face before you've even locked your front door. Your eyelashes? Coated in ice. Your car? Completely buried. Your driveway? A frozen wasteland. And don't even *think* about going anywhere, because the roads are either sheets of black ice or straight-up gone." I tilt my head. "And that's just a regular Tuesday."

I don't give him a chance to protest before continuing, my voice smooth and matter-of-fact. "And don't get me started on the *Manitoba Mauler*—" I pause, then smirk, "—or worse, the *Alberta Clipper*." I let that hang for effect. "That's when a system barrels down from Canada at a million miles an hour, slaps the state with subzero wind chills, dumps a fresh layer of misery, and is gone before you even have time to cry about it."

Liam blinks. "That's... horrifying."

I nod. "And we *still* go to school in it."

Liam exhales. "Okay, yeah, I'm staying in Florida."

I smirk. "Good choice. Now shut up and straighten up your thinking about North Dakota before I start explaining *wind chill*."

2

Jordan catches up to me as we head back toward the camp cabins, shaking his head with a grin.

“Ivy, that was some *stellar* North Dakota defense back there. You could run PR for the whole state.”

I smirk, stretching out my legs, which are still feeling the full betrayal of that horseback ride.

“Please. That wasn’t even my full playbook. I didn’t even *start* on the oil boom, the Enchanted Highway, or how North Dakota has *the best* state fairs.”

Jordan laughs. “Probably for the best. I think Liam was already questioning his entire Floridian existence.”

I glance over at Liam, who is rubbing his face like he’s just been through battle. “Good. Maybe next time he’ll think twice before calling me ‘North Dakota.’”

Liam groans. “Fine, fine. I admit it. Your state has more than corn. Happy?”

I cross my arms. “Oh, we’re not *done* yet.” I level him with a look. “Tell me, *Flo-Rider*, how many national football titles does your state have?”

Liam blinks. “Uh... we’ve got the Gators, the Seminoles—”

I wave him off. “Cute. But North Dakota State? *Ten* NCAA Division I FCS national championships since 2011. *Eighteen* total if you count the Division II era.” I let that sink in before adding, “That’s *more* than Alabama has in the CFP era, in case you were wondering.”

Liam stares. “I was not wondering that.”

I grin. “And don’t even get me *started* on our wrestling, basketball, and track championships.” I glance at Liam. “But I’ll spare you—for now.”

Liam exhales. “I walked right into this, didn’t I?”

Jordan pats him on the back. “Oh, you galloped into it, man.”

“The next time you wanna call me North Dakota. You might want to remember—not every woman from North Dakota is a *Cow-Woman*... but we can all *freeze you out*.”

As Liam wanders in a different direction Jordan tells me, “By the way, I think Liam might have been crushing on you. Kind of think you froze him out though.”

I snort. “If he’s been flirting, he just got hit with a full-force Alberta Clipper.” I shake my head. “Poor guy wasn’t dressed for the weather.”

3

Later that evening, we were in the dining hall, and someone had somehow managed to steer the conversation toward college football.

Ethan—the second loudest Floridian at camp, after Liam—leaned back, arms crossed, smirking.

"I don't know, man. My state has a decent football team, at least. North Dakota even have a university?"

Jordan immediately went still.

Liam, who had spent the last two hours recovering from his North Dakota blizzard trauma, looked up sharply.

Liam gripped Ethan's sleeve like a man who had seen battle and was trying to save his comrade.

"Bro," Liam whispered. "No. Please don't do this."

Ethan frowned at him. "What?"

Liam shook his head, eyes hollow with memory. "You don't want this."

Jordan covered his mouth, already holding back laughter.

Ethan ignored all warnings.

Jordan: "Ethan just booked a one-way ticket to his own demise."

I slowly set down my fork.

"Oh, Ethan," I said sweetly. "You think I don't know football?"

Ethan smirked. "I mean, no offense, but—"

"Let me stop you right there," I said, cutting him off. "You assume I don't know football because I'm from North Dakota. And yet..."

I leaned forward.

"...NDSU has won ten NCAA Division I FCS national championships since 2011."

Ethan's smirk flickered.

"Eighteen total if you count the Division II era," I added, just to twist the knife.

Jordan was shaking with laughter.

Ethan blinked. "I—"

"Oh, and if you're not a football guy," I added, voice dangerously smooth, "we've also got the University of North Dakota hockey program, which has won eight national titles and basically owns the entire concept of frozen dominance."

Ethan froze.

Jordan recovered enough to add, grinning like a proud parent, "Ivy, you forgot the best part."

"Oh, right!" I said, snapping my fingers. "Would you like to hear about Carson Wentz?"

Ethan groaned. "Oh my god."

Liam burst out laughing. "SHE'S STILL GOING."

4

Trey, a smug overconfident guy from Ohio, leaned forward, grinning like he had game.

"You know," he said, tilting his head slightly, "it's kind of cute how into music you are."

Jordan choked on his drink.

Liam, pale with trauma, looked up sharply. "Trey. No."

Trey ignored him.

"The whole cello thing is impressive," he continued. "But you seem... I don't know, kinda competitive? Bet you'd be fun at, like, an actual sport."

Jordan collapsed onto the table, wheezing.

I set down my fork.

"Trey," I said sweetly. "You know how every Big Ten fan likes to talk about 'NFL talent'?"

Trey narrowed his eyes. "...Yeah?"

I smirked.

"Two players from this year's NDSU team are literally about to be drafted. Grey Zabel and Cam Miller."

Trey froze.

Jordan gasped dramatically. "OH NO."

Ivy tilted her head. "So tell me, Trey... how's that Big Ten superiority feeling?"

Trey stared at the table.

Liam, gleeful, leaned over and patted Trey's shoulder. "You fought hard, man."

Jordan was in tears.

Trey groaned. "I regret this conversation."

I shrugged, picking up my fork again. "Maybe next time, you'll think before underestimating North Dakota."

Ethan, still processing, muttered, "She's terrifying."

Liam clapped him on the shoulder. "You get used to it."

Trey groaned. "Do you?"

Jordan snorted. "Nope."

5

A group of us were hanging out around the campfire, the night settling cool and crisp around us. The flames flickered in the breeze, casting shadows over the campers sprawled across benches and logs. Someone had a guitar out, strumming half-heartedly while conversations rippled across the circle.

I was half-listening until Logan—the trombone player from California, with way too much confidence—turned to me, flashing an easy, obviously flirtatious grin.

"If you ever get bored in North Dakota, Ivy, come visit me in LA," he said, leaning back with a smug tilt to his head. "I'll show you how real cities work."

Jordan pressed a fist to his mouth, trying not to laugh.

I turned slowly. "Oh, Logan. Sweet, sweet Logan."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"You think I'd get bored?" I asked. "In North Dakota?"

Logan chuckled. "I mean, what do you guys do up there?"

I smiled ominously. "Would you like a list?"

Logan blinked. "Uh—"

"Let's begin," I said, cracking my knuckles.

First, there's Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where the literal father of national parks built his legacy."

Then we have the Enchanted Highway, a 32-mile stretch of the world's largest scrap metal sculptures."

Oil boom? We've got that."

Ever heard of the Medora Musical? Because it's iconic."

Oh, and the International Peace Garden—an actual park that straddles the U.S.-Canada border."

We also have dinosaur fossils, the world's largest buffalo statue, and a town called Rugby that is literally the geographic center of North America."

Logan stared. "I—"

Jordan leaned forward. "Oh man. She's not done."

And in case you think we're just land," I said, still going, "we've got Devils Lake, which is actually an inland sea that changes size depending on the season."

Ever heard of the Badlands? Yeah, we've got those too, and they're stunning."

If you like history, we've got Knife River Indian Villages, where Lewis and Clark met Sacagawea."

And if you want weird, we have a UFO landing pad. Just in case, you know, aliens need a rest stop."

Logan just blinked at me.

Jordan gave me a slow clap. "Wow. That was beautiful."

Logan exhaled. "Okay, I get it. North Dakota has... stuff."

Jordan nudged me. "That felt too easy."

I smirked. "He wasn't prepared for the PowerPoint I keep in my head."

6

— · —

J ordan, watching: "You just silenced four dudes in a row, and you still can't think of anything to say to Aiden when you get back?" I froze.

Because he was right.

I could fight with someone I didn't care about. I could banter and roast people who didn't matter. But when it was Aiden...

The words got harder.

Jordan smirked. "See? Now that's interesting."

Maybe I was ready to go home. And maybe... just maybe... it was time to stop and end the silence.