



# A Very Grumpy Ranger

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult

**Description:** It's just a bet... right?

Blake:

It all started with a harmless bet.

I was bored, and there he was—Luca Wright, the new guy in town and the only other person in the diner.

So, I challenged him to a race: who could finish their meal first?

I won, he paid for my food, and from there, we bet on pretty much everything—who could finish the hike first, who could make a better meal, who could fit the most marshmallows in their mouth.

It's always been a fun competition between us, but this latest bet feels different, like the stakes are higher, and I'm not sure I'm ready for what comes next.

Luca:

From the moment Blake sat across from me with that mischievous grin, I was hooked.

Every bet, every challenge has been an excuse to stay close to her, even though she only sees me as her best friend.

But when Blake throws out her latest bet—who can plan the best first date—I know it's my chance.

This is more than a game.

This is my chance to show her that the best date and the best guy will always be me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

# Page 1

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ONE

Blake

I'm so sick of staring at my four apartment walls. I need to get out of here, I think as I slam my laptop closed and roll my chair away from my desk.

I can't help but groan as I stretch my back and roll my shoulders. I've been working since five this morning. I'm ready to call it a day and grab a late lunch. I glance at the clock and sigh.

Make that an early dinner. It's way past lunchtime.

I tuck my chair under the desk and gather my things. I'm too tired to cook, so that means I'm going out. Wolf Valley is a small town, and there aren't many options for restaurants around here. I'm not hungry for tacos or pizza, so that means the Nosh Diner it is.

I've been living in Wolf Valley for the last few months. I moved here when my company allowed me to work remotely. I wanted to find a safe town with cheap rent so I could save some money. Things have been going well. My only complaint is that I haven't been able to spend much time with my new friends. I spend all of my time inside, staring at my computer screen. I'm hoping to change that in the next few weeks, though. Now that I'm all settled in my apartment and have a good routine going, I should be able to get out more.

I grab my keys and head out of my place. I live above the barbershop in town, and I

wave to Mr. Grainger as I pass his front window and cross the street to the diner.

I head in and search the place for my friend, Cameron. Her husband owns the diner, and she works here when he needs a hand. I don't see her blonde hair, though. Instead, a curvy redhead comes out of the kitchen and tells me to sit wherever I like. I smile as I head over to an empty booth and slide in with my back to the wall so I can people-watch while I eat.

"Hey, can I get you something to drink?" the server asks.

"Just a water, please."

"Sure thing. I'm Ruby. You've been in here before, right? I think I've seen you around."

"Yeah, a few times. I live over there," I tell her, pointing to my apartment.

"Cool. When did you move to town?"

"How do you know I'm not a local?"

Ruby grins. "Because I've been here for a year and a half, and I know everyone."

I laugh. "I moved here a few months ago."

Ruby leans against the side of the booth. "How are you liking it?"

"I love it here. It's so quiet and peaceful. Everyone is friendly."

"Good. We should hang out sometime. Get a coffee or whatever," she suggests.

I nod eagerly. “That would be great!”

“I’ll give you my number.” She pulls out her notepad and scribbles her number on it.

“Thanks.”

“Of course. Let me know when you’re free. Now, I’ll get you that water.”

She turns and heads back to the kitchen. I grab a menu and scan it. The diner is pretty empty at this time—an older couple eating on the other side of the restaurant, and a trucker sitting at the counter.

I decide on the club sandwich with fries and set the menu aside. The door opens, and a man about my age walks in. He scans the restaurant. Between how he carries himself and his haircut, I’d bet money he’s in the military.

His eyes wander over me before landing on Ruby as she reappears with my drink.

“Sit wherever,” she tells him.

He nods, glancing at me again before sitting in the booth next to mine, facing me.

I bite my lip, blushing as I look away.

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Ruby sets my water down and wiggles her eyebrows at me. “Know what you want to order?”

I nod and choke on a laugh. “I’ll take the club sandwich with fries, and can I get a side of ranch, please?”

“Coming right up.” She scribbles my order down and heads over to the handsome man at the next booth. “Hey, can I get you a drink?”

“Water, please, ma’am.”

“Are you ready to order?”

“I’ll have what she’s having,” he says, nodding at me.

“You got it.”

Ruby heads off to place our orders. I sip my water and look around the diner. The trucker pays his bill and stands to leave. It looks like the older couple is wrapping things up, too. My eyes land on the hot guy across from me again.

He’s watching me.

I raise an eyebrow.

He raises his eyebrow, too.

“I thought military people always sat with their backs to the wall so they could see all the exits. Something about tactical awareness.”

His eyebrow rises higher. “How do you know I’m military?”

“Haircut. Posture. Overall vibe.”

He grins and ducks his head.

“Am I wrong?”

“Nope.”

“Which branch?”

“I was an Army Ranger.”

“Was?”

“I got out a few weeks ago.”

“Congrats?”

He shrugs.

I get the impression that he’s not thrilled to be out. “So, just passing through, or are you new in town?”

“New in town.”

Ruby comes back with his water and looks between us before returning to the

kitchen.

The front door opens, and a few people come in, all laughing as they sit at a table on the other side of the restaurant.

The Ranger tenses when they walk in. I was right about him not liking to sit with his back to the door.

Why did he choose that spot if it stresses him out?

He looks over his shoulder at the newcomers before returning his gaze to me.

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I stand and wave my hand toward the seat I've just vacated. "Come on."

Grinning, he grabs his water and takes my seat. I slide in across from him.

"Smooth way to get me to join you," he teases.

I laugh. "It wasn't that. I didn't want you getting all tense and fidgety every time the door opened."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

Ruby comes out with our food and smirks when she sees us sitting together. She doesn't say anything as she drops off the food before heading to the new customers to take their orders.

"Bet I can finish my food first," I challenge him.

"I doubt you can even eat all that," he snorts.

"Wanna bet?"

"Sure."

"Loser pays."

"Deal." He extends his hand.



I slip my hand into his and shake, grinning at him across the table. “I’m Blake, by the way.”

“Luca.”

“Nice to meet you, Luca. Now...Go!”

We both dig in, and I smile as I watch him. His dark brown hair falls over his forehead as he bites into his sandwich.

“Do you have family in town?” I ask as I take a bite of my sandwich.

“Yeah.”

“A wife? Kids? Mom and Dad?”

He peeks at me from beneath his eyelashes, his blue eyes sparkling. “Are you trying to slow me down?”

I smirk. “I’m not a cheater! I’m just trying to learn a little more about the man who’s about to buy me dinner.”

He chuckles and grabs another fry. “My brother lives here. He’s a firefighter.”

“Oh, that’s cool. He must love having you here.”

“Yeah, it’s been good getting to spend more time with him.”

“Is it just the two of you?”

“Yeah, our parents passed a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. What about you?”

“I don’t know anyone here.”

“What about family?”

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“None. I was a foster kid. I aged out four years ago, and I’ve been on my own since.”

“Sorry.”

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

I finish off my sandwich and smirk at him. He grins and shoves half of his sandwich in his mouth.

I polish off my French fries and lean back in my seat, smiling victoriously.

He groans good-naturedly.

“I think I might get dessert,” I joke.

Luca passes me the menu to look over the options as Ruby returns.

“Do you guys need anything else?”

“Nah, we’re good,” I answer.

Luca shakes his head. “She wants dessert. One of each, please. And I’ll take the check when you get a chance.”

“You’ve got it.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say as Ruby disappears to grab my desserts and the

check.

“I wanted to. Maybe you’ll take it easy on me next time.”

She comes back with everything boxed up and hands the check to Luca, who passes her some bills.

“See you guys later,” she says, giving me a meaningful look. “Let me know when you want to grab that coffee.”

“I will,” I promise.

I turn back to Luca. “Is there going to be a next time?”

“Sure.”

“When?”

“What are you doing right now?”

I grin. “I’m going to the grocery store to pick up a few things.”

He feigns surprise. “What a coincidence.”

“You’re going shopping, too?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so what’s the bet?”

“Let’s see who can find the coolest item in the store,” he suggests.

I nod. “You’re on.”

I follow Luca out of the diner. He’s not who I had in mind when I thought about meeting people in town, but I can’t say I’m upset that he’s my first friend here.

“Now, about this bet,” I say as he glances at me. “What does the winner get?”

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“What do you want?”

“Ah, so you think I’m going to win, too?” I tease.

He laughs. “No, I mean, what should the prize be?”

I know what I want it to be, but I also know I can’t ask for that. There’s no way a guy like Luca would be interested in someone like me.

Still, I can’t help but hope...

“How about dinner tomorrow night?” I suggest.

“Deal.”

We nod at each other and head into the store. I try to bury my feelings for him as we mosey around the store, but it’s useless. The more time I spend with him, the more I learn, and the more I want him.

Just be happy to have a friend, I tell myself.

But when Luca looks at me, I can’t help but want more.

TWO

Luca

“What are you doing with Blake today?” My brother, Milo, asks as he gets ready for his shift at the fire station.

“I’m not sure yet. Just that she’ll be done with work by three.”

He nods, checking his bag and shoving in a phone charger.

“How does it feel?”

I frown. “How does what feel?”

“To fall in love?” he asks with a knowing smile.

“I...How did you know?”

“Please, Luca, it’s obvious. Besides, I’ve been there before. I saw Lilou, and that was it. Game over. I knew she was the one for me. I get the feeling that you feel the same way about Blake.”

“I do,” I admit. “It’s kind of crazy. I mean, five days ago, I didn’t even know she existed. Falling in love wasn’t even on my radar. I was going to settle down here and try to figure out my life. But then I walked into the diner, and there she was.”

It’s been a whirlwind few days. Blake is so much fun, and we’ve spent most of our time running errands, eating, or exploring the town.

“Have you asked her out yet? Officially?” Milo asks.

“Not yet. I’m working up to it.”

“Hmm.”

I roll my eyes. “Didn’t you wait like a year to ask Lilou out?”

He grins sheepishly. “Yeah. You should learn from my mistakes and not waste so much time.”

“Noted.”

He finishes grabbing his stuff and stands. “It’s been great having you home.”

“Yeah.”



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“How have you been? Any pain? Or... anything?” he asks, concern flashing in his eyes.

“I’m fine.”

Leaving the military after I was shot overseas was not what I wanted. I was pissed off at the world when I first got to town and struggled to reintegrate into civilian life. To be honest, I didn’t even want to be a civilian. I wanted to stay in the Rangers.

I liked my life in the military. It was ordered. I knew what was expected of me, what I needed to do, and the chain of command. Then I got shot, and it all got messed up. I was discharged and had to figure out what I was going to do. I had no idea where to go and no home to return to, so I chose the town where my brother lived—the only family I had left.

Now, here I am, and I still have no idea what to do. Do I want to stay in Wolf Valley? What will I do for a job? What do I want out of life?

“Are you sure?” Milo asks, sensing my troubled thoughts.

“I’m fine, Milo. I promise. My injuries are all healed. No pain. Well, not much. I’m good.”

He nods and changes the subject. “When will your place be ready?”

“I close on the place tomorrow.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“I’ll be okay. I know you’ll be dying to see Lilou after your shift.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will,” I promise.

“See you later,” he says as he leaves.

I wave at him and head back to my room. I’ve been staying with Milo and Lilou since I got to town. I know I must be cramping their style. I’m excited to move out and give them their space back.

My eyes flick to the clock, and I groan when I see that it’s only noon. Three more hours before Blake gets off, and we can hang out.

I know I have it bad, but I can’t help it. From the moment Blake sat across from me with that mischievous grin, I was hooked. Every bet, every challenge has been an excuse to stay close to her, even though she only sees me as her best friend.

My phone rings, and I hope it’s Blake calling to tell me she got off work early. But when I pick it up, I see Camden’s name on the screen instead.

When I first arrived at Wolf Valley, I was surprised by how many former military personnel I knew from my time in the service. Camden, Ansel, Huxley, Meyer, and Kip were Marines I deployed with during my time in the military. Xavier and Townes were in the Army, and we went through boot camp and Ranger School together. Even Nolan, an Air Force buddy, wound up here in town.

Being around so many former military personnel has helped me adjust, and it’s been

good catching up with everyone.

“Hey, what are you up to?” Camden asks.

“Right now? Nothing.”

“Want to go for a hike with me?”

“Sure. Where?”

“I’ll pick you up. Can you be ready in ten?”

“Yeah. I just need to be back by two thirty.”

“Got a hot date?”

“Yep.”

“Good. We’ll talk about it on the hike.”

“Can’t wait,” I deadpan.

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Camden laughs. “See you soon.”

He hangs up, and I open my suitcase to grab my boots. I’m filling up my water bottle when Camden texts me to let me know he’s out front.

I screw on the cap, grab my phone and keys, and head out to meet him.

“Hey,” I greet as I climb into the passenger seat.

“Hey. Ready?”

“Yep.”

I look over at Camden as he drives. “What’s new with you?”

“Not much. Lymric is out of town this week, so I’m finishing up some projects around the house and working.”

“How’s Semper Fly?” I ask, naming the tourist helicopter company where Camden works.

“It’s been good. Business is booming. They’re talking about getting another helicopter so we can do more tours.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. Have you ever thought about getting your pilot’s license?”

I grin. “Nah, I’ll leave that to you.”

“They’d take you if you change your mind.”

“Thanks, man.”

“What are you going to do instead?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Okay. Tell me about this hot date, then.”

I laugh. “Is this twenty questions?”

“We can do that if you want. Okay, question one?—”

“Nope, I’ll just answer it.”

He laughs as we turn onto a back road and drive down the gravel path to a parking lot. “Okay, answer it.”

“Her name is Blake. She moved here a few months ago, and I met her at the Nosh Diner last week. She invited me to sit with her and challenged me to a bet.”

“What kind of bet?”

“Who could finish their meal first.”

“And you ate her under the table?”

“No, I let her win.”

“Aww.”

“Shut up,” I growl.

“Why’d you let her win?”

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“Because I didn’t want to have her buy me dinner... and I wanted to see her smile.”

Camden smirks. “You’ve got it bad, brother.”

“I’m aware,” I grumble.

“So, you let her win and bought her dinner. Then what?”

“We went to the grocery store and bet on who could find the coolest item.”

“Do you have a gambling problem now?”

I laugh. “No. It’s a way to stay close to her. We bet on the grocery run, and she won, so I had to buy her dinner again.”

“Smooth.”

“I try.”

We park and climb out at the base of the trail.

“So, you’re seeing her again today? What’s the plan?”

“Yesterday, we bet on who could finish a hike first, and tonight, we’re hanging out to see who can make a better meal.”

Camden raises an eyebrow. “Have you tried just asking her out?”

“I’m working on it.”

We start the hike, and the conversation shifts to how he and Lymric are doing and reminiscing over stories from our time in the service.

“Thanks for inviting me out,” I say when we make it back to his car.

“Anytime. It’s good to have you here. I know that it wasn’t your plan.”

I nod. “Not quite, but it’s working out okay so far.”

“Yeah, a good woman will do that,” Camden says with a knowing smile, obviously thinking about his girl, Lymric. He slaps my back. “Come on. We need to get you home so you can be ready for your date.”

We hop into his car and make the short ride back to Milo’s place.

“Have fun tonight. I’ll talk to you later,” Camden says when he drops me off.

“Thanks. See you.”

I close the door and wave before I jog up the steps and let myself in. Lilou is still at work, so the place is empty. I rush to my room and take the quickest shower of my life. By the time I’m dressed, it’s almost three.

I’m grabbing my keys and heading out the door when my phone buzzes with a message from Blake telling me she’s done with work for the day. I send her a message letting her know I’m on my way.

I pull up in front of her apartment and park. When I climb out of the car, I see her waiting for me at the top of the apartment stairs.



She smiles. “Hey, how was your day?”

I jog up the stairs toward her. “It was good. I went for a hike with a friend.”

“Fun!”

“What about you?”

“I worked all day. It was pretty boring.”

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“You should find another job. Something you love doing.”

“You make it sound so easy,” she sighs.

I shrug. “It’s not. I know that. I’m in the same boat, but life is way too short to spend all day doing something you hate.”

“I’ll think about it. Do you know what you want to make for dinner?”

I nod. “Yeah, I found a few recipes.”

“Okay, good. I have my list. Do you want to run to the store now?”

“Sure.”

We head out, and I smile as we walk side by side down the street toward the market. It feels so right being with her. It’s easy, like breathing. She fits in my life perfectly, like she was made for me.

We head into the grocery store and get our ingredients before heading to the checkout.

“I’m paying,” I insist.

Blake opens her mouth to argue.

“You won the marshmallow bet the other day, remember?”

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “I’ve got it.”

We check out and head back to her place to start cooking. I carry the bags, and she tells me about her day as she unlocks the door and lets us in.

We unpack all the groceries and begin preparing our meals.

“If you could do anything, what would you do?” I ask as we cook.

“I’m not sure. Paint, maybe? Or some kind of arts and crafts. Maybe work with kids in some way?”

“Why don’t you do that? You could be a teacher. An art teacher. Maybe work at a preschool or something.”

“Maybe,” she hedges. “What about you?”

“I don’t want to be a teacher or work with kids.”

She snorts. “No, I mean, what are you going to do now you’re out of the military?”

“I’m still not sure. Camden asked if I wanted to work at Semper Fly with him today.”

“The helicopter place?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to?”

“No, I don’t think so. I mean, working with other military guys would be good, but I’ve never much cared for flying.”

“What do you love to do?”

“I loved being a Ranger.”

“What did you love about it?”

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“The structure. Helping people. Serving my country. The action,” I admit.

“Maybe you could do that here. You could be a police officer,” she suggests. “Or some kind of security guy. You’re so smart. Maybe you could be a consultant of some kind.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

I finish my chicken and open the oven, sliding the baking dish inside.

I sit at the kitchen counter and watch as Blake finishes her meal and grabs some plates.

“Ready for the main course?” she asks.

“Oh, my dish still has ten minutes left in the oven,” I tease.

“Ha ha,” she mumbles as she sets a plate in front of me and sits in the chair next to mine. “Dig in.”

Blake has made spaghetti and meatballs, and we both take a bite. She’s a good cook, and I swallow down a moan as the taste of oregano, garlic, and parmesan cheese hits my taste buds.

“Not bad,” I say.

She glares at me. “It’s perfect, and you know it.”

“It’s really good, but will it beat my roast chicken and vegetables?”

She smirks. “I’m not worried.”

I finish my spaghetti, and the timer goes off. I slide out of my chair and take the chicken out of the oven.

“It looks good,” Blake says.

“It looks like it should be on the cover of a magazine.”

She laughs and nods. “It does. Smells good, too.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you cook a lot in the Rangers?”

“Not much. My mom taught Milo and me when we were growing up. My parents were big on us learning basic life skills, so every weekend, it was a new skill.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We learned how to change the oil on a car, change a tire, how to cook, bake, and clean. I can sew pretty well, and Milo is scary good with a pair of knitting needles.”

“That’s great. I wish that I’d been taught half of that growing up.”

“How did you learn to cook, then?” I ask as I cut the chicken and make each of us a plate.

“I had to. My last foster home wasn’t the best. All of the kids had to do chores, and since I was the eldest, I was in charge of cooking and cutting the grass.”

I set her plate down in front of her and sit next to her. We both dig in, and she moans as she pops a bite of chicken into her mouth.

“Okay, you win,” she says as she takes another bite.

“No way. Your spaghetti was so good. You win.”

She shakes her head, and I smile as she eats a carrot.

“So, it’s a draw, then,” she says.

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“What happens now?” I ask.

“We need a tiebreaker.”

“Okay, like what?”

She takes another bite, and I watch as she thinks over how to figure out a winner.

“Okay, new challenge,” she says finally. “We see who can plan the best day.”

“A whole day? Like a date?” I blurt the question before I can think it through.

Blake blinks and then blushes. “Yeah, like a date. Who can plan the best first date.”

Fuck. Could Blake want me the way I want her?

“Okay.”

“Do you want to go first?” she asks.

I nod. “Sure. Tomorrow night?”

“Okay.”

We finish eating, and I take her plate to clean up.

“You don’t have to do that,” she argues.



I give her a look. “I’m not about to leave this pile of dishes for you to do.”

She bumps her shoulder against mine, and we work in silence as we load the dishwasher. My mind races with ideas for our date and for what this could mean for us.

Does Blake want me as badly as I want her? Either way, this is my chance to show her how perfect we could be together, and I’m not about to mess it up. Not when I’m this close to winning over my dream girl.

I need to nail this date and make her mine.

THREE

Blake

“Planning a date is a lot harder than I thought it would be,” I tell my best friend, Jade.

“What have you got so far?” she asks, then curses as she drops the phone. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries. What are you doing?”

“I’m at work. I’m hiking through the National Park, trying to find the perfect place for some new pine trees.”

Jade is an arborist. She moved here a few weeks ago and started working at the National Park. She loves plants and nature, so she’s pretty much in heaven here. Throw in that she’s now dating Meyer, her grumpy next-door neighbor, and she’s the happiest I’ve ever seen her.

Jade and I have been best friends forever. We met and instantly connected, and we've been inseparable since. When she moved up here to be closer to me, I was thrilled. Then she met Meyer, and we've barely seen each other since she got here.

“So?”

I blink. “What?”

“What's the plan for your date? Are you going classic? Dinner and a movie? Or something more unique?”

“I have no idea,” I sigh. “Maybe it would be easier if I'd ever, you know, been on a date before.” I close the browser tab and open my email to check on work. “Where's the best place you've been on a date?”

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“Meyer took me for a picnic last week. It was just the two of us, beautiful weather, and great food.”

“Hmm.”

I look out the window at the clouds rolling in. “I don’t think we have the right weather for a picnic.”

“I know. We’re expecting storms all weekend,” Jade agrees.

“So, something indoors, then.”

“I think it matters more who you’re with than where you go. I mean, Meyer and I could eat mac and cheese in the kitchen, and I would still love it. It’s how he makes me feel. It’s our conversations and the connection.”

“Ugh, you two are so perfect together,” I joke.

She laughs, twigs snapping in the background as she walks through the forest. “You could have that with Luca. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I do. I just... Things seem to be happening so fast. I met the guy a week ago, and now?—”

“And now you’re going on a first date.”

“It feels like more than that,” I admit.

“There’s no correct timeline for falling in love, Blake. Maybe you and I are lucky it happened so quickly.”

“Maybe,” I sigh.

“He’s a good guy, right?”

I smile. “Yeah, the best. When we met, we just clicked. He gets me. Being with him is easy. You know?”

“Yeah, I know,” she says dreamily, obviously thinking about Meyer.

Thunder rumbles outside, and I scan the skyline, noting the dark clouds.

“Enjoy the journey. Trust Luca and yourself, and see where this goes,” she says wisely.

“All right,” I murmur.

I know she’s right. I’m having fun with Luca. He makes me feel safe, cherished, and seen. He’s the first person I’ve ever wanted to be with and the only guy I’ve ever been attracted to. The only one I’ve ever wanted more with.

A new email comes in, and I groan as I read it.

“Work?” Jade asks.

“Yep.”

“It’s starting to drizzle, so I’m headed back to my car. I’ll let you get back to work. Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will,” I promise. “Stay dry!”

“I’ll try.”

“Talk to you later.”

“See you,” she says before we hang up.

I dive back into work, creating a few new sheets of educational material for my company's latest middle school workbook. When I first started this job, I thought it would be fun. I thought I’d get to be creative and make my own schedule, but in reality, it’s none of that. There are so many rules and bureaucratic hoops to jump through.

All of my coworkers seem miserable. Half of my managers are egomaniacs high on the little bit of power they have. Because my company is located in Virginia, I have to wake up early to log on and work the same hours as everyone else. The only good part is that I’m done early.

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I work for a few more hours before I call it quits. Luca should be here soon to pick me up for our first date, and I try to calm my racing heart as I open my closet to find something to wear tonight.

Should I dress up? Are we going out? What shoes should I wear?

My phone buzzes, and I glance at the screen, smiling when I see Luca's name.

Luca: I was planning on doing something outside, but that's not possible now. So, change of plans. We can go out to dinner, or I can cook something for us at my new house.

Blake: That's right! Congrats! Do you want to postpone tonight? I'm sure you're eager to move into your new place.

Luca: No way. I've been looking forward to seeing you all day.

Blake: Okay, your place it is.

Luca: Sounds good. Pick you up in thirty. Dress comfortably.

Blake: See you soon.

I smile as I toss my phone onto the bed and grab my favorite shirt and a pair of yoga pants.

My heart is still racing as I get dressed, but now, instead of nerves, it's anticipation.

I'm all in with Luca, and I know that, one way or another, I'm going to win this bet.

FOUR

Luca

"So, we're betting on love now?" Meyer asks.

"It's kind of our thing."

"Hm," he says noncommittally.

"What?"

"Well, does she like you or just want to win the bet?"

My stomach drops.

"She likes him," Camden interjects. "No one bets on everything."

Except, we kind of have been...

I swallow hard and try to calm my racing heart.

Blake likes me. Right?

"You look like you're going to throw up." Camden grins as he sets a glass of water down in front of me. "You sure you're ready for this date tonight?"

"He's fine," Meyer says from the other end of the couch. "Just nervous because it's his first date with the girl he's in love with."

“I’m not?—”

"Spare us," Meyer cuts me off. "Milo said you're already planning what color throw pillows you're putting on the couch when she moves in."

I groan and drop my head into my hands. "You guys are the worst."

"We're the best," Camden counters. "Now, let's get serious. What's the plan tonight?"



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I glance up at them. “I was going to take her on a sunset walk through the meadow, maybe have a little campfire picnic set up, but the rain put a damper on that.”

“Yeah, the weather’s going to be rough all weekend,” Milo chimes in as he walks into the room. He tosses me a small box. “Here. Housewarming gift.”

I open it and grin when I see the keychain that reads, 'Home is where the chaos is.'

“Very funny.”

“So, what's plan B for date night?” Milo asks.

“I texted her. We’re doing dinner at my new place. I'm going to cook for her.”

“Damn,” Meyer mutters. “You're going domestic already.”

“I want it to be special. I finally have my own place again, and I want her to be the first person to see it.”

They all exchange a look.

Camden nods. “Okay, then. This is the real deal.”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “Blake’s the one.”

A beat of silence follows my declaration.

“Well, shit,” Meyer finally says. “Don’t screw it up.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I mutter.

“Just be yourself,” Milo says. “Not the grumpy ranger version. The guy who buys her every flavor of Pop-Tarts to see which one she likes best.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I’m guessing you did that for your girl?”

Milo nods, his expression serious. “I had to. Turns out she likes anything with sugar, so the flavor doesn’t matter.”

We all chuckle.

I want to take their advice—I should since all three are happily settled and in love with their girls. But it’s hard to remember it all when I’m so nervous I could throw up at any moment. This is the most important date, the most important bet, of my life.

I check the clock. “I need to go home and get everything set up.”

“Good luck,” Meyer says, raising his beer.

“You’ve got this,” Milo adds.

“Call if you need anything,” Camden shouts as I stand and move to the door.

I nod and grab my jacket, heading out into the drizzle.

I make the short drive to my new place and jog up to the front door. I spent this afternoon unpacking as much as I could. It was easy since I don’t have much. My couches and TV stand were delivered and set up today, and the place looks decent,

though a bit empty.

I check the fridge, making sure I have all of the ingredients for dinner tonight. Checking the time, I hurry upstairs to shower and change before driving into town to pick up my girl.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull up in front of her place. Blake is already waiting by the door, bundled in a hoodie and leggings, her hair twisted up in a messy bun. She looks gorgeous, and my heart races as I jump out of the car to greet her.

“Hey,” she says, her smile lighting up everything in me.

“Hey,” I manage. “Ready?”

She nods, and I help her down the steps and into my truck. We pull away from the curb, and I drive slowly as the storm picks up. The rain is coming down fast, the sky dark and gloomy as we drive the backroads to my house.

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“How was your day? Did you get everything unloaded before it started to rain?”  
Blake asks.

I smile. “Yeah, just barely.”

We pull up in front of my house, and I hop out to get her door for her. Taking her hand, we race through the rain to the front door.

“This is it,” I say.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs as she steps inside. “I love the porch.”

“Thanks. I’m still decorating and unpacking,” I tell her as we shake off the rain.  
“Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

I take her hand and lead her further into the house. “This is the living room.”

“I love the fireplace,” she gushes.

“There’s a half bath here,” I continue.

She pokes her head in and smiles.

“Kitchen is back here.”

“How many bedrooms?”

“Three. They're all upstairs. I have two bathrooms upstairs. One in the master and one between the two guest rooms.”

“Nice.”

“I'd show up, but most of the rooms are empty. The master only has a bed and some boxes.”

“I'll check them out later, then. Once they're furnished.”

I nod, finding hope in the fact that she's making plans to see my bedroom. That has to be a sign that she wants to spend time with me, and it's not just about the bet. Right?

“What's the plan for tonight?” she asks as we head into the kitchen.

“Well, I was planning a picnic and hike, but now we've shifted to dinner. How does steak and potatoes sound?”

“Delish. Want me to help?”

“No, you relax.” I smirk. “I'll show off my culinary skills.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Yeah? You want to call off the bet and admit defeat now?”

She grins. “Not a chance.”

I smile as I take out the steaks and other ingredients. Blake sits on a bar stool at the counter as I prepare everything. I haven't bought a kitchen table yet, so we'll have to eat at the counter.

“Can I get you something to drink? I have water, milk, some pop, or merlot.”

“Just a water would be great, thanks.”

I grab her a bottle of water out of the fridge and pass it to her.

“How do you like your steak?” I ask as I heat the cast-iron pan.

“Medium, please.”

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I nod and get to work preheating the oven and dicing up the potatoes. I season the steaks, peeking at Blake as I work.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“Fine. Boring. I worked and talked to my friend Jade for a bit. Planned our date.”

“What do you have planned?”

“I’m not telling. It’s going to be a surprise. Just be ready for the best date of your life.”

“All right.” I grin as I add the steaks to the pan.

“I mean it. I’m going to win this bet easily.”

My stomach flips. I turn so she doesn’t see my smile drop and realize something is wrong.

The rain picks up, heavy drops splattering against the windows. A flash of lightning lights up the forest surrounding my place, and I look over at Blake to see her watching the storm.

“Do you like the rain?” I ask.

“Love it. It makes everything feel so cozy. What about you?”

“I’ve never minded it. I’ve never minded anything except the heat.”

“Yeah, same. The weather has been good here so far.”

I nod, flipping the steaks in the pan.

“Where were you stationed?”

“Fort Benning, Hunter Army Airfield, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Then I did a few deployments overseas.”

“Where are those bases?”

“Fort Benning and Hunter Army Airfield are in Georgia, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord is in Washington.”

“Which was your favorite?”

“Lewis-McChord. I liked the weather there more. And I had a lot of friends.”

“You miss it,” she says softly.

I nod tightly. “Yeah, but I miss it less and less every day.”

The timer goes off, so I pull out the potatoes and add the steak to the oven for a few minutes.

“Still okay with just water?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m good.”



I nod and blanch some broccolini while I prepare our plates and grab water for myself. I pull the steaks out and make up two plates.

“Dig in!” I tell her as I slide onto the stool next to her.

“It looks great. Thanks.”

We cut our steaks, and Blake moans as she takes a bite. My cock hardens in my pants. I clear my throat and try to focus on my food.

The lights flicker as the storm picks up, so I light out the candles I bought from the store this afternoon.

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“So romantic,” she says with a theatrical sigh.

I laugh. “I try.”

“What’s the best first date that you’ve ever had?” Blake asks as she takes another bite of steak.

“Uh...I’ve never been on one before,” I admit.

“What?” She looks at me in shock. “How is that possible? Look at you.”

“Uh, thanks? I think...”

“You’re hot. How have you never dated before? You’ve never had a girlfriend?”

I shrug. “No. I was never interested. I was busy with school and working part-time before I joined the Army. I went from boot camp to Ranger School to my first duty station before being deployed. The time went by fast.”

“Hmm,” she hums.

“What about you? What was your best first date?”

“This.”

“Really?” I smile proudly.

“Yeah, it’s also my only date,” she says shyly.

“How is that possible? You’re smoking hot.”

She snorts and rolls her eyes. Her cheeks glow with a blush. Has anyone ever told her how beautiful she is?

“No one ever asked you out?” I probe.

“No. I was always the chubby girl people overlooked.”

“You’re not chubby.”

“I am.”

“No. Curvy. Beautiful. Perfect.”

“Well, you’re good for my ego.”

“It’s the truth.”

Blake goes back to her dinner, but I see her smiling as she eats. She likes compliments, and I make a mental note to tell her how amazing she is more often.

We both eat, and the conversation turns to our childhoods. We discuss our favorite subjects in school, our favorite foods, and our favorite holidays. I discover that she’s always wanted to travel, and she makes lists of all the countries and sights she wants to see. I make a mental list of all of them.

Dinner is perfect. We eat by candlelight, laughing and talking, and it feels so natural that it’s almost surreal.

Afterward, we move to the couch. I flip on a movie, and she curls into my side.

I can't stop looking at her.

"Thank you for tonight," she says softly. "This was... more than I ever expected."

"You deserve the best," I say, my voice low.

Her eyes meet mine, and I can't stop myself. I can't hold back any longer.

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My eyes drop to her lips, and her tongue darts out to lick them. I groan at the sight, and then I'm leaning in to kiss her.

It's soft at first. Testing. Then she sighs against my mouth and grips my shirt, and everything in me unravels. She kisses me back like she's been waiting her whole life.

When we finally pull apart, we're both breathless.

"Well," she says with a dazed smile, "This is going to be a tough bet to win."

I smile, my eyes dropping back to her mouth. "Do your worst."

She laughs and tugs me down for another kiss.

Either way, I know I've already won.

FIVE

Blake

"How's this?" I ask Jade, stepping out of the bathroom wearing outfit option number five.

"Ohh, sexy!" she gushes.

I smile, twirling around in my dark wash jeans that mold to my legs and ass like a second skin. My flowy tunic-style shirt floats around me as I spin, and I laugh as I get

dizzy and stop.

“I think this is the one.”

“Definitely! You look hot,” Jade agrees.

I sit on the bed next to her and pull on a pair of socks and my boots.

“What time are you picking him up?” she asks.

“He’s picking me up in an hour.”

“And what did you have planned for tonight? It needs to be good if you want to win the bet,” she says.

“Oh, I’ve got this in the bag,” I say confidently. “We’re going to the pottery studio up in Maple Creek and then out to dinner at that new barbecue place.”

“Sounds fun. Call me tomorrow and let me know how it goes,” she says as she stands and gathers her things.

“I will.”

She hugs me and smiles reassuringly before she heads out. I take a deep breath and look around my apartment. I spent all day stress cleaning it, so the place is spotless.

My palms are sweaty, and my heart is racing as I wait for Luca to pick me up. I need something to distract me, but I’m all caught up on work, and there’s nothing else to do here.

Entering the bathroom, I brush my hair until it shines. I twist it up into a high ponytail

and then splash cold water on my face.

Calm down! I order myself. It's a date. Not even our first date. It will all be okay.

I dry my face and hands and pace my apartment, my eyes glued to the clock.

Finally, four o'clock rolls around, and Luca knocks on the door.

"Hey," I greet him as I open the door.

"Hey. Wow, you look amazing."

"Thanks. You look pretty good yourself."

“Thanks. Are you ready to go?”

“Yep.”

I grab my purse and phone and step outside, locking the door behind me.

“What’s the plan for tonight?” Luca asks as we head downstairs to his car.

“You don’t want to be surprised?”

He shrugs. “If you want. Might be hard to drive us there.”

“You’ve got a point,” I agree.

“Did you want to drive us there?” He asks, holding up his keys.

I wave them away. “No, I hate driving.”

“Really?”

I sigh. “Yeah. I had a mean driving teacher. Now, every time I’m behind the wheel, I’m anxious and on edge.”

“We could work on that,” he offers.

“Maybe, but not tonight.”



He nods and opens the passenger door for me. I hop in, and he rounds the hood and climbs behind the wheel.

“Where are we headed?” he asks as he starts the car.

“Maple Creek. Or...shoot, I should have asked if you minded driving that far first.”

“It’s fine. It’s only twenty minutes from here,” he says, pulling out into the light traffic. “What’s in Maple Creek?”

“Pottery.”

“Pottery?”

“Pottery and barbecue.”

“Sounds like a date.”

“A winning date,” I correct him.

“We’ll see.”

Maple Creek is the largest town in the region, boasting a professional hockey team and an airport. It has way more restaurants and businesses than Wolf Valley.

“Want to put in the directions?” Luca asks, passing his phone to me.

“Sure.”

I pull up Maps on his phone and enter the address of the ceramics studio.

“How was your day? What did you do?” I ask as we get on the highway.

“I finished unpacking. Tried to find some furniture online for the guest rooms. I also need some kitchen supplies. Just a lot of odds and ends.”

“Do you want to look while we’re in Maple Creek? We could hit up some furniture stores,” I offer.

“Not tonight. Not on date night.”

“Another time, then.”

“For sure. I’d love your opinion on some things.”

“Okay.”

“How was work?” he asks.

“It was fine. My manager was in a meeting all day, so I didn’t have to deal with her or anyone else. I finished early and started looking for a new job,” I tell him.

“Any leads?”

“Not really. They’re hiring for some construction work, but unless I want to learn how to weld, I don’t think I’d be a good fit.”

“Probably not.”

“I’ll keep looking.”

We arrive in Maple Creek, and Luca parks in the ceramics parking lot. We hop out of his car, and he takes my hand.

“I hope you don’t expect me to actually sculpt something,” he warns me.

I laugh. “No, this is strictly painting pottery,” I assure him.

He opens the door for me as we enter. Our instructor checks us in and leads us to a table in the back corner. She explains the process before leaving us to select a piece and choose our paint colors.

Luca follows me as we examine the pottery options. I decide on a bowl, and Luca grabs the same as me.

“What are you planning on painting?” I ask as we look over the paint colors.

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe polka dots or...flowers? What’s easiest?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never done this before.”

He nods and grabs a few different colors. I decide to try my luck at making little hearts, so I grab red and white paints and head back to the table.

We talk as we work. Luca tells me about growing up with Milo, their time in school, and when he decided to join the military.

“Why the Army? Or the Rangers?” I ask as I add another coat of paint.

“I’m not a huge swimmer, so the Navy and Marines were out, and I’ve never had any interest in flying, so no Air Force. That left the Army.”

“Why go into special forces?”

“I wanted to serve my country. I wanted to make a difference,” he says quietly.

“You did,” I assure him.

“I tried.”

“You did,” I promise. “I’m sure of it.”

He nods, and we work in silence for a while, both of us getting lost in our painting.

“That looks great!” our instructor says once we’re finished. “Remember to initial the bottom with this pen.”

I flip my bowl over and write my initials, then pass the pen to Luca.

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“They’ll be finished in the kiln and ready for pickup in a few days. We’ll call you,” she says as we check out.

Luca tries to pay, but I push him aside and swipe my card.

“Come again,” the instructor says as we head out, and I wave over my shoulder.

Luca takes my hand as we walk back to his car. “That was fun,” he says as he opens my door.

“Ready to admit defeat?”

He grins. “Not yet. Where now?”

“Dinner. There’s a barbecue place right around the corner.”

He nods and closes my door. We drive to the restaurant and pull in. It’s packed and smells delicious. My mouth waters as we stand in line, and Luca’s stomach growls.

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Starved.”

“Me, too,” I admit.

We wait a few minutes to be seated. Looking over the menu, we decide to split a few plates so we can try everything. I let Luca order and lean back, taking in the place.

Dinner passes in a flash. We joke, rank the meats and sides by our favorite to least favorite, and learn more about each other.

It starts to rain again as Luca and I argue over who gets to pay the bill. I win since it's my date, but Luca grumbles as I put my debit card down with a victorious smirk.

"I should have paid," he complains as we leave the restaurant.

I laugh. "It was my date."

"Still."

Lightning streaks across the sky, and I jump at the loud boom of thunder that follows.

"Let me get the car. You wait here."

I wait beneath the awning while he brings the car around, then dash through the rain to the passenger door and slide inside.

"Now where?" Luca asks.

"Home."

"Mine or yours?"

"Mine."

The rain splatters against the roof and windshield as we drive back to Wolf Valley. We pull up to my apartment, and I turn to Luca.

I intend to ask him who won the date or maybe suggest a third date as a tiebreaker,

but when my eyes clash with his, all thoughts leave my head.

His eyes drop to my lips, and we both freeze, the moment suspended in time. My body heats, and my core clenches. I lean forward, my body swaying toward his.

“Blake.”

That single word—my name on his lips—sends a shiver down my spine. It’s low and rough, like gravel and longing, and it wraps around me tighter than any embrace.

I lean in without thinking, the space between us charged and electric. His hand lifts, hovering near my cheek, and then he cups my face gently like he’s afraid I’ll vanish if he moves too fast. I don’t. I can’t. I’m already lost to the pull between us.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:23 am*

“You gonna keep looking at me like that or kiss me?” I whisper, my voice unsteady and thick with want.

His breath hitches. “I’m trying to remember every second of this.”

And then his mouth is on mine.

It’s not soft. Not tentative. It’s desperate and deep like he’s been waiting forever and finally cracked. His lips claim mine, and I melt into him, my hands curling into the front of his shirt as I press my body against his. The heat between us roars to life, scorching and undeniable.

His other hand slides around to the back of my neck, tilting my head, and the kiss deepens. My lips part, and his tongue brushes against mine, hot and insistent, sending a bolt of heat straight through my core. I moan into his mouth, and he swallows the sound like it’s the only thing he wants to hear for the rest of his life.

I don’t know where the world went—maybe it fell away the moment he touched me—but right now, all that exists is this: the taste of him, the way he groans softly when my fingers slide into his hair, the way he presses me against the door like he can’t get close enough.

I gasp as his mouth drifts to my jaw, then down to my neck, the scrape of his stubble making me dizzy.

“Luca,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

He pulls back enough to look at me, his chest heaving. “Tell me to stop.”

“I won’t,” I say, breathless. “I don’t want you to.”

His lips crash into mine again, and I’m instantly lost in him.

We’re like two teenagers, making out before I have to head in for curfew. The storm rages around us, the rain cocooning us in his car.

His tongue tangles with mine, and I moan as his fingers move to cradle the back of my head.

BOOM!

A loud clap of thunder startles us, and we jump, jerking apart. We’re both breathing heavily. His cheeks are flushed, his lips swollen from mine, and all I can think about is asking him to come upstairs.

“Did you want to come in?” I ask breathlessly.

“You want me to?”

“Uh-huh,” I say huskily.

I’ve never been so turned on and needy in my life, but I don’t tell him that.

“I mean, I think it’s clear that I already won the bet,” I joke. “Might as well get my prize.”

I mean for the words to be light and teasing, but they seem to have the opposite effect on Luca. It’s like a bucket of cold water being dumped on him.

His eyes go from dark and heated to guarded in a second, and he pulls back.

“I...I can’t. I need to get home,” he says stiffly.

I blink.

What? How did I mess this up so badly in a few seconds?

“I...Are you okay?”

He nods. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

“Oh. Okay, um, I’ll see you later,” I say as I gather my things.

My cheeks heat in a fierce blush. I duck my head as I grab the door handle and bolt from his car. I don’t look back as I run up the steps to my apartment. I can hear his car idling at the curb until I get inside, and I know he’s checking I’m safely inside before he leaves.

Always a gentleman.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:24 am*

Is that why he didn't want to come in? Was it too soon? Is he not into me?

Questions circle in my head all night, but I can't pinpoint what went wrong.

I hope I didn't ruin things between us permanently.

SIX

Luca

I'm busy breaking down the moving boxes when there's a knock on the door. My heart lodges in my throat, wondering if it's Blake, but then the door opens, and my brother walks in, followed by Camden and Meyer.

"Hey," I greet them. "Were we meeting today?"

"No, but we wanted to know how your date went last night. I have to head into work soon, so I thought I'd stop over with some donuts and hear all of the details," Milo says, tossing a bakery box onto the kitchen counter.

"Thanks."

I open the lid and grab a donut, taking a big bite to stall for time.

"So?" Meyer asks bluntly.

"It was a lot of fun."

“Yeah? What did you guys do?”

“We went to a pottery place in Maple Creek. Then we went out for some barbecue.”

“Sounds fun,” Milo says encouragingly.

“So, who won the bet?” Camden asks.

“I don’t know...”

“Did you make plans to see her again?” Meyer asks.

“No, not exactly.”

“Why the fuck not?” he asks with a frown.

“We kissed...”

“Okay, good sign.” Camden nods.

“Right, so we’re making out in my car in front of her apartment, and it’s pouring out.”

“Hot,” Meyer says, and his tone is so deadpan that I can’t tell if he means it or is being sarcastic.

“Anyway, she invites me in and?—”

“You slept with her and didn’t make plans to see her again?” Milo demands.

I shake my head. “No! I said no.”

The room is silent. Everyone is frozen in place.

A donut dangles from Meyer's fingers as he stares at me. His gaze darts to Camden, Milo, and back to me. "What?" He shakes his head as if he may not have heard me correctly.

"I said no. I couldn't go inside. I told her I was tired."

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“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asks incredulously.

“I don’t know!”

Oh, my god. Am I an idiot? Did I mess everything up?

I thought I was doing the right thing by not going inside last night. I wanted us to clear our heads. I wanted to find the right words to tell her what she meant to be before I sat her down and explained that us sleeping together wasn’t part of the bet. That I would never bet on something like that.

Camden and Milo are still speechless, frozen in shock, and my doubts only grow stronger the longer they stay like that.

“I don’t know. I wanted to go with her so badly last night, but I need her to know that this is real. I didn’t want her to think that sex was part of any bet,” I try to explain.

Camden and Milo to blink.

“And you couldn’t have told her that before you followed her inside?” Meyer asks.

“I don’t know. Tensions were high.”

“You mean hormones,” Meyer interjects.

I glare at him. “Yeah, that too. I just... I guess it seemed like too important a conversation to have before jumping into bed together.”

“Oh,” Camden says, nodding.

“Yeah, that makes sense. Pausing a make-out session to talk about a bet isn’t exactly a turn-on,” Milo adds.

“So, when are you going to have that conversation?” Meyer asks.

“I just... I still don’t have the right words to explain it all.”

“How hard can it be?” Meyer snorts. “I love you, Blake. Be with me forever.”

“I wanted to do something a little more romantic than that,” I say wryly.

“Well, you need to figure it out soon,” Milo says.

I sigh. “I know.”

“I mean really soon because it looks like you rejected her last night and then ghosted her.”

“Shit,” I groan.

“Good luck, bro,” Milo says, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Just talk to her. She’s into you. It will all be okay,” Camden reassures me.

Milo nods in agreement as he grabs a donut. “I’ve got to get to work. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will,” I promise. “Talk to you later.”



He waves and heads out the door.

Camden grabs a donut and plops down on the couch, kicking up his feet on the coffee table. “Want to talk strategy?”

“No. I need to figure out where to get some bao in this town.”

“Good luck with that.” Meyer snorts.

“Why bao?” Camden asks.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:24 am*

“It’s her favorite food. Tofu bao.”

“Can’t be that hard to make,” Camden says. “Let’s look it up.”

And that’s how Camden, Meyer, and I wind up spending the afternoon making tofu bao a dozen times before we get it right.

I box up the meal and smile at my friends. “Thanks, guys. I owe you one.”

“No problem,” Camden mumbles, eating one of our failed attempts at the dish.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Meyer says as he wipes down the kitchen counter. “Now, go get your girl.”

I smile and grab the food. “Lock up when you leave!”

They both wish me good luck as I head out.

I drive to Blake’s apartment and take the stairs two at a time. Knocking on the door, I take a deep breath as I wait for her to answer.

I practiced what I wanted to say with my friends all afternoon, but as soon as the door opens, all my words disappear.

“I messed up,” I blurt.

Blake blinks. Her green eyes reflect hurt before becoming guarded. I hate that I’m the

cause of that hurt.

“Last night, I messed up. Or maybe it was days ago when we first made the date bet.”

“Wow, okay,” she says, her hand tightening on the door.

“Not like that. I mean, I should have told you how I felt instead of playing games.”

She pauses, her grip on the door loosening as she stares at me.

“I...I made you tofu bao,” I say, shoving the Tupperware at her.

“You made it?”

“Yeah. You can’t order it anywhere around here. I’ve checked.”

“Thanks,” she says sincerely. “That was sweet of you.”

“It’s nothing. I...I want you, Blake. Any way I can have you. But I don’t want you to think I’m only sleeping with you to win a bet. If we have sex, it’s because this is real.”

“It is real,” she says softly. She steps back, grabs my shirt, and tugs me inside before closing the door. “I want you,” she whispers. “For real.”

I swallow hard. “We can go on more dates.”

“We’ve been dating since the diner. The hikes, the errands, and coffee. All the dinners and movies. They were dates. We were just too scared to call them that. Now kiss me,” she orders.

I do as she commands eagerly.

My mouth crashes into hers like I've been starving for her—because I have. Her lips are soft and warm, familiar and new all at once. She tastes like mint and mischief, and the way she melts into me makes something primal snap inside my chest.

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her flush against me, and she lets out a soft moan that nearly brings me to my knees. She slides her hands into my hair, tugging just enough to drive me insane. I growl against her mouth, pressing her back until she bumps into the apartment door

“Bedroom,” I mutter, breaking the kiss long enough to take the food from her and set it on the kitchen counter as we stumble toward the bedroom.

She giggles, breathless and beautiful, and tugs me into the room with her. The second the door clicks shut behind us, we're on each other again.

I back her against the wall, one hand finding her hip, the other threading into her hair as I kiss her like I've waited a lifetime. Maybe I have. She's everything—fire and softness and stubborn sweetness—and I don't want to wait another second.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:24 am*

Her hands tug at the hem of my shirt, and I yank it off without thinking. Her nails skate across my chest, and I shudder, biting back a groan. I want to go slow—God, I want to savor her—but the look in her eyes is pure heat, and I know we’re both past the point of patience.

I lift her easily, her legs wrapping around my waist, and I carry her to the bed. We’re a tangle of hands and mouths the whole way there. She laughs and gasps, kissing me like she can’t get enough, and I never want her to stop.

I set her down on the mattress, and she reaches for me instantly, pulling me over her.

“Luca,” she whispers, her voice soft and needy.

“Need to get you naked. I need to taste you,” I moan.

Blake sits up, pulling her shirt over her head. Then we’re both tugging off our pants and crashing together on the mattress.

“I’ve never...” Blake says as I trail kisses down her neck. “I’m a virgin.”

“Me, too,” I admit.

She looks at me in surprise. “Be honest. Did you live under a rock or something before you moved here?”

“Nope. I was just waiting for you.”

“What if this is awful?”

I shake my head. “It will be good. I’ve got you,” I promise, kissing her again, slower this time.

I trail my lips along her jaw and neck, memorizing every gasp as I learn what she likes. Her hands are on my back, her thighs around my hips, and I swear I could live in this moment forever.

Blake’s hips are restless beneath me. She rocks against me, her pussy lips wrapping around my length, and I groan with each movement.

“Easy,” I tell her. “We’ve got all night.”

“I can’t wait,” she whines, her hips jerking back and forth.

She’s soaked, her juices coating my cock as she humps me. My mouth waters and I know I can’t wait any longer to get a taste of my girl.

I kiss my way down her body, stopping when I get to her tits. I mold the smooth mounds in my palms, and Blake arches into my touch.

“Luca!” she shouts when I pinch one of her nipples.

Smiling devilishly, I place a kiss between her breasts. I toy with her nipples, rolling the sensitive peaks between my thumbs and forefingers as I trace circles with my tongue around her belly button.

“Luca, please,” she gasps.

I release her boobs and shoulder her thighs apart as I settle between her legs. “You

smell so good,” I growl as I spread her lower lips.

“I hurt,” she cries.

I can’t have that. I lean forward and bury my face in her pussy. She smells like honey and cream, and she tastes just as sweet. With one lick, I’m instantly addicted.

“So fucking sweet,” I groan.

Blake cries out as my tongue rolls over her clit and slides to her snug opening. I repeat the same pattern over and over, and soon enough, her hips are rocking in time with my movements. Her body coils tighter and tighter, her breaths coming in breathy pants with each flick of my tongue. Her fingers grip the blanket as I flick my tongue over the little pearl.

That’s all it takes to send her flying over the edge into pure bliss.

She screams my name, her fingers tangling in my hair as she comes all over my face.

“Fuck!” she shouts.

I growl, licking up every drop of her release. She tugs on my hair, her breathing heavy as she stares down at me. Her green eyes are so dark with passion, and I can see she wants more than just my mouth.

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I move up her curvy body and kiss her softly. I hover over her. “Are you sure?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

She cups my cheek, her eyes locked on mine. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

That’s all I need.

I kiss her again as I line up with her drenched opening. We both hold our breath as I slide into her, gasping at the contact. She arches beneath me, her fingers digging into my shoulders as I thrust through her virginity and bottom out inside her.

“Oh!” she cries.

I freeze, letting her adjust to my size. She feels so good, so much better than I ever thought possible—wet and hot and tight. Her pussy wraps around my cock like a fist, and it takes everything in me not to come instantly.

“I’m good,” she says, nodding for me to start moving.

I grit my teeth and pull out slowly before pushing back in. We both gasp as I bottom out inside her again.

Soon, we find a rhythm, our bodies moving together like they were made for this. For us. It’s intense and messy and perfect. Every moan, every whispered word, every touch is burned into my memory.



Her body shudders under me, her grip on me tightening, and I know that she's close to coming again.

Thank God because I'm close to my release, and I don't know how much longer I can hold on.

"Luca," she gasps.

Hearing her say my name like that has me falling over the edge. "Fuck, Blake. Mine," I growl as I come.

Blake clings to me, her cries like music to my ears as she comes with me. We fall apart together, tangled in the sheets and each other, our breaths ragged, our hearts racing.

I wrap my arms around her and roll to the side before I collapse on top of her. Blake cuddles up next to me, her head resting on my shoulder, and I smile as I kiss her forehead. When I look down at my girl, her eyes have drifted shut, and a moment later, her breathing evens out.

I grin, pulling the covers over us as I wrap my arms around Blake and allow my eyes to drift closed.

I know—no matter what comes next, I'm not letting her go.

SEVEN

Blake

"Oh, my god! What time is it?" I ask, bolting upright in bed.

“What?” Luca grumbles next to me.

I look at him as he sits up, smiling when I see his hair sticking out in every direction and his adorable, sleepy expression.

“What?” he repeats.

“The time! What time is it?”

“Uh...” He turns his head to look at the alarm clock next to him. “Almost five in the morning.”

“Oh, thank god,” I groan, sinking back onto the mattress.

“Why are we freaking out about the time?” he asks, lying down next to me and tugging me against him.

“Because I have to be up for work in an hour.”

“This is terrible. You do this every day?” he complains.

I nod. “Unfortunately.”

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We're silent for a moment, and I think he's fallen asleep again. Then I feel it—his fingertips trailing up my thigh, moving higher.

“So we have an hour until you have to be at work?” he asks suggestively.

“Uh-huh.”

My body heats as his fingers trail higher. Last night was incredible, and even though I'm a little sore, I'm more than ready for another round.

Luca kisses me as he knees my legs apart and settles over me.

“Morning,” he mumbles against my lips.

I grin. “Morning.”

His dick nudges my opening, and I look up at him, taking in his handsome features, his dark brown hair, full lips, and the heated look in his blue eyes.

“Luca,” I whisper, our eyes locked as he sinks inside me.

My pussy clenches around his cock, making his jaw pop.

“You feel so good,” I moan.

He curses under his breath and starts to move. His pace is languid and lazy, as if he's savoring me and this moment between us. His mouth moves over mine, his hands

molding my curves as we rock together.

Soon, that delicious pressure builds inside me, and I know I'm close to coming. I rock my hips against him harder and faster as we strain to reach our peaks.

"Luca!" I gasp, my nails digging into his arms as I fall over the edge.

"Fuck," he chokes a second later as he reaches his peak.

I tug him down to me and kiss him, sighing when we pull away, and he collapses next to me on the bed.

"I need to get ready," I murmur.

"I should head home and finish unpacking."

Luca kisses me one more time, and we both climb out of bed. He pulls on his clothes, and I walk him to the door.

"Dinner tonight?" he asks. "I can grab food or pick you up."

"Why don't you grab a pizza or something?" I suggest.

He smiles. "You got it."

He kisses me goodbye, and I wave before I close the door and head to the bathroom for a shower. I throw on clothes and start the coffeemaker. When I sit at my desk, I'm still not awake, and every part of me wishes I was back in bed with Luca.

I mean, I've never been great at mornings, but today feels like a cruel joke.

With a resigned sigh, I start my computer and see what's waiting for me. I blink at my laptop screen, rereading the email for the fifth time as if that will somehow change the words.

Due to company restructuring and cost reduction efforts, your position will be eliminated effective immediately.

My stomach drops. My heart races. My throat tightens.

I reread it. Still there. Still true. Still happening.

I've been laid off.

Numbness settles over me as I slump in my chair. My job. The one stable thing I've had since aging out of foster care is gone. Just like that.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:24 am*

My hands shake as I close the email and push my chair back. I stand and pace my tiny apartment, trying to breathe, trying not to cry, trying to figure out what to do.

I feel like the floor has dropped out from under me.

Rent. Groceries. Bills. What am I going to do now?

My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter. I see Luca's name on the screen, but I can't bring myself to pick it up.

It's too soon. I need a plan. I need to fix this.

I open my laptop again, my hands moving on autopilot as I type up a new resume. It's old. Outdated. Doesn't reflect my current skill set. I work on it until my vision blurs, until tears fall silently onto the keyboard.

It takes everything I have to pull myself together.

Eventually, I search for jobs in Wolf Valley. There aren't many. A handful of part-time positions. A few listings at the local schools. Some retail jobs.

My fingers hover over the mouse as I debate if I should apply for work at the art store. I've been helping Luca with the setup, and I love the space. I love the idea of helping kids to create, of making something with my hands instead of typing instructions all day.

But I'd barely make minimum wage. It won't be enough.

Still, I save the listing.

I'm debating whether to send my resume to the community center for their afterschool program when I hear a knock at the door.

I freeze.

Another knock, followed by Luca's deep voice.

"Blake? It's me. Got dinner."

I wipe my eyes on my sleeve and inhale a shaky breath before opening the door.

Luca stands there with a brown paper bag in his arms and a worried crease pinching his brow.

"Hey," he says softly, stepping inside as I move aside. "You okay?"

I try to smile. It falters.

And just like that, I fall apart in front of him.

EIGHT

Luca

The second I see Blake's face, I know something's wrong.

She opens the door slowly, her green eyes rimmed with red. And that easy smile she always gives me? Nowhere in sight. She's wearing one of her oversized sweatshirts, sleeves pulled down over her hands, and it hits me how small she looks tonight. Not

physically—Blake’s never been small, not with all that fire and sass—but like something has knocked the wind out of her.

“Hey,” I say softly, holding up the brown paper bag of takeout like it might cheer her up. “I brought dinner. That tofu bao place finally called me back.”

She steps aside silently, and I walk in, closing the door behind me. The second it clicks shut, she turns and practically folds into my chest. No warning. No words.

Just grief.

I drop the bag on the table and wrap my arms around her.

She doesn’t sob, not at first. It’s more like she’s trying not to break. Her body shakes, and her breath hitches as she presses her face into my hoodie. My hand moves instinctively to the back of her head, cradling her gently.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper. “Whatever it is, I’m here.”



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Her fingers curl into the fabric of my sweatshirt, gripping hard.

When she finally pulls back, her eyes are glassy, and her lips tremble. "I got laid off."

Fuck.

My chest tightens. "What happened?"

She swallows. "My company's downsizing. Corporate restructuring or whatever they want to call it. I got an email this morning. Effective immediately. No notice. No severance. Just... gone."

Rage flickers through me, hot and fast.

She's not just some name on a spreadsheet. She's brilliant, creative, and loyal as hell. How could they treat her like that? Like she doesn't matter?

"Jesus, Blake," I mutter, reaching for her again. "I'm so sorry."

She lets me hold her for another beat before pulling away and moving toward the couch. She sinks into the cushions like they're the only things keeping her upright.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she says, her voice hollow. "Rent... bills... groceries. I barely have any savings."

I sit beside her, not touching her yet, just letting her talk.

“I was already struggling to stay motivated at work, but at least it was steady. I never thought they’d cut me loose like that.”

“You don’t have to figure it all out right now.”

“But I do,” she whispers. “I have no one to fall back on. I’ve always taken care of myself, Luca. I’ve had to.”

My hand finds hers, warm and trembling. “You don’t have to do it alone anymore. Move in with me.”

She looks up, startled. “What?”

“Come live with me. The house has plenty of space. You don’t need to stress about rent or bills. Just... be with me.”

She blinks. “That’s huge. We haven’t even been together that long. Isn’t this moving too fast?”

“No,” I say without hesitation. “It feels fast because it is. But it also feels right. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She studies me for a long second. “You’re serious.”

“Dead serious. I love you, Blake.”

Her eyes go wide. “You... what?”

I scoot closer. “I love you. I’m in love with you. I think I fell the second you beat me in that sandwich race. And every day since, it’s only gotten stronger. You’re funny and smart and stubborn and brave. And the thought of you crying alone makes me

want to burn down your whole damn company.”

She lets out a shaky laugh, tears shining in her green eyes. “You mean that?”

“Every word. I love you. So damn much.”

She bursts into tears again.

I pull her into my arms again, and she doesn’t fight me. She wraps around me like I’m the only steady thing left in her world.

“I love you, too,” she whispers. “I think I have since our third bet.”

That earns a grin from me. “Took you long enough.”

She laughs wetly, pulling back and swiping at her eyes. “Okay. Say I move in. What do I do for work? I still need something to pay the bills.”

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I hesitate. Not because I don't know what to say but because I don't know how she'll take it.

"You open your own art store."

She blinks. "What?"

"You love art. You love teaching. You light up every time you help kids paint or create. You could build something here. A shop. A studio. A community space."

"Luca, I don't have the money for that."

"I do."

She sits up straight. "You... what?"

"I have savings. From the military. Investments. Disability. It's sitting there collecting interest. Let me be your silent partner."

"You're insane."

"Crazy," I correct with a smile. "Crazy about you."

She stares at me like I've grown two heads. "You want to fund an entire business? For me?"

"Yes. Because I believe in you. And because this town needs something like that."

Because you deserve to wake up excited to go to work. Because I want a life with you, and this is how we build it.”

She shakes her head slowly. “You’re really serious.”

“One hundred percent serious.”

I kiss her softly. Tender. Sure. Her fingers curl into my shirt, anchoring her to me.

When I pull back, I whisper, “Say yes.”

Her brows lift. “Yes to what?”

“To everything. To being mine. My business partner. My roommate. My everything.”

She smiles, eyes glistening. “Yes.”

I pull her into a deeper kiss, relief and joy flooding my chest. She tastes like hope and tears and everything I never thought I’d get to have.

“I love you,” she says again, her voice thick with emotion.

I rest my forehead against hers. “I love you more.”

She laughs softly. “Wanna bet?”

And just like that, my world clicks into place.

NINE

Blake

One Year Later...

Carter has spaghetti in his hair. Again.

I stare at my son—his big brown eyes shining with mischief and his chubby fists proudly smashing a noodle against the side of his highchair tray—and I have to laugh. He looks so much like Luca that it's ridiculous. Same dimples. Same thick lashes. Same habit of making a total mess and acting like he just won a medal for it.

“Carter Wright,” I say, hands on my hips. “That is not how we eat spaghetti, mister.”

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He grins at me, wide and unbothered. “More?”

I sigh and lean in to kiss his soft curls, breathing in the scent of marinara and baby shampoo. “You are so lucky you’re cute.”

“Just like his mom,” Luca calls from the doorway, shrugging off his jacket. He walks into the kitchen, looking far too smug for someone who missed dinnertime and skipped clean-up duty.

“You’re late,” I say, arching an eyebrow at him.

“I brought pie,” he counters, lifting a white box from the bakery down the street. “Cherry.”

“You’re forgiven,” I reply instantly, reaching for the box like the hormonal, pie-craving woman I am.

Luca leans over to press a kiss to my temple, then one to my swollen belly. “Hey, baby. Your mom’s got that dangerous glint in her eye. You better behave in there.”

“You better behave out here,” I mutter.

He chuckles and scoops up Carter with ease. “How’s my big guy?”

“Messy,” I say flatly. “He got most of the spaghetti on himself, the rest on the dog, and somehow, I think there’s sauce on the ceiling.”

Luca tilts Carter upside down and earns a squeal of laughter as he inspects his son's spaghetti-soaked onesie. "Ah, a true Wright. Chaos incarnate."

"He's definitely yours," I mumble, even as I smile. I can't help it. Watching them together always makes my heart squeeze.

Carter babbles something incoherent and smacks Luca's face with a wet noodle.

I laugh so hard I snort.

"This is what I get for raising a mini-you," Luca grumbles. Then he grins and wipes his cheek.

Once the mess is cleaned up—more or less—and Carter is bathed and in bed, Luca and I curl up on the couch together. I rest my head against his shoulder, and his hand settles over my belly, fingers brushing back and forth in lazy sweeps.

"Today was chaos at the store," I say, exhaling slowly. "A birthday party and two back-to-back art classes. One kid tried to eat glitter."

"Just one?" he asks dryly. "You're slipping."

"I'll try harder tomorrow," I promise with a grin. "But I did get the rest of the Valentine's kits assembled. And the new gouache paint sets finally came in."

"You're amazing, you know that?" Luca murmurs. "I don't know how you run that place, teach kids and adults, chase Carter, and still put up with me."

"I like a challenge," I tease.

He leans in and kisses me—slow and sure, the kind of kiss that still makes my toes



curl even after five years, a baby, and a mortgage.

I sigh happily. “How was work?”

“Busy. Townes and Xavier are building our new training schedule, and Meyer wants to offer community safety workshops.”

“Look at you,” I say proudly. “Mr. Responsible Business Owner.”

“Don’t get used to it. I’m still a sucker for a stupid bet.”

“Oh, trust me, I remember.” I pat my belly. “You owe me dinner, by the way.”

“For what?”

“I said I’d finish building Carter’s toy organizer before you finished hanging the shelves in the nursery. I won.”

“Pregnancy strength is cheating,” he mutters.

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“Still counts.”

He groans and drops his head against my shoulder. “You’re never going to let me win again, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

We sit in the comfortable quiet of our living room, the fire crackling in the hearth and Carter’s sleepy little snores drifting through the baby monitor on the coffee table.

“Do you ever think about how it all started?” I ask softly. “One dumb bet in a diner.”

Luca smiles against my shoulder. “Best bet I ever lost.”

I nudge him with my elbow. “You let me win.”

“Only the first time,” he counters. “The rest? All you, baby.”

I shift so I can look at him, emotion swelling in my chest. “I love our life.”

“Me, too.” He brushes his lips against mine again, tender and full of promise. “And I can’t wait for our next adventure.”

I grin and settle into his arms, my hand over his as we cradle our next little wild card.

We still bet. We still tease. But now we do it as a team.

And I've never felt more like a winner.