



A Very Grumpy Navy SEAL (Wolf Valley: Grumps #10)

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Category: Romance

Description: I've fallen in love for the first time...with my brother's best friend.

Lula

Moving to Wolf Valley has been quite the adventure so far.

Nothing is going according to plan.

First, my housing fell through, and I had to scramble to find a new place.

Then, I got laid off from my job.

I'm trying to stay positive, but it's hard.

I have no one to turn to for help.

My brother is halfway around the world, and I have no other living family to rely on.

When I run into Koa, things suddenly seem to be looking up for me.

Koa

I'm only in Wolf Valley to help out a SEAL friend.

His sister just moved here, and he hasn't been able to get in touch with her in weeks.

So, I used some of my leave and traveled to this small town to find her.

I thought tracking Lula down would be hard, but it wasn't.

I find her right away, and that's when my problems start.

Cause Lula is my best friend's little sister.

And she's also meant to be mine.

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ONE

Lula

Well, this sucks.

I sigh as I stare at the charred remains of my rental house. The roof is caved in, and only three of the four walls are still standing. I survey the land, taking in the trampled grass and the deep gouges where the firetrucks parked when they put out the fire two weeks ago.

My dreams of relaxing on the front porch and staring out across the fields surrounding my house have gone up in smoke. Literally.

Well, I moved here looking for an adventure.

I turn and head back to my car, which is stuffed with my belongings. I was supposed to move into my new place today, but now I'll have to figure out a plan B.

After living in San Francisco my entire life, I yearned to see more of the world. I wanted to find somewhere cheaper without all the memories. Somewhere new.

I rented an apartment with my older brother, Ledger, after our parents passed, but he joined the military two years ago and had no plans to move back home. I couldn't stand to be in that apartment all by myself, so I did something about it. I took a leap—and landed in this mess.

What do I do now? I have no place to stay, no friends in town, and my only remaining family is halfway around the world. I wish Ledger were here. He would know what to do.

I sigh as I start my old car and back out of the driveway. What would Ledger do?

I know my brother better than anyone. Ledger would make a to-do list with everything that needs to be done and address each task in order of importance. He's analytical and tackles problems head-on. That trait makes him a great Navy SEAL.

I head into town, my mind going a million miles an hour as I park at the Nosh Diner and head inside.

"Hey! Table for one?" a server asks. Her name tag reads "Cameron."

I smile. "Yes, please."

"How about over here?" She points to a table in the back.

"That works," I say, walking to the table and taking a seat.

Cameron passes me a menu. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Um, coffee and a glass of water, please."

"You got it." She gives me a wide smile and heads to the kitchen.

I pull out my notepad and a pen from my purse and get to work.

Okay, what do I need to do?

I write down tasks.

Contact the landlord about a refund on the rental property.

Find a new place to live.

Organize a place to stay tonight.

Check in with work.

Take a shower.

Eat.

“Are you passing through?” Cameron asks as she sets down my drinks.

“No, I was supposed to move here, but my rental property burned down.”

Her eyes widen. “The old Miller property out on Oakland Street?”

I nod. “That’s the one.”

“I heard about that. There was a storm a few weeks ago, and it was hit by lightning. Torched the place,” she tells me.

“Yeah, I wish I’d known before I moved here.”

“Shit, yeah. Sorry, that sucks.”

“Thanks. You wouldn’t happen to know about any other rental properties around here, would you?”

“I don’t, sorry. You might be able to find a roommate, though. I can ask around if you want?”

“That would be great!” I say gratefully. “I’m Lula, by the way.”

We shake hands, and she whips out her cell phone. “What’s your number? I can text you if I hear anything. Maybe we can grab a drink sometime?”

“That would be awesome,” I say sincerely, giving her my number.

The door opens, and Cameron goes to greet the new customers, leaving me with my list and the menu. I sip my coffee as I scan the menu, choosing a burger and fries. Cameron returns to take my order, and I tackle my to-do list while I wait for my food.

I spend the next hour picking at my food and arguing with my landlord about the fire, demanding a refund for my deposit and first month’s rent.

After that, I lose myself in a rabbit hole of real estate listings, scouring every rental site I can find.

Nothing’s available. Nothing I can afford, anyway.

Ledger calls as I’m paying my bill, and I send it to voicemail, making a mental note to call him back in a bit.

We’ve been missing each other’s calls a lot lately.

It seems like I call him one day, and he calls me back a few days later when I’m busy or asleep.

Then, the cycle repeats. It can be like that between us, but we’ve never gone this long

without connecting.

It sucks. I miss him. He's the only family I have left, and we live thousands of miles apart. Half of the time, we're not even on the same continent or in the same time zone. It's been almost a year since we've seen each other in person. I hate it.

I check my emails as I wait for Cameron to return with my card, and my stomach drops when I see the message from my work. The one with the subject line: "Layoffs."

"Shit. Can today get any worse?" I mutter, my heart racing as I click on the message and start to read.

We regret to inform you that you've been laid off.

Tears well in my eyes. What a fucking day. I blink them away quickly when Cameron returns.

"Here you are," she says, passing me my card. "I'll talk to you soon, okay? Let me know if you want to grab that drink."

"I will," I promise as I gather my things to leave.

Fuck, now what am I going to do? I need a job. I need money.

I'm starting to panic as I walk to the exit. I'm not paying attention, so I don't see the man walking in as I head out, and I run right into him.

"Oomph!" I grunt, my nose bouncing off a hard chest.

Strong hands grab my elbows as I stumble, and I shiver in the solid hold.

“Easy, bunny,” a deep voice says.

My head snaps up, and my mouth drops open as I stare at the man holding me. Holy crap, he’s gorgeous. Strong jawline, thick black hair falling over his forehead, and piercing green eyes that pin me in place. His grip on me tightens, and his eyes dart to my mouth as I lick my suddenly dry lips.

For the first time today, I think my luck is starting to turn.

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TWO

Koa

Bunny? Where the hell did that come from? I think as I hold the curvy bombshell against me. The curvy bombshell who just so happens to be my best friend's little sister.

I recognize her from the picture that Ledger sent me, and I steel myself. I release her quickly and step back, putting distance between us before I do something stupid like drag her against me and kiss her senseless.

Shit, what the hell is happening to me? Get it together!

I'm only in this little town as a favor to my best friend, Ledger.

His sister is moving here, and he's worried about her.

He hasn't been able to get in contact with her in a few weeks.

Since he's still deployed and I'm headed stateside, I decided to do him a favor and use some of my leave to check on her for him.

I thought it would be hard to find her, but apparently not. The second I get to town, she runs right into me.

I drink her in, taking in her curves and the way her shirt strains over her full tits.

SHE'S LEDGER'S LITTLE SISTER!

I clear my throat and glance behind her at the diner.

“Sorry,” she says, sidestepping me.

I step in front of her before I even think about what I'm doing. It's instinctual. I need to be close to this girl.

“I'm Koa,” I grunt, extending my hand.

“Uh, Lula,” she says, slipping her hand into mine.

We shake, but I hold on when she starts to pull away. “Ledger is worried about you.”

She blinks in surprise. “You know my brother?”

“Yeah, he's my best friend.”

“Koa?” she asks as my name clicks in her head. “He's talked about you.”

“He talks about you all the time.”

She smiles softly. I swallow hard. My fingers brush the back of her hand, and she inhales sharply.

Can she feel this attraction between us, too?

No, not attraction. This is way more than that. This is a certainty in my bones that I've found my other half and that we're meant to be.

I've gone my whole life not even glancing at a girl. I've always been focused on other things, but now I've met Lula, I can't look away. She has my full attention. She has my heart.

"What are you doing in Wolf Valley?"

I clear my throat. "I came to check on you. Ledger said he hasn't been able to get hold of you in a while, and he was getting anxious."

She looks upset for a moment. I want to tug her into my arms and comfort her, but she steps back.

"I've tried to call him, too, but it's always a bad time. We've been playing phone tag for a few weeks," she explains. "He didn't have to send you here to check on me."

"I don't mind. I had some leave after my deployment."

She nods, looking distracted, and I use the moment to wrap my arm around her waist and lead her back into the diner.

"Hey! For two?" the server asks, smiling curiously at Lula.

Probably because she was just leaving, I think.

"Yes, please."

We're led over to a booth. I slide in across from Lula and pass her a menu.

"I should call him," she mumbles.

I nod, scanning my menu.

She pulls out her phone and curses.

“What’s wrong?” I ask in alarm.

“My battery died. I’ve been on it all day between driving up here and trying to find a place to stay.”

“You don’t have a place to stay?”

“No. I mean, I did, but there was a fire, and now I’m screwed.”

I hate that she looks so defeated. I want to hold her and make all her problems disappear.

Before I can offer to do that, my phone rings. I pull it out to see Ledger’s name on the screen.

“Speak of the devil,” I mutter.

“What?” Lula asks.

“It’s your brother. Hold on,” I tell her as I answer the call. “Hey,” I greet Ledger.

“Hey? Did you make it to Wolf Valley all right?”

“Yeah, just got here.”

“Did you get the picture I sent you of Lula?”

“Yep, and I found her.”

“She’s okay?”

“Seems to be. Hold on, I’ll pass the phone to her.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you.”

I pass my phone to Lula, and she smiles as she talks to her brother. I listen to her side of the conversation.

“No, I’m fine...Work is all right...No, I was laid off...This morning...I know, but I’ll find something else...Yeah, and somewhere else to live, too...It will be okay. I promise...Yeah...How are you?...Promise?... Okay, yeah, I’ll talk to you soon...I will. I promise...Okay, bye.”

She hangs up and passes my phone to me. “He says thanks, and he’ll talk to you later.”

I nod and tuck my phone back into my pocket. “What now?”

She takes a deep breath. “I’ll check into the hotel in town. I can charge my phone and get some rest. Hopefully, tomorrow will be better.”

I nod, and the server returns to take my order.

“Can I get a BLT to go, please?”

“Coming right up,” she says.

I turn back to Lula, taking her in. She looks tired and a little defeated, but she’s strong. She’s a fighter, and I know that none of this will keep her down.

“What can I do to help?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

I want to argue, but the server comes back with my takeout and the check. I pay in a hurry and stand to offer Lula my hand.

“Come on. I’m headed to the hotel, too.”

We leave in silence, and I walk her to her car. I wait until she’s safely inside before jogging across the parking lot to my car and climbing behind the wheel. I pull out of the lot behind my girl and follow her to the hotel.

We park next to each other, and I take a deep breath as we both climb out.

Every fiber of my being wants to stay close to Lula.

I want to touch her, to map out every inch of her body, to mold her curves in my palms. I want to learn all about her.

What does she want out of life? What are her hopes, dreams, and goals? What can I do to make her happy?

How can I convince her brother that no one will ever treat her better or love her more than I will?

This vacation isn’t going how I thought it would. I thought that finding Lula would be the hardest part of this trip. Turns out my biggest problem might be keeping my dream girl at arm’s length.

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THREE

Lula

We head into the hotel in silence, and I try to calm my racing heart as we step up to the counter.

“Two rooms,” Koa orders.

“I can pay for my own room,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “I’ve got it.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I argue.”

“I want to.”

I sigh, deciding to let him win this one.

He turns back to the clerk. “Two rooms, please.”

I stand next to him and look around the old hotel as he gets us checked in. It’s supposed to be a historic site, and it seems like it. The place is all rocks and wood. It has charm, but it’s not really my style. I doubt that it’s Koa’s, either. Too bad for us, it’s the only option around here.

“Thanks,” I tell Koa as he grabs our keys and hands one to me. “I’ve never stayed

somewhere that had a real key before. Usually, it's a key card."

"Me neither."

I tuck the key in my pocket, and we head back out to our cars.

"I've got it," Koa says, reaching past me to grab my suitcase.

"I can get it."

"You don't need to. I'm here to do it."

"How gentlemanly of you," I say drily.

He grunts, missing my sarcasm.

I trail after Koa inside and up the stairs to the second floor. Our rooms are right next to each other, and he sets my suitcase down in front of my door.

"Thanks again," I tell him.

"What's the plan now?" he asks.

I look away from him. "Uh...just relax. Take a shower. That sort of thing."

"No, I mean with your housing and stuff."

"Oh. I don't know. I mean, I don't have a home, a job, or a plan. I've looked for rentals in the area, but there aren't many. I could buy a place, but I need to find a new job first."

“Why?”

“Because I got laid off this morning, and I doubt I would qualify for a loan without a source of income.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s been quite the day,” I joke.

He gives me a sympathetic smile. “I can help you look.”

I smile. “You don’t have to do that. You should enjoy your leave.”

“I don’t mind. I want to help you,” he assures me.

My heart kicks at his words, but the logical part of my mind tells me that he’s only offering because I’m Ledger’s little sister.

He doesn’t see me the way I want him to.

A handsome guy like him never will. I’m sure he’s got women throwing themselves at him—hot women, maybe even models.

There’s no way he would be into a plus-size girl like me.

I tear up, and I know I need to get into my hotel room before I cry and make things between us even more awkward.

“Thanks,” I choke out, fumbling with the key.

“Hey,” he says sharply.

A second later, his arms are wrapped around me.

Well...they're sort of wrapped around me. The embrace isn't sexy at all.

It's not even all that comforting. It's more like a headlock, and I freeze in his hold.

One arm is wrapped around my waist, holding me against him.

The other is wrapped across my collarbone, slightly pressing on my throat.

I swallow hard, shifting from foot to foot.

Koa pats my shoulder awkwardly and clears his throat. "It will be okay."

I nod. "Uh-huh."

Even though I know he's not holding me romantically, I still react. My nipples harden into stiff points, and my body heats as my back presses against him. I try to get my reaction to him under control, but it's impossible while he's so close.

We stand like that for a moment before I turn my head to look up at him. "I'm okay now."

He grunts, giving me an awkward pat before releasing me. "Right, well, I'll see you in the morning. I'm next door if you need anything."

"Thanks."

I shove the key into the lock and give him a smile before entering my room. The door clicks shut behind me, and I take a deep breath, leaning against the door. My heart is still racing, and all I can think about is Koa and how it felt to be in his arms.

I've never wanted anyone before him. I focused on school when I was younger.

Then, my parents died, and I was grieving.

Boys weren't even on my radar. I thought maybe I wasn't interested in guys or sex, but one look at Koa, and I realized I was wrong.

I didn't want other guys because I hadn't met him— my brother's best friend. And a Navy SEAL.

Fuck my luck.

Even if he wasn't my brother's best friend, I can't be with a Navy SEAL. I just can't. I know what my life would be like if I were. I've had a front-row seat since Ledger joined the military. I'd always be alone and worried. I can't live like that.

I need to distract myself, I think, as I unzip my suitcase and grab my phone charger.

I plug my phone in and get settled in my room. The place is outdated but clean and spacious. I take a shower as my phone charges and tuck myself into bed to resume my search for a new job and apartment in town.

Except every few minutes, my thoughts drift to the man next door.

What is he doing right now? I think as I put my phone away and drift off to sleep.

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FOUR

Koa

I didn't sleep a wink last night. My mind wouldn't shut off.

I spent a few hours searching for a suitable house for Lula.

It needed to be safe and close to town so she'd have decent internet and access to help if needed.

There weren't many rental properties in Wolf Valley or the surrounding areas, so I moved on to houses that were for sale.

I have some money saved, and I wouldn't mind being Lula's landlord.

That way, I would still have a reason to talk to her and could ensure she was safe.

I finally narrowed it down to three houses and sent a few emails to the agents inquiring about seeing them.

After that was done, I tried to get some sleep, but it was no use.

I was too wound up, too horny and wired to fall asleep.

For the first time in a while, I'm not sure what to do. Being in the military is pretty predictable. We wake up, go to work, receive our orders, complete them, go home,

sleep, and start all over again the next day. Here, though, I'm at a loss.

I want Lula. Badly. I haven't even known her for twenty-four hours, and I'm already head over heels in love with her.

But she's Ledger's little sister. Ledger is my best friend, and I would never do anything to hurt him or betray his trust. He sent me out here to look for his sister, not wife her up.

But fuck if I don't want to.

With a groan, I roll out of bed and head into the bathroom to take a shower to wake me up.

I stand under the hot spray, trying to figure out my next move.

I know I need to talk to Ledger, but I don't know how to bring it up to him.

How do you tell your best friend you're in love with his little sister?

I shut off the water and grab a towel to dry myself. My phone is ringing when I walk out of the bathroom, and I hurry to answer it.

"Hello?" I grunt.

"Hey," Ledger greets.

I sink onto the bed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm about to head out, but I wanted to check in with you to see how Lula is really doing. She said she was fine yesterday, but she seemed off."

“Yeah, she had a rough day yesterday.”

“How bad?”

“Well, she lost her rental house and her job, so pretty bad.”

“Shit,” he hisses. “I knew she shouldn’t have left San Francisco.”

“She would have lost her job regardless, and I’m pretty sure that rent in San Francisco is a lot more than here, so she might be better off staying in Wolf Valley,” I point out.

“But she could find a job more easily in San Francisco,” he argues

I know Ledger is worried about his sister, and I want to put him at ease. He doesn’t need to be worried about Lula while he’s in a war zone. I need to put him at ease so he has his head on straight before he goes out on patrol.

“I’m in town for a few more days. I’ll get her sorted out before I head back to base,” I promise.

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“I’ve got to head out. I’ll check in once I’m back at base.”

“Okay. Stay safe.”

“Thanks.”

He hangs up, and I drag my hands down my face. I know I need to tell him about my feelings for his sister, but I need to choose the right time. I don't want to upset or distract him before he heads out on a mission.

It's still early, and I know Lula must still be asleep, so I dress and head out to grab us some coffee and breakfast.

I pull on my shoes, grab my phone, hotel key, and wallet, and head out the door. As I lock the door behind me, Lula emerges from her room.

"Morning," she greets me with a pretty smile.

"Morning. You're up early," I comment as I fall into step beside her.

She laughs self-consciously. "Yeah, I was hungry."

"Me, too. What are you hungry for?"

"There's a bakery a block west of here. I was going to check it out."

"I'll join you."

We head downstairs, and I take her hand and lead her toward my car.

"We can walk. It's so nice out," she says, smiling at the sunrise.

I nod, and we head down the sidewalk toward the bakery.

"How did you sleep?" Lula asks after a minute.

"Um, good," I lie.

“Yeah?”

I nod, staring straight ahead. “How about you?”

“Pretty good. I spent a few hours looking for jobs and places to live.”

“Any luck?”

“Not really. I put my resume in at a few places. Hopefully, I’ll hear back soon.”

“Fingers crossed,” I say as we stop outside the bakery.

It smells delicious, and Lula’s stomach growls as I hold the door open for her.

“Welcome!” a redheaded woman calls as she loads pastries into the display case.

Lula smiles. “Morning.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to order,” the woman says.

Lula bends to look at all the options in the case. I do my best to keep my eyes on the pastries and not on Lula’s ass.

“What looks good to you?” she asks.

You.

“Um, I think I’ll do the cinnamon roll.”

“Okay. Can we get a cinnamon roll, a cheese Danish, and a blueberry muffin, please?” Lula orders. She turns to me. “Did you want a coffee?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, and two coffees.”

“Coming right up!” the redhead says.

I shake my head as Lula pulls out her wallet. “I’ve got it.”

“You paid for the hotel rooms. I can buy us breakfast.”

“Not a chance, bunny.”

“Bunny?” She raises an eyebrow, and a smile tugs at the corner of her lips.

I shrug. “It seems fitting.”

Our breakfast is boxed up, and when Lula steps up to pay, I reach out, grab the back of her shirt, and tug her away from the register.

“No,” I tell her sternly.

“It would be good if you weren’t always pushing or pulling me when you’re trying to do something sweet,” she points out.

I grunt, and she rolls her eyes. I hide my smile as I pay for our breakfast and pass Lula’s pastries to her. We each grab a coffee and wave goodbye as we exit the bakery.

“Where now?” I ask, sipping my coffee.

“How about we eat over there?” She points to a small park across the street.

“Sure.”

I follow her to a picnic bench and sit across from her. We both dig into our food and Lula moans as she bites into her Danish. My cock hardens, and I shift on the bench.

“You have to try this,” she says, shoving the pastry in front of my face.

I take a bite and swallow a groan when the cheese melts on my tongue. “That’s damn good,”

“What was the best breakfast that you’ve ever had?” she asks after another bite of her Danish.

“There’s this little place in Virginia, right outside the base. They have the best breakfast. I’ve probably been there a hundred times, ordered everything off the menu, and it’s all delicious.”

“Are you a savory or sweet person?”

“Usually savory, but after this, I might be swayed to the sweet side.”

She laughs and finishes her Danish.

“What about you?” I ask.

“There was this crepe place in San Francisco. We went every Sunday morning, and I had the lemon and sugar crepes with a scoop of ice cream,” she says with a nostalgic smile.

“I’ll have to check it out sometime.”

Her smile dims. “You can’t. They closed a few months ago.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“So why did you decide to move here?”

“I woke up one morning and realized there was nothing left for me in San Francisco. I was alone, working a boring job, in a city that didn’t feel like mine anymore. I wanted a change. I wanted to make something that was mine. Find somewhere that felt like home.”

“And that’s Wolf Valley?”

“I think it could be.”

Lula is so optimistic and resilient. She’s lost her parents and been left behind by her brother, but she’s still going strong. The world and all its ugly parts haven’t corrupted her. I want to keep it that way.

“What about you? Where’s home?” Lula asks.

“Right now, Virginia.”

“And before that?”

“Chicago.”

“Is that where your family is from? Are they still there?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I was an orphan. I grew up in the foster system. There’s nothing left for me in Chicago.”

“I’m sorry, Koa.”

I shrug. “I turned out all right.”

“Yeah,” she says softly.

She digs into her muffin, and we eat in silence for a minute before she asks, “Did you always want to be a Navy SEAL?”

“Yeah. I saw an ad on TV when I was seven, and I was set on it from then on.”

“And is it everything you thought it would be?”

“Pretty much. I can’t imagine doing anything else. I’m good at it. I’ve found a family with my team members.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“What about you? What’s your dream career?”

“Honestly?” She leans across the table.

“Yes.”

“I don’t really care about a job. I want to be a mom,” she whispers.

“Oh, fuck,” I curse under my breath.

My cock presses against the zipper of my jeans, and it’s not going down anytime soon. Not with the image of Lula pregnant with my kid flashing in my head.

Lula pregnant, naked, beneath me...

She frowns. “What?”

I clear my throat. “I think you’d make a great mom.”

She beams. “Thanks. But first, I need to find a man.”

Jesus, I need to talk to Ledger. Soon. I need to tell him how I feel about his sister because I’m not about to let another man knock up my girl.

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FIVE

Lula

What a long day.

I've been all over town looking for any places that are hiring. Koa has trailed after me from store to store, my trusty shadow. It's been good having his company, but I feel bad that he's spending his vacation like this.

The bell above the hardware store door jingles as I step inside, and I offer the older man behind the counter my most hopeful smile.

"Hi! I was wondering if you're hiring?"

He squints at me like I've asked him to donate a kidney. "You know how to fix a leaky pipe?"

"Um... I could learn?" I offer weakly.

He chuckles, not unkindly, and shakes his head. "No openings right now, sweetheart. Sorry."

"No worries. Thanks anyway." I back out of the store with Koa on my heels.

"That's six now," I mutter as we continue along the sidewalk. My feet are aching from the cheap flats I threw on this morning, and the sun is beating down on my head

like it has a personal vendetta.

“Seven, if you count that weird vape shop.”

“You mean the one you wouldn’t let me go into?”

“You can’t work in a place like that,” he says with a dark scowl.

I roll my eyes. “If they pay me, then yeah, I can work in a place like that.”

“No,” he says sternly.

We keep walking, hitting another cafe, a bookstore, and a gift shop that sells handmade soaps and crystals. No one is hiring. Or at least not hiring someone like me—a recently laid-off data analyst with no retail experience and no references in town.

“Hey, what do you say we grab lunch? My treat,” Koa suggests as we near the burger place Cameron told me about yesterday.

My stomach answers before I can. Loudly. My face heats with a blush.

He smirks. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

The diner-style burger joint is cool and shaded, with red booths and checkered floors. We grab a booth near the back, and I slide into the seat with a grateful groan.

“Hey, there. What can I get you?” asks a frenzied server.

I’m not surprised she’s frazzled—this place is packed.

I grab the menu and quickly scan it. “Double cheeseburger, fries, and a milkshake,” I order without shame.

"Same," Koa says.

While we wait for our food, I try not to stare at him, but it’s hard not to.

His broad shoulders stretch the fabric of his black T-shirt, and his forearms—good Lord, his forearms—are distractingly veiny and muscular.

He’s relaxed now, lounging against the booth like he’s got all the time in the world. I envy that.

“Are you always this helpful?” I ask casually.

He shrugs. “Only when my best friend’s little sister is in crisis.”

My stomach flips at the way he says it. No teasing. No pity, either. Just a steady, calm energy that makes me feel safe even though everything else in my life is chaos.

Hope sparks, but then I replay his words.

Best friend’s little sister. That’s all I am to him. I need to remember that, I remind myself.

Our food arrives, and for a few minutes, the only sounds are happy chewing and the occasional moan of appreciation.

"This is so good," I groan, licking melted cheese off my thumb. “If I weren’t broke, I’d eat here every day.”

“Maybe they’re hiring,” Koa suggests, eyes locked on my mouth.

“Oh! That’s a good idea. I should ask.”

I look around for our server and spot her heading out the back. I turn back to my food, noticing that Koa’s gaze is still on me. I swallow hard when I notice the heat in his eyes as they drop to my mouth. My cheeks warm, and I quickly reach for my milkshake to cool down.

We eat in silence for a bit, and I stare out the window, taking in the charming town and the people walking past.

I try to look professional as our server returns, giving her my best smile. “Hey, you guys wouldn’t happen to be hiring, would you?”

She gives me a sympathetic smile. “No. Sorry, sweetheart.”

My hopes crash and burn. “Thanks anyway.”

Once we finish eating, Koa insists on paying, and I don’t argue with him this time. I’m too full and too emotionally wrung out from another day of failed job hunting to care.

We walk back to the hotel in silence. It’s a comfortable quiet, the kind that feels like a shared secret.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I pause in front of my door. “Do you, um, want to come in? Just hang out for a bit? I could use the company.”

His whole body goes still, and he hesitates. I know he’s about to reject me.

Slowly, he shakes his head. "I shouldn't."

The words hit like a slap. I step back, embarrassed. "Oh. Right. Of course. I mean, why would you want to hang out with me?"

"Lula," he says quickly, stepping toward me. "That's not what I meant."

I fumble for my key. "Right. Okay."

He huffs out a frustrated breath. "It's not what I meant, Lula."

Something inside me snaps. Maybe it's exhaustion, or maybe I'm sick of being rejected, but I turn on him and snap, "Then what did you mean?"

He exhales like the words are heavy. "I want to. Fuck, you have no idea how much I want to, but you're Ledger's little sister."

I fold my arms over my ample chest and glare at him. "And? I'm not property. He doesn't own me. I'm my own person, Koa. I can do whatever I want."

"I know that, but you're important to him. And he's important to me."

"And I'm not important. Not to you," I fill in.

His eyes flash with frustration. "Of course you are. That's the damn problem."

I turn away, my heart pounding. "You know what? Just... forget it."

"Lula—"

But I'm already unlocking my door. I step inside and shut it, leaning against the wood

as the tears I've been holding back all day spill onto my cheeks.

Why does this always happen? Just when I think something good might be starting, the universe yanks it away like a cruel joke.

I take a deep breath, toe off my shoes, and head to the bathroom. I need to wash today off. Then I'll feel better.

The hot shower scalds away some of the ache in my chest, but not all of it. I stand under the spray for way too long, letting the water wash away my tears. By the time I turn off the shower, I'm wrung out and emotionally raw.

I wrap myself in a towel, dry my hair, curl up on the bed, and plug in my phone. Scrolling through my contacts, I land on Ledger's name. I need to talk to him and find out what exactly he told Koa.

I press call.

He picks up on the second ring, and I know he must be eating. I can hear people shouting in the background and the clink of silverware on plates.

"Lula? Everything okay?" He asks, raising his voice to be heard over the noise.

"Did you tell all your friends to stay away from me? Like, warn them not to date me or something?"

"What? No. Why would I do that?" he asks, sounding baffled. "What happened?"

"I just...I've had a bad day."

"With Koa?"

“What? No.”

“Why are you asking about my friends then?”

I sigh. “It’s nothing. Never mind.”

“Lula...”

"I don't know. Maybe you give off big brother warnings or something. It doesn't matter. It's fine."

"Did Koa do something?" he asks again.

I groan. “No! Forget I said anything.”

“Lula. Talk to me.”

I shake my head even though he can't see me. “I'm just having a rough day. Job hunting sucks. No one's hiring. I'm tired and stressed, and I feel like I made a huge mistake moving here.”

He's quiet for a minute, and I check the call to make sure we haven't been disconnected.

“You didn't make a mistake, Lula. You wanted a fresh start, remember? And things might be tough now, but they won't always be.”

His words calm me a little. That's the thing about Ledger—he can annoy the crap out of me, but he's always known how to bring me back to center.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

“Anytime, Lu. You need anything, you call me. Okay?”

“I will,” I promise. “Now, tell me what you’ve been up to.”

He laughs, and we talk a little more. He tells me about his current deployment and what he’s been doing. He asks me more about Wolf Valley, and I tell him about Cameron, the diner, and the bakery. I don’t mention Koa again.

After we hang up, I sit in the quiet for a long time.

I try not to think about Koa or the way he looked at me. Like he wanted me. Like he needed me. Like he felt this thing between us.

And I try even harder not to think about how much I want him, too.

But I do.

God help me, I do.

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SIX

Koa

The second my phone lights up with Ledger's name, I know that this is the conversation I've been dreading.

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest, and I feel sick to my stomach as I pick up my phone. I swipe to answer and press the phone to my ear, bracing myself.

"Hey," I say, trying to keep my voice casual.

"Don't 'hey' me. What the hell is going on?" Ledger barks.

I wince. He sounds pissed.

So much for easing into it.

"Lula called me just now," he continues, his tone sharp. "Pissed off, emotional, and dodging my questions like I was the enemy. You know what she asked me?"

"I have an idea?—"

"She asked me if I warned off all of my friends from dating her!" he continues over me. "What did you do?"

I blow out a breath and scrub a hand over my face. "It's not what you think."

“So, you didn’t upset her?”

“No, I did... I just didn’t mean to.”

Ledger exhales roughly, and I can practically hear him pacing.

“What did you mean to do?” he growls.

I swallow hard. “I don’t know.”

I sink onto the edge of my bed and hang my head in my hands.

“Talk to me, man. Tell me what happened.”

I lie back on the bed, staring at the ceiling like the answers might be up there.

“I want her,” I admit finally, and it’s the hardest three words that I’ve ever had to say.

I wait for him to say something, but he’s silent.

My voice is low, rough with the truth as I say, “Your sister. Lula. I want her in a way I’ve never wanted anyone. But I haven’t touched her. Not like that. Not beyond a hug. I wouldn’t disrespect you like that. Not ever.”

There’s a long pause on the line.

Then Ledger sighs. “Koa.”

“I know,” I say quickly. “She’s your little sister. I should’ve walked away the second I saw her. But I can’t. It’s like... she’s already under my skin.”

“Koa—”

“Fuck, man, you know me. You’re my brother. I would never do anything to hurt you or our friendship. I didn’t touch her. I swear.”

“I know, Koa! Just shut up for a second,” he shouts. “Jesus, you two,” he grumbles.

I swallow down what I was about to say.

The phone crackles as Ledger heads inside and out of the wind. “I trust you. I know how you are. You’ve never paid any attention to women. So, if you’re into Lula, I know it means something. Besides, you wouldn’t have answered the phone if you were just screwing around with her.”

I close my eyes. “I’m not screwing around at all. She means something to me.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

I blink. “What?”

“You just told me you care about her and she’s already important to you. So why the hell aren’t you making a move?”

I sit up straighter and frown. “Because she’s your sister.”

“Koa,” Ledger says, voice softer now, “she’s not a kid. She’s an adult. A smart one. She can make her own decisions. I’m not her gatekeeper. I’m not going to beat the shit out of you. Well, not unless you break her heart. Then I have to. You understand.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“Good. Then fix this thing with Lula. The next time she calls me, I expect her to be happy and not close to tears.”

I nod even though he can't see me. “She will be.”

“And we will never discuss sex.”

“Dude, no.”

“Good. Go get your girl.”

I feel such a sense of relief at how this conversation went. “Thanks, Ledger.”

“I didn't do anything. I've got to go, but I'll talk to you later.”

The call ends, and I sit on the edge of the bed for a full minute, just breathing.

I have Ledger's blessing. Nothing is standing in my way now. I have no excuse not to go after her.

I grab my keys and head out, determined to pick up something she'll love.

The local pizza place is still open, and I remember her moaning over a cheeseburger like it was a five-star meal.

She's a comfort food kind of girl. I order a large pizza with pepperoni, grab a bottle of root beer, and return to the hotel.

My stomach twists with nerves as I stop outside her door. I've been practicing what I'll say for the last half an hour. I take a deep breath and knock on her door.

I wait. No answer.

I try again.

Still nothing.

I shift from foot to foot, my heart racing with something besides nerves. No, this is...worry.

“Lula? It’s me.”

Nothing.

I pull out my phone and call her.

Straight to voicemail.

Something is wrong.

I call her name again, louder. Still no answer. I press my ear to the door, but it’s silent on the other side.

Did she leave her room? What if she fell or something happened? What if she’s hurt?

Fuck it.

I take two steps back and ram my shoulder into the door. The wood cracks and the door bursts open.

Steam spills out from the bathroom, warm and heavy, and hits me in the face.

“Lula?”

The bathroom door swings open, and she barrels out, wrapped in a towel, dripping wet, blonde hair plastered to her skin. A few soap bubbles slide down her arms, and I swallow hard as my body reacts to the sight of her.

“Fuck me,” I mumble.

I’m ready to throw her down on the nearest surface and make her mine, but one look at her face, and I can see that we’re not on the same page.

“What the hell?” she yells, eyes wide as she takes in the busted door and me standing there like some lunatic with a pizza box in hand.

“I thought something happened,” I say, turning my back quickly so no one in the hall sees her. I force the door closed behind me, chest heaving.

“I was taking a shower!”

“You didn’t answer the door. Or your phone. I got worried.”

She stares at me, furious and flushed. Water drips down her chest, sliding along her curves. I groan as I try not to look, but fuck, it’s impossible.

She’s glorious. All tan skin and full curves, her towel barely hanging on. I can still see bubbles clinging to her collarbone.

“Turn around,” she snaps.

I obey instantly. I hear her rummage for clothes, muttering curses the whole time.

“Did you have to break down the door?” she huffs.

“I thought you were hurt.”

“Well, I wasn’t. Just... wet.”

I groan at her word choice.

When she finally says, “Okay,” I turn back around. She’s in an oversized T-shirt and shorts now, her cheeks still pink, but her eyes calmer.

“What do you want, Koa?”

I step toward her, setting the pizza box on the desk. “I talked to Ledger.”

Her eyes widen.

“He called me a little bit ago. Told me you called him.”

“I didn’t rat you out or anything,” she says quickly.

“I know. I’m not upset. You just forced me to do what I was putting off.”

“Which was what?”

“Tell him the truth.”

Hope shimmers in her eyes. “What truth?”

I swallow hard, vowing never to hurt her. Never again. “That I want you. That I can’t stop thinking about you. That I haven’t touched you or asked you out because I

respect him. And you.”

She swallows hard, hugging her arms around herself. “And what did he say?”

“He said that he trusts me. That he’s not your boss or bodyguard. And that if I care about you, I should do something about it.”

She stares at me like she’s not sure she heard me right.

“So...” I take a step closer. “Unless you tell me to leave, I’m not going to keep pretending like I don’t want you. Because I do. So much it hurts.”

“Koa,” she whispers.

I move in front of her. “Tell me to stop, and I will. But if you feel even half of what I do, let me show you. Let me love you.”

She doesn’t speak. She leans up on her toes and wraps her arms around me.

And I know.

I’m hers.

And she’s mine.

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SEVEN

Lula

I stare at Koa, still dripping from my shower, towel clutched tightly around my body, and my heart thundering in my chest like it's trying to escape. He burst into my room like a goddamn action movie hero with a pizza box and a confession that cracked something wide open inside me.

He talked to Ledger. And more importantly, he chose me. He wants me.

My throat is dry. My skin prickles with goosebumps, but it has nothing to do with the cool air from the AC and everything to do with the man currently devouring me with his eyes.

I want him. I wish I knew what I was doing or how to seduce him. As I study Koa, though, I realize that maybe I do know how to seduce him.

He looks like a caged animal that's dying to break free. I want him to break free. I want him to pounce on me, to devour me.

Should I just drop the towel?

Koa inches closer to me, and I lick my lips. He drops the pizza box on the dresser. His eyes never leave mine, and the tension between us ratchets tighter and tighter until it finally snaps.

He moves fast.

One second, he's three feet away, and the next, he's pushing me against the wall and kissing me like he's drowning and I'm his air.

I gasp, and he uses that moment to deepen the kiss, one hand cupping the side of my face while the other slides around my waist, pulling me close.

My towel starts to slip, but I don't bother fixing it.

Suddenly, I don't care that I'm wrapped in nothing but cotton and steam.

I don't care about modesty, pacing, or even breathing.

I just want this. I just want him.

"Koa," I whisper against his lips.

He pulls back to meet my eyes. "If you tell me to stop, I will," he says, his voice raw and reverent. "But I don't want to. I've wanted this since the second you ran into me at the diner."

"I'm not going to tell you to stop," I whisper.

That's all he needs to hear.

He kisses me again, slower this time, but with just as much hunger. I can taste the need on his lips, and I moan, wanting more.

I reach up, threading my fingers into his damp hair as he pulls me flush against his chest. I feel every inch of him, every hard line and tense muscle, and I'm not self-

conscious or hesitant like I thought I would be. I feel wanted. Desired. Revered.

Koa kisses down the side of my jaw, his mouth hot against my skin. “God, you’re perfect,” he groans, his hand sliding up the curve of my waist and pausing beneath the edge of my towel. “So fucking perfect.”

I whimper, arching into him as he lifts me effortlessly, cradling me against his chest like I weigh nothing.

“Bed,” I whisper.

He carries me across the room like I weigh nothing, like he was built to carry me, and lowers me gently onto the sheets. My towel loosens and falls away. For the briefest second, insecurity claws at me.

Koa pauses. Not because he’s hesitating but because he’s staring at me like I’ve knocked the breath out of his lungs.

“Jesus, Lula,” he murmurs, voice hoarse. “You’re... you’re everything.”

I lie back, exposed and trembling, not from fear but from want. From trust. From the overwhelming knowledge that I’m safe and wanted.

I smile. “Your turn.”

He nods and pulls his shirt over his head. I drink him in as he tosses his shirt aside and unbuttons his pants. I lick my lips, squirming as he pushes his jeans down. His eyes lock with mine, and my whole body bursts into flames from the heat in their green depths.

“Lula,” he rasps.

His boxers drop a second later, and then he's moving over me, surrounding me, his body covering mine in the best way.

"I need you," I pant.

"You have me."

His lips claim mine, and I melt against him.

His mouth finds my neck, my collarbone and the swell of my breasts. His hands are everywhere, exploring, worshipping, mapping me like I'm a country he's just discovered and plans to make his home.

His palms cup my breasts, and I arch into his hold. His thumbs brush my nipples, sending shockwaves throughout my entire body.

"Fucking hell," he growls.

I suck in a sharp breath. "What?"

"Your body... You... You're so fucking perfect, Lula. So goddamn hot."

His praise turns into a molten pool of lava on the bed, and I rock against him.

"Koa," I beg.

"You deserve so much more than me. You deserve the best. You deserve to be worshipped," he murmurs against my skin.

"Then worship me," I tell him.

His eyes flare as they lock with mine.

Then he's on me, all over me.

His hands mold my boobs, and his lips wrap around one of my nipples. He sucks the stiff peak into his mouth, and I cry out at the sensations of his tongue rolling over my flesh, of his hot mouth and hands on my skin.

"More," I plead.

He groans against my skin, moving lower, his tongue licking a path down my stomach.

"Koa," I breathe as he trails kisses down my stomach, pausing at my hip like he's trying to savor every inch.

"Say it again," he whispers.

"Koa."

He groans like the sound of his name on my lips is some kind of drug.

"Koa, please!" I cry, the ache inside me so intense that I think I might burst if I don't find release soon.

With a growl, he pushes my legs further apart and buries his face in my pussy.

"Oh!" I shout, my back arching off the bed when he sucks my clit into his mouth.

His hands pin my thighs to the bed, holding me in place as he devours me.

His tongue licks down to my opening, swirls around my snug hole, and licks back up to my clit.

He repeats the pattern over and over. With each pass, my body tightens.

My legs shake, and I grip the sheets as his tongue flicks over my clit.

The movement sends me flying, and I scream his name as I burst apart beneath him.

“KOA!”

He growls against my drenched cunt as I cry his name again when another baby orgasm rolls through me.

He looks up at me, his black hair falling over his forehead slightly. His lips and chin glisten with my juices. He’s so hot like that. He looks like a warrior about to claim his woman.

I watch as he licks his lips and prowls up my body. His cock bumps my core, and I gasp as it brushes my clit.

“Lula. Bunny,” Koa grits as he lines his cock up with my opening.

I cling to him as he starts to press into me slowly, inch by inch.

“Oh, God,” I choke out when he bumps up against my virginity.

He stills and scans my face. He wants to know if I need him to stop.

I grip him tighter. “Don’t stop.”

He nods, and then he's inside me. Fully.

I cry out, overwhelmed by the stretch, the fullness, the feeling of finally having him completely, truly, with no more barriers between us.

He stills, eyes searching mine. "You okay?"

I nod, my fingers digging into his shoulders. "More than okay."

He gives me a moment to adjust before moving.

Slow. Deep. Intentional. He thrusts deeper, hitting every one of my nerve endings as he moves in and out of me.

The feelings, the connection, it's everything.

Every push and pull, every groan and breathless moan builds toward something massive, something inevitable.

We move together like we were made for it. Like he was made for me.

His pace picks up, and my hips rock to meet his thrusts.

"Mine," he growls.

I hold on, letting the waves of sensation carry me higher and higher until I can't take it anymore.

"I'm—oh, God—Koa!"

"Come for me, Bunny," he growls.

My orgasm crashes through me like a tidal wave, stealing my breath and making me cry out his name like a prayer. Koa follows a moment later with a low groan and a stuttering thrust that feels like a benediction.

We collapse together in a sweaty, tangled heap, his chest pressed against mine, our hearts racing in unison.

For a long time, we don't say anything. I close my eyes, sucking in a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

A few moments later, he rolls to his side, pulling me into his arms and tucking me against his chest.

"Are you okay?" he asks, pushing my hair away from my face.

"Yeah. More than okay," I say, my eyes damp, my throat thick with emotion.

He kisses the top of my head.

I smile as I cuddle into his side. "Is it always like that?"

He shrugs. "I've never..." he trails off.

I push up onto my elbow so I can look at him. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," he says self-consciously.

"Why?"

"I just never wanted to before."

I blink. “Oh.”

“What about you? Why’d you wait?”

“Well, I had an overprotective brother when I was in high school, and then, well...like you, I just never wanted to before.”

He smiles and kisses me softly. “I’m glad that I was your first.”

“Me, too.”

“Are you hungry? The pizza is probably cold by now, but?—”

“I don’t mind.”

He crawls out of bed and grabs the pizza box. I grin as he climbs back in next to me and flips the lid of the box open.

“Yum,” I groan as I grab a slice and shove half of it in my mouth.

Koa chuckles and grabs a slice.

We eat in silence for a bit, both of us starved after all of our activities. I finish three slices before collapsing against the pillows. Koa finishes and reaches for me. I tuck myself against him and sigh happily.

Everything feels perfect in this moment. What we just shared? It wasn’t casual. It wasn’t fleeting. It was the beginning of everything.

I hope.

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EIGHT

Koa

I wake to the soft weight of Lula draped over me.

Her thigh is hooked over my hip, her arm thrown across my chest, and her cheek pressed below my collarbone. Her slow, even breaths puff against my skin, and every now and then, she makes a sleepy little sound somewhere between a sigh and a hum that shoots straight to my chest.

And my dick.

She shifts on top of me, rubbing herself against me, and I curse under my breath.

Fuck, I want her.

I'm hard as a damn rock, but I don't move. I don't want to. I want to lie here and memorize this. Her weight on me. The warmth of her skin. The faint scent of shampoo and sex still lingering on her.

It's the best morning of my life.

I slide my hand up her bare back slowly, letting my fingertips skim over her spine, committing every dip and curve to memory. She shivers and nuzzles in closer, her soft lips brushing the center of my chest. My muscles tighten, and my cock throbs where it presses between us.

You would think that after all the times that I made love to her last night, I'd be tired. But I'm not. It's like I can't get enough of Lula.

"Morning," she murmurs against my skin.

"Morning," I rasp, tightening my arm around her.

She shifts, her body rubbing against mine, and I groan low in my throat. Lula freezes, then peeks up at me with sleepy eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Oh," she says, and her lips twitch into a sly little smile. "That's...impressive."

"You've got no one to blame but yourself, Bunny," I murmur, brushing her hair out of her face.

She blinks at me, her smile growing bolder. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. You've been draped all over me for the last ten minutes, making those little sleepy noises."

Her brows lift innocently. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I roll her onto her back in one fluid motion, bracing myself on my forearms above her. She gasps, her hands flying to my shoulders.

I grin down at her. "You were practically humping me in your sleep."

"I was not!" she squeals, laughing.

I nuzzle into her neck, dragging my lips over her pulse. "Bunny," I growl, "you were. And now I've got a problem only you can fix."

Her breath catches as I roll my hips into hers, letting her feel every inch of how badly I want her.

“God,” she breathes, her legs falling open for me without hesitation. “You’re insatiable.”

“Only for you.”

I can’t resist her any longer. My hand slips to the back of her neck, and I hold her in place as my lips land on hers. I kiss her slowly, deeply, taking my time. Her body melts beneath mine, soft and eager.

I can feel how hot and wet she is for me. Every brush of her pussy against my cock drives out of my mind.

I break the kiss and make my way down Lula’s body, but she grabs me, stopping me in place.

“Are you okay?” I ask, concerned that I may have hurt her.

“Yeah, I just...was hoping that I could do something for you.”

“Something like what?” I ask in confusion.

“Like...suck your cock.”

I stare at her blankly as my brain short-circuits.

“You want to suck my dick,” I say flatly.

She blushes. “I want to try. I mean, you may not want me to do something like that. I

jus?—”

“I want you to,” I interrupt her.

“I’ve never done this before. I might not be any good at it,” she warns me.

I laugh. “Bunny, you could bite me, and I swear I would like it. But don’t bite me,” I rush to add.

She giggles, pushing on my shoulder until I roll onto my back. She throws her leg over my waist and straddles me. Her hands brace on my chest, and she takes a steadying breath. “Will you tell me what to do?”

I nod and she scoots down my body, trailing kisses as she goes. My cock leaps with every brush of her lips on my skin. I’m already on the edge before she settles between my legs and wraps her hand around my length.

“Fuck!” I grunt as her hand pumps my cock.

“It’s sensitive,” she comments.

“It’s you. It reacts to you.”

She smiles, emboldened by my words. Her fingers tighten around me and she strokes my dick a few times. Her blue eyes lock with mine, and she licks her lips. Her warm breath fans over me as she parts her lips and takes me into her mouth.

My hips buck, and I fist the sheets as her head bobs, sucking my stiff pole.

“Goddamn, Lula,” I growl as her hand jerks me off in time with her mouth.

Her tongue licks over me, trailing up the vein on the underside of my cock and swirling around the tip. Her mouth opens wider to take even more of my length, all the way to the back of her throat.

When I feel the soft pressure of her swallowing around the tip of my cock, I can't hold back any longer.

"Lula, I'm going to come," I warn her.

She moans, sucking harder. I choke out her name as I come, spilling down her throat. She swallows me down before releasing me with a pop. Her full lips are swollen and wet with saliva, and my cock jerks at the sight.

She grins, and I huff out a laugh.

I reach for her, dragging her up my body. "I need you."

"You just had me."

"I need to make you come."

"All right," she says eagerly.

I kiss my way down her body, needing to make sure she's ready for me.

"So, I was good?" she pants as I suck one of her nipples into my mouth.

"So, so good. Amazing. The best."

I knee her legs apart and pounce on her, burying my face in her wet folds and eating her like a man starved. It doesn't take long for her to come all over my face.

I prowl up her body and slam into her. It feels like coming home all over again. My pace is rough and fast. I can't slow down, can't hold back. I need to get my woman off again.

Her fingers claw at my back, her hips rising to meet every thrust. I whisper her name like a prayer, kissing her through every moan, every gasped plea, every moment of bliss.

We move together like we've done this a thousand times.

Like we'll do it a thousand more.

She comes with a cry, her body arching into mine. I follow seconds later, burying my face in her neck as I spill inside her.

I don't move right away. I lie there, still joined with her, letting the world slow down for a few precious seconds.

She's everything.

And I can't get enough.

When I finally roll off her, she immediately curls into my side, her hand resting on my chest like it belongs there.

"You okay?" I ask, brushing her damp hair back from her flushed face.

She nods, still breathing heavily. "Yeah. More than okay."

I kiss her temple, and we lie in comfortable silence for a while until her phone buzzes on the nightstand.

Lula groans and rolls over, dragging it toward her.

“Ugh. Emails.”

I chuckle, already missing her warmth. “Anything good?”

She scrolls, and her expression shifts. “Actually...yeah. I got a response to one of my applications. They want me to come in for an interview today.”

I sit up. “Seriously?”

She turns the screen to show me, and there it is.

“They want to do in-person meetings. First one’s in a couple of hours.”

“That’s amazing, Bunny.”

She beams at me, and I swear my heart swells three sizes. I lean over and kiss her again, unable to help myself.

“I should probably get dressed,” she says when we break apart.

“Mm. Not yet.”

“Koa.”

“Just a few more minutes.”

I tug her back into the bed, wrapping my arms around her. She laughs and pretends to fight me off, but her attempts are feeble. She doesn’t have a chance. Not against me.

Eventually, we manage to leave the bed. She pads to the bathroom, still gloriously naked, and I watch her with shameless appreciation.

God help me. I'm in so deep it's not even funny.

While she showers, I slip back to my room, change into my jeans, and tidy up.

By the time I return to her room, Lula is coming out of the bathroom.

She's wrapped in a towel, her hair wet, and her skin flushed from the hot water.

I nearly drag her back into bed, but she holds up a hand like she can read my mind.

"Nope. Interviews. I cannot be late."

"Fine," I grumble.

She smirks. "Later."

I lean in and press a quick kiss to her lips. "Promise?"

"Oh, yeah."

Lula spins out of my hold and rushes around the room. She's like a tornado as she digs through her suitcase for something to wear. I smile as I lounge on the bed and watch her.

"Okay, I need to brush my teeth. Then we can go."

I nod and climb off the bed. Her suitcase is still open, half of her clothes spilling out, so I fold everything and repack it. My eyes stray to the busted door. She can't stay

here. We should have moved to my room last night, but I was more than a little distracted.

I zip up her suitcase, ignoring the splintered doorframe as I carry her things to my room, and set them in the corner like they belong there.

Because they do.

And so does Lula. She's mine now—no more separate rooms.

I go back to her room to inform her that I've moved her in with me, bumping into her as she comes out of the bathroom.

"Got ya," I tease, steadying her.

Her hair is down, her makeup subtle, and she looks so damn pretty I forget how to breathe for a second.

"Ready?" she asks, grabbing her bag.

"Not even a little bit," I mutter, holding the door open for her. "Let's go."

"Are you going to tell them about the door?" Lula asks as we head down the stairs.

"Yeah, I'll do it before we leave," I say as we step into the lobby.

We stop by the front desk on the way out, and I brace myself.

"I need to report some damage," I tell the clerk.

"Oh, no. Is something wrong with your room?" she asks.

“Yeah, I broke down her door last night.”

“You—oh! Okay, um, let me get the form.”

Lula giggles, and I give her a dirty look as the clerk passes me some papers to fill out.

“You’ll be charged for the repairs,” the clerk says.

I nod. “I know.”

“What happened?” the woman whispers, leaning over the counter with a conspiratorial smile.

“Uh...I thought someone was hurt. I couldn’t get an answer at the door, and I may have...forced entry.”

Lula coughs, hiding a laugh behind her hand.

I ignore her and sign the last form. I slide them back to the clerk and reach for Lula’s hand.

The woman sighs. “We’ll send someone to assess the damage and get it fixed. Just don’t break any more doors.”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, turning toward the exit before I have to explain anything else.

We head down the block to Masterbeater’s Bakery.

“What are you going to be doing for them?” I ask as we walk.

“It’s a project manager position. Three sisters run it, and they’re looking to hire

someone to help.”

“Sounds like you’ll be busy.”

She shrugs. “I don’t mind.”

We enter the bakery, and Olive, the woman from yesterday, smiles at us.

“Back again?”

“Yeah. I’m here for an interview,” Lula says.

“And I’m here for a cinnamon roll and a cheese Danish,” I add.

Olive laughs and grabs my pastries.

“My sisters are on their way, but we can get started without them,” Olive tells Lula, leading her to a table in the back.

I take a seat up front and eat my breakfast while I watch my girl.

She’s radiant. Confident. Professional. Smart. I’ve never been so proud of anyone in my life. It’s crazy to think a girl like her is into me.

Two more women rush in a few minutes later and join Lula and Olive. They must be the other sisters. I split my time between watching Lula’s interview and scanning the street outside.

An hour later, she comes up to me with a spring in her step.

“How’d it go?”

“I think it went well,” she says, grinning. “They seem friendly, and the job sounds perfect for me. I could do a lot of it from home. I told them about my background, and they all seemed interested.”

“Of course they were,” I say, opening the door for her. “You’re a catch.”

Her cheeks go pink, but she doesn’t argue. “God, I needed this. I needed to feel like I could still do something. That I’m not just floating.”

“You’re not floating, Bunny. You’re building.”

She glances at me, eyes soft. “Thank you. For coming with me. For being here.”

“Of course.”

My stomach growls, and she laughs.

“Want to get some lunch?”

“How do tacos sound?” I ask.

“I’m sold.”

I smile and link our fingers as we head a few blocks down to Salsa Supreme. We find a spot outside, shaded by an umbrella, and order enough food for a small army. Lula talks nonstop between bites, rehashing her favorite moments from the interview, and I listen, hanging on every word.

I could watch her talk forever.

After we finish, I pay the bill—despite her protests—and we stroll back to the hotel.

By the time we reach my room, she's yawning.

"Long day," she murmurs, dropping her bag and slipping out of her shoes.

"Yeah, plus we didn't get much sleep last night," I whisper.

She giggles. "That's true."

"Want to take a nap?" I ask, reaching for her waist.

She smiles sleepily. "With you?"

"Yeah."

I pull her into my arms and kiss her slowly. The kind of kiss that says you're mine, and I'll always be here, even when I'm not.

She melts against me, her arms sliding around my neck.

"I think I suddenly have extra energy to burn off," she whispers against my lips.

"Let me help you with that," I offer, taking her hand and leading her to the bed.

We undress each other slowly, reverently. There's no rush this time. No urgency. Just need. Familiarity. Worship.

I lay her on the bed and kiss every inch of her, relearning her curves and freckles, the sensitive spot behind her ear, the way she gasps when I drag my tongue along the inside of her thigh.

She comes apart in my arms, and I follow her there, losing myself in the softness of

her body, the sweetness of her kiss, the promise in every breath we share.

After, we lie tangled together, the late afternoon light spilling across our skin. I know I have to leave in two days, but right now, I'm here.

So is Lula.

And that's enough.

For now.

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NINE

Lula

I wake up warm. Like, really warm. The kind of warm that comes from having six-foot-four of solid Navy SEAL wrapped around you all night.

A soft sigh escapes my lips as I blink open my eyes. The sunlight is already creeping in through the edge of the curtains, casting golden light across the hotel room walls. I stretch slowly, not wanting to disturb the quiet peace of the morning.

Only...the bed is empty.

Well, half-empty.

My fingers skim across the spot beside me and land on warm sheets, which means Koa got up recently. I roll onto my back and listen for a moment. The faint sound of running water comes from the bathroom, and I smile to myself.

Koa's in the shower.

I sit up, the sheet slipping to my waist, and glance at the bathroom door. It's cracked open enough for steam to escape, curling into the air like something out of a daydream. Grabbing my phone off the nightstand, I switch it on. I scroll through the messages from Ledger and open my email.

And there it is.

The email I didn't think I'd get.

Subject: Job Offer—Project Manager Position

I sit up straighter, my heart racing. My thumb trembles slightly as I open the message and start to read.

Dear Lula,

Thank you for interviewing with the Baker Sisters Enterprises. We were impressed with your background, your ideas, and your energy. We'd love to offer you the position of Project Manager starting Monday.

The job entails managing scheduling and logistics for the three Baker Sisters businesses: Wet and Wild, Shelf Indulgence, and Masterbeaters. Duties include organizing inventory, coordinating suppliers, running social media, and updating and maintaining the business websites.

We hope you accept, and we look forward to working with you. Please stop by today to fill out the onboarding paperwork.

Warmly, Olive, Saffron, and Maple Baker.

I read it three times to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Then I throw myself back onto the mattress and let out a scream of joy into the pillow.

Koa opens the bathroom door, a towel around his waist and his dark hair dripping onto his shoulders. "Lula? You okay?"

I shoot upright. "I GOT THE JOB."

His eyes widen, and he grins. “Seriously?”

“Yes! The project manager role with the Baker Sisters. They want me to come in and fill out the paperwork today. I start Monday!”

He grins, and damn it, even freshly showered with a stubbled jaw and water still clinging to his abs, the man is heart-melting. “That’s amazing, Bunny. I’m proud of you.”

My cheeks heat as he crosses the room, leaning down to kiss me soundly before I can say anything else. My heart practically gallops in my chest. It feels so good, so easy, having him here, celebrating with me.

He pulls back slowly. “Want some help getting ready?”

“Only if you want to be late, too,” I tease.

“I’ve got time.”

I laugh as he kisses his way down my neck, but something about his words niggles at the edge of my mind. “Wait, when do you have to leave? To go back to base?”

He pulls back, and his easy-going smile from a moment ago is gone. “Sunday.”

Sunday.

The word hits me like a brick in the chest.

That’s in two days.

“Oh,” I whisper, looking away.

He doesn't rush to fill the silence, and that makes it worse. I already feel the ache of him leaving before he's even gone.

I'd started to imagine what it might look like if he stayed. If we stayed.

But now that feels like a dream with an expiration date.

"I'll go with you to the Baker Sisters," Koa says, his voice low and soft. "Make sure everything goes smoothly."

I nod and swing my legs out of bed, moving toward the bathroom. "Thanks. That would be nice."

We get dressed in near silence. Not angry, just quiet. Like neither of us wants to break the bubble.

Once I'm ready, we head into town together. The Baker Sisters' shops are all lined up next to each other on Main Street. I spot Olive inside the bakery, and she grins, waving us in.

She greets me with a hug and a huge smile. "You ready to make this official?"

"More than," I say, returning her grin.

She passes me a stack of onboarding forms, and I settle onto one of the chairs by the window to go over everything. Koa takes a seat beside me, lounging as he watches me work.

The sisters rotate in and out. All three of them are warm, funny, and full of vision for the future of their businesses.

By the time I hand over my final signed form, I feel like I belong here. Like I have a purpose again.

Koa stands when I do, and Iris offers me one last smile. “We’ll see you on Monday, Lula. Welcome to the team.”

“Thank you,” I breathe.

We step onto the sidewalk and into the late morning sunshine. I’m still buzzing with adrenaline, but the weight in my chest hasn’t lifted. Not completely.

Because now I know I’m staying.

And Koa... isn’t.

We walk the few blocks back to the hotel in silence. I clutch the paperwork in my hand, my mind going a million miles an hour. We climb the stairs side by side, and I follow Koa to his room.

“Lula...”

I want to beg him not to say anything. I want to stay frozen in this moment. I don’t want to have to think about what will happen in a day or two or three. I just want things to stay the way they are.

“We need to talk,” Koa says, bursting my dream of remaining in our little bubble.

My heart lurches.

God. Please don’t let this be him ending things before they’ve even started.

TEN

Koa

Lula tenses at my words. I don't blame her. I'm not thrilled about having to ruin our time together by talking about my departure. I wish I didn't have to, but I can't ignore the pit in my stomach. Not when every moment we spend together is a countdown ticking louder in my head.

"My room or yours?" she asks.

"Mine."

She nods, waiting as I unlock the door. I follow her into the room, and the door clicks shut behind me.

I only have two more days in Wolf Valley, and then I'm gone. Back to base. Back to the structure, the orders, and the predictability of Navy life.

I clear my throat, leaning against the doorframe. "I don't want to mess this up."

Lula sits on the bed and tucks her legs beneath her. "Mess what up?"

"You. Me. Us."

"Koa—"

“I just... I want to know what you want. Out of this. With us.”

Her eyes search mine, and I can see the gears turning in her mind.

“I want... this. You,” she says after a moment. “But I also want to stay here. I like it in Wolf Valley. I like the quiet, the space, the way people smile at you in the grocery store like they mean it. It feels like home.”

I nod slowly, trying not to flinch. “I figured.”

“What about you?” she asks. “How much time do you have left in the military?”

I let out a breath. “Two more years on my current contract. After that, I can re-up or let it run out.”

“And you’d be stationed where?”

“Still at the same base, most likely. Virginia Beach. Unless they transfer me.”

She nods. Her fingers fidget on her lap.

“It’s not just that,” I say. “I’ve been planning to make a career out of the SEALs. I always thought I’d do twenty years. Retire with a pension. Maybe move into private security or train recruits. It’s all mapped out.”

“Sounds smart,” she says quietly.

“It is. It was,” I admit. “Before I met you.”

She looks down, a crease forming on her brow. I reach across the space between us and touch her hand. She doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t squeeze back.

“I want you, Lula. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. But I’ve made commitments. To my team, to the job. I can’t just walk away.”

“I’m not asking you to,” she says, pulling her hand back gently.

“But you also told me you don’t want to live on a base,” I say. “You don’t want that life.”

“I don’t.” Her voice breaks slightly. “I can’t. I’ve lived it through Ledger. The deployments, the distance, the constant anxiety. I want roots. I want to build something that doesn’t disappear every six months.”

“If you stay here, we’ll be on opposite sides of the country. We won’t be in the same time zone. We’ll never see each other.”

Her head snaps up, and she glares at me. “And if I go with you, I’ll be in Virginia, all alone for half of the time. We still wouldn’t see each other!”

I curse, starting to pace. I try to keep my breathing steady. The silence between us stretches, heavier than anything I’ve ever carried in my rucksack.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?” I mutter, mostly to myself.

Lula doesn’t answer. She stands and grabs her laptop. “I need to fill out some more paperwork for the job,” she says softly. “They want it all back today so I can start on Monday.”

I nod, stepping back to give her space.

“I should...” She glances toward the door, hesitating. “The hotel fixed the lock. I think I’m gonna work over in my room for a bit. I just...need some space to think.”

The words hit harder than a sniper round, but I nod again because what else can I do?
“Yeah. Okay. I get it.”

Lula hesitates in the doorway, her hand on the knob, and when she looks back at me, her eyes are glassy. She opens her mouth to say something, then snaps it closed.

And then she’s gone.

I stand in the middle of the room for a full minute, staring at the door like it’s going to swing open again.

It doesn’t.

I sit on the edge of the bed and press the heels of my hands to my eyes. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I’ve never not had a plan. Even in the middle of a firefight, I know the protocol, the fallback options, the rules of engagement.

But this? This isn’t combat. This is my heart. And I’m flailing.

Who would I call for advice in any other situation?

Without letting myself overthink it, I grab my phone and scroll until I hit Ledger’s name.

He answers on the third ring. “Hey, man. Everything okay?”

“No,” I admit. “Not really.”

“What happened?”

I exhale hard. “I think I screwed everything up.”

“With Lula?”

“Yeah. And no. I don’t know.”

There’s a pause. Then Ledger says, “Start from the beginning.”

So, I do.

I tell him about the conversation. About what she wants. About what I want. About how those things don’t seem to match up. I tell him about the way she looked when she walked out. Like she was trying not to cry. Like she was trying not to hope too hard.

“She says she doesn’t want to live on base. And I get it. I do. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. The military has been everything for me. It’s the first place I ever belonged.”

“Is it still?” he asks.

“What?”

“Is it still everything to you? Or was it, until now?”

I fall silent, staring at the carpet beneath my feet.

“Look,” Ledger continues, “I know what the military has given you. Hell, I’ve been right there with you through most of it. But you’re allowed to change your mind, Koa. You’re allowed to grow.”

“I made commitments,” I say, jaw tight.

“Yeah, and you’ve honored them every step of the way. But you’re also allowed to want something more. Or something different. That doesn’t make you weak. That makes you human.”

I press my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “I’ve spent years building this career. Planning every step. I thought I’d be a SEAL until they forced me to hang it up.”

“And maybe you still will,” Ledger says. “But if that life doesn’t work for the one person who makes you feel more at peace than anything else ever has, maybe it’s time to re-evaluate the map.”

The silence stretches again.

“I still have two years. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t be able to leave right now,” I point out.

“I know, but you could use the next two years to figure out a new plan.”

I blow out a big breath.

“Let me ask you something,” he says. “What do you want more? The military? Or to be with Lula?”

I don’t hesitate. “Lula.”

“Then figure it out.”

“Thanks for the help,” I grumble.

He huffs a laugh. “I’m not the person you need to be talking to about all this. Open up to Lula. Figure out a game plan that works for both of you.”

“Fine.”

“See ya.”

I end the call and stare at the wall.

Lula.

I’ve only known her for a few days, yet it feels like my soul has been orbiting hers for years, waiting for the right moment to collide.

I think about the future I had mapped out: another sixteen years with the SEALs at least, maybe a few more after that. Buying a place near the base. A quiet life of service.

Then I picture something else entirely: A house in Wolf Valley with laughter echoing down the hallway. Lula in the kitchen with flour on her nose. A yard full of forts and toy trucks and sticky little hands that tug at my shirt when I walk through the door.

I close my eyes as that vision hits so hard it nearly knocks the breath out of me.

I don’t have to figure it all out right now, but I know one thing for certain. I’m not walking away from her. Not now. Not ever. Even if I have to rearrange everything I thought I knew about my life, she’s worth it.

She’s my home.

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ELEVEN

Lula

I've been pacing this room for what feels like hours, but it's probably only been fifteen minutes.

The sun dips lower, casting gold and amber light through the old lace curtains. My laptop sits closed on the desk beside my completed job forms, and I keep looking at it like it might give me the answers I still don't have.

I'm trying to be excited—I should be excited. I got a job. A fresh start. It's everything I said I wanted when I moved here. Everything I swore I needed.

But now, there's Koa.

Koa, with his warm hands and steady voice. He makes me feel safe and desired and seen. Koa, who looked like someone had cut out a piece of his heart when I told him I needed space. Koa, who I know would never hurt me but still terrifies me in all the ways that matter.

Because he's not just a man. He's a future. A big, life-changing one.

And I don't know how to fit into his world.

I haven't been here long, but I love Wolf Valley. I see myself living here and being happy. The quiet, the sense of community, the way I don't feel like I'm drowning in

memories. This place feels like mine. Like home.

But Koa? His world is orders and bases and deployments. A life on the move. And I'm so scared that if I step into it, I'll lose myself again.

I press a hand to my chest and try to breathe. It takes me a moment to realize that the pain in my chest isn't from a lack of oxygen. It's from a broken heart.

A knock on the door breaks the silence, and I freeze. It could only be one person.

My feet move before my brain catches up, and I open the door. Koa stands there, his green eyes locked on mine. He's not holding anything this time—not pizza or flowers or tools. Just his heart in his eyes.

"I love you."

The words are so simple. So honest. So pure.

My breath catches. "Koa..."

"I have no idea what I'm doing," he blurts, stepping closer. "None. This isn't how I work. I like structure, Lula. I like plans. I've lived my life on five, ten, fifteen-year timelines. I've always known where I'm going and why."

I nod slowly, my heart racing.

"But you..." He laughs softly, a little breathless, like I've knocked the air out of him. "You don't fit into any of those plans. You blew them all up the second you ran into me outside that diner."

I bite my lip because if I speak now, I might cry. And I want to hear all of this first.

“You’re messy and spontaneous and soft and real. You make me want things I never even let myself consider. And it scares the hell out of me.”

I reach out without thinking, touching his chest. His heart beats hard under my hand.

“But it’s also exactly what I need,” he says. “I need you. I want you. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. And I don’t care how much I have to shift, change, or figure out so long as it means you’re mine.”

The tears I’ve been holding back break free, falling hot and fast down my cheeks.

His eyes widen in panic. “Shit. No. No, don’t cry. I didn’t mean—are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

I laugh through the tears and shake my head, grabbing the front of his shirt and tugging him inside before someone sees us in the hallway.

“You didn’t say anything wrong,” I whisper.

He cups my face, wiping the tears with his thumbs like he’s terrified they’re his fault.

“I love you, too, Koa. So much it hurts,” I say, my voice thick with emotion.

He lets out a shaky breath and pulls me into his arms. I can almost feel the wave of relief that crashes through him.

“I was so afraid I messed everything up,” he murmurs into my hair.

“You didn’t. But”—I pull back to meet his eyes—“I can’t live on a base. I can’t live in a big city or spend half my life waiting for you to call from halfway around the world. I don’t want your career to dictate everything. I want a life that’s mine, too.”

“I know,” he says. “And I want that for you. I swear.”

I search his face, and everything I see there is real. Raw. True.

“We can make it work,” he says. “Stay here in Wolf Valley. Build your life, your career, your community. I’ll deploy when I have to, but I’ll come home here. To you.”

“But you’re still in the Navy.”

“For now, yeah. I have to finish out this contract but after that...” He pauses, eyes burning into mine. “After that, I can come home for good.”

A sob breaks in my throat. “I want you to keep doing what you love.”

“I will. And I’ll love you, too. We’ll figure it out.”

My heart aches in the best way. Because I believe him. “What about when you’re home?

Will we split time?”

“You’ll visit when you can. I’ll fly you out. Your new job is remote, right?”

I nod.

“So you can work anywhere. I’ll rent us a place close to base while I’m stateside. But this”—he gestures around the hotel room, to the town beyond the walls—“this will be home base. We’ll keep a house here. For good.”

I blink at him. “You want to buy a house?”

“I already looked at a few.” He shrugs. “Didn’t feel right making an offer until I knew you’d be in it.”

“You’re serious.”

“I’m very serious,” he says. “And also—I want to marry you.”

My heart flatlines.

“Tomorrow.”

My mouth drops open. “Koa!”

“We don’t have to make it big. Just us. The courthouse. Maybe Cameron can be our witness. Or we can wait until Ledger gets back from his deployment and do it then. I don’t want to wait longer than that.”

I stare at him, trying to catch up.

“This isn’t heat or adrenaline or a reaction to the craziness of this week,” he continues. “This is the clearest I’ve ever felt about anything. I love you, Lula. And I want to start forever with you. Now.”

“I...”

“I’m not asking for a picture-perfect life. I know we’ll fight. I know I’ll screw things up sometimes. But I will never stop choosing you. Every day.”

I throw myself at him, arms wrapping around his neck as I press my lips to his.

The kiss is messy and wet and a little desperate. But it’s perfect. Because it’s us.

“I love you,” I breathe when we break apart. “I love you so damn much.”

He grins, that dimple peeking out like it always does when he’s happy. “You’re mine now, Bunny.”

“Only if you’re mine, too, SEAL.”

“Always.”

We collapse onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and heartbeats. My cheeks hurt from smiling, and my chest feels sore from how full it is. And for the first time in what feels like forever, I’m not afraid of what comes next.

We’ll make a plan together. We’ll change it when necessary, and we’ll continue to choose each other, no matter what.

That’s all I need.

That’s all I’ll ever need.

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Koa

Five Years Later...

Some days, I still can't believe she said yes.

Not just to that first date or to me kissing her in a hotel bathroom while she was dripping wet and furious with me. Not just to the whirlwind proposal and our tiny courthouse wedding a few days later. But to this life. Our life. The messy, loud, beautiful chaos we've built together.

I step onto the back porch of our house in Wolf Valley, the early morning air crisp against my bare chest. One of the twins is already in the garden, talking to himself in that half-gibberish, half-bossy tone he uses when he's trying to reason with his brother. It makes me smile.

Our house sits on five acres outside town, and the backyard is their kingdom.

From where I stand, I can see the tire swing I hung in the big oak tree and the pile of half-finished forts they insist are top-secret military bunkers.

Lula jokes that our kids are mini-SEALs in training, and damn if she's not right.

I walk back inside quietly so I don't wake anyone.

The house smells like lavender and pancakes.

Lula must've lit one of her candles again before bed.

She's curled up on the couch with one of the boys tucked against her chest, her blonde hair a tangled halo around her face.

My heart aches every time I look at her.

God, I love this woman.

We split our time between Wolf Valley and base housing, just like we promised. Lula made our Wolf Valley house feel like home instantly. She still works for the bakery, which gives her the flexibility to travel with me or stay here when I deploy.

She's built a life here, too. Friends. A garden. Community events. I think the whole town was at our wedding, even though we tried to keep it quiet. That's the thing about Wolf Valley—it's impossible to keep anything quiet for long.

"Morning," she whispers without opening her eyes.

I lean down and kiss her forehead. "Morning, baby. You get any sleep?"

She groans. "What is sleep?"

I chuckle and gently scoop our son from her arms. He blinks up at me sleepily, then promptly drops his head against my shoulder.

"Leo?"

"Luca," she corrects, smiling. "Leo's the one outside arguing with the squirrels again."

Our twin boys—Leo and Luca—are four and somehow identical yet completely different. Luca is quieter, more thoughtful. Leo is wild, bold, and stubborn. They both have Lula's bright blue eyes and my inability to stay still for long.

I carry Luca to the kitchen and set him in his booster seat before starting a pot of coffee. Lula shuffles in behind me, barefoot and yawning, as she pulls things out for breakfast. We work around each other easily like we've been doing this forever.

"How's your shoulder?" she asks, glancing up as I reach for the frying pan.

"Fine. You worry too much."

She arches a brow. "You tried to wrestle a trampoline back into place during a windstorm. I feel like I'm allowed to worry."

"Fair."

The back door bangs open, and Leo rushes in, covered in grass and dirt and dragging a stick longer than he is. "Mom! I saved the base from squirrel invaders!"

Lula gasps, playing along. "My hero!"

He beams and climbs up beside his brother, already launching into an elaborate story involving tactical maneuvers, squirrel spies, and a dragon (for dramatic effect).

I cook breakfast and make mental notes—Lula keeps saying we should write down all their adventures, start a family journal. She's probably right.

After breakfast, Lula gets the boys dressed while I clean up.

She's taking them into town today to help Ledger set up for the town festival.

My best friend—now my brother-in-law—never did go back to San Francisco.

After a particularly rough deployment, he took a stateside position and moved to Wolf Valley permanently.

He teaches tactical training at a nearby base and is the best uncle our boys could ask for.

He and Lula are as close as ever. It's still surreal sometimes, hearing them laughing in the next room, watching him sit cross-legged on the floor as he teaches Leo how to tie knots or lets Luca use his dog tags as a toy.

They lost so much when their parents died, but they never lost each other. I'd do anything to keep it that way.

I walk them out to the car, pressing kisses to each of their heads and giving Lula a lingering kiss on the lips.

"Try not to fall in love with any festival clowns while you're gone," I murmur against her mouth.

She smirks. "You're the only overgrown child I've ever loved."

"Damn right."

They drive off in a cloud of dust, and I head back inside to shower and start on the repairs I promised I'd get to this week. The laundry room door still sticks, and the boys broke the screen on the porch last weekend during a spirited Nerf war.

By the time Lula and the boys return, the sun's starting to set, and the scent of grilled vegetables and salmon fills the air. I started dinner after fixing the porch screen and

mowing half the yard. Not bad for a day off.

“Something smells amazing,” Lula says as she walks in, cheeks flushed and hair full of glitter.

“Please tell me that’s not permanent,” I say, eyeing the sparkle trail.

“No promises.” She laughs.

The boys barrel into the kitchen, chattering about balloon animals and sack races. I let them help me plate dinner, and we all sit on the back deck, watching the sky turn pink and gold as we eat.

Later, after baths and bedtime stories and promises to check under the bed for monsters, Lula and I curl up on the porch swing. She fits against me perfectly, her head on my chest and our fingers laced together.

“Do you ever think about how fast it all happened?” she asks softly. “Five years ago, we didn’t even know each other.”

“I knew you,” I say. “The second I saw you. I knew you were it for me.”

She turns to look up at me, eyes shining. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

We sit in silence for a while, listening to the crickets and the distant hoot of an owl. I think about the road that brought us here. About chance and fate and timing. About Ledger and how different everything would’ve been if he hadn’t sent me to Wolf Valley.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“For what?”

“For giving me a life I never knew I needed.”

She presses a kiss to my jaw and closes her eyes again. “Right back at you, Navy SEAL.”

I smile and tighten my hold on her, knowing without a doubt that no matter where the future takes us—whether we’re in Wolf Valley or halfway around the world—this is home.

She is home.

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Lula

The sky over Wolf Valley is the clearest blue I've ever seen, like even the universe is giving us a blessing.