



Among Friends (Mount Hope: Prequel Novella)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: What are the chances?

When I have a snowboarding accident, the last person I expect to see in the ER waiting room is Tennessee. My Tennessee. My childhood best friend who moved away in middle school without warning. We both have broken wrists and an urge to reconnect.

The gawky kid I once knew has been replaced by a cute, sweet, wounded, and vulnerable man whom I'm instantly attracted to. He's shy, though, and I need to take things slow to show him that this time he's sticking around forever—with me.

Among Friends is a sweet, steamy novella set in the Mount Hope universe but stands alone as a series prequel. It features an EMT hero determined to win his childhood best friend's heart. It contains all the low angst, hurt-comfort vibes that are heavy on comfort and big swoony, falling-in-love feels. Originally featured in the Heart2Heart anthology, the story has a new cover and a preview of Up All Night, Mount Hope Book 1.

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Chapter One

Tennessee

“This isn’t how I expected our date to end.” Carefully cradling my swollen wrist, I turned toward Gunter. He drove a souped-up Hummer, which should have been my first clue that our date was doomed.

“Uh-huh.” Thus far, the guy appeared to have a conversational vocabulary of twelve words, most of them grunted syllables. Gunter wore a too-small T-shirt advertising a popular gym chain under a thin windbreaker and his nylon track pants were no match for his thickly muscled legs. That should have been my second clue. Gunter was a jock, and I was...well me. Skinny, no muscles, and no idea what to do with weight machines. Oh, and on my way to the emergency room exactly seven minutes into our blind date.

“Maybe we could do dinner after my x-rays?” I didn’t hold out a lot of hope, but the CUPID algorithm on the Heart2Heart app had matched us, after all. CUPID was supposed to find soulmates for us lonely gay dudes—or so the app made it seem.

“Dude, I’m not waiting around.” For a supposed soulmate, Gunter had a surprising lack of soul. And heart. He followed the signs at the Mount Hope Regional Medical Center to pull up at the entrance labeled Emergency Room in giant red letters. “You can get out here.”

“Well, thanks for the ride.” I shrugged, which jostled my injured arm and made me wince. I supposed I should be grateful Gunter hadn’t made me use a ride-share app to

get to the hospital. Or worse, call 9-1-1 for what could turn out to simply be a bad sprain. But if he was my soulmate, shouldn't he want to wait with me? Or at least follow-up? Exchange contact info? Something.

"You sure you don't want a raincheck? I figured since CUPID's great track record matched us, you might want to try again?"

"Stupid CUPID is glitchy as fuck." Gunter's full lips twisted. He was disgustingly easy on the eyes. If one was into blond muscle-bound jerks, which I was decidedly not. "You're the third match it's given me this week. Soulmate finder. Hah. I can't even get a decent hookup out of the app."

Hookup was right up there with jock, muscles, off-roading, and gym on the list of words that didn't apply to me.

"Ah. Good luck then." I exited the Hummer, which wasn't easy to do without the use of my dominant hand and with all my other bumps and bruises. Instead of an emphatic stomp off, I had to settle for awkwardly slithering to the ground and limping toward the wide double glass doors. For his part, Gunter zoomed away before I was fully on the sidewalk. Jerk.

Much as I'd like to find my person, I'd settle for someone pleasant to talk with, someone who cared enough to text asking about my day. Someone who stuck around past a single date. Apparently, I'd set my hopes too high.

Or perhaps I was simply a too-nerdy flavor the CUPID algorithm had no idea how to match. A depressing thought. And likely what I got for assuming artificial intelligence could find me a soulmate. Or a date.

Instead, here I was, banged up and bruised in more than one way, entering the ER on a gloriously sunny February Saturday in the Columbia River Gorge. Predictably, the

waiting room was packed. The clear day had lured a number of fresh-faced hikers and skiers out, and now they filled the room with hastily bandaged wounds or ice packs. There was also the usual assortment of sneezing and sniffing winter flu patients and injured kids from Saturday daredevil activities. A dude wearing a Kiss The Cook apron with missing eyebrows and singed hair had clearly used the good weather to barbecue.

As I searched for a seat, my gaze landed on a familiar-looking face. Around my age, the man was shorter with muscles for days. Not as thick as Gunter by any means, but someone who evidently knew his way around all those intimidating gym machines. Unlike Gunter and his Hollywood looks, this guy had a face more intriguing than classically handsome with a light golden complexion, mixed-race features hinting at both Black and Polynesian ancestry, and wide, mesmerizing dark eyes. However, before I could figure out why the man seemed so familiar, one of the women working the registration desk waved me over. The badge on a lanyard around her neck with a bored-looking ID picture said her name was Madeline.

Older with a clipped demeanor, Madeline asked the usual triage questions about whether I was experiencing any dire symptoms like chest pain or dizziness.

“Nothing like that.” I pursed my mouth. Perhaps I should have looked harder to see if Mount Hope had any freestanding urgent care options. Madeline’s brusque attitude made me feel guilty for not being more of a critical case. “It’s my hand. Or wrist. I don’t know. I felt a pop when I fell, and it hurts...a lot.”

“Sorry to say you’re likely in for a wait.” Madeline gestured at the full waiting room.

“That’s okay.” I prided myself on being accommodating, especially when a situation was out of my control, so I modulated my voice to be as soothing as possible. “I understand.”

“Do you have your insurance card with you?” Madeline’s tone was somewhat kinder.

“I just started a new job.” I stifled a groan because I hated making Madeline’s job more complicated. “The insurance company hasn’t mailed the card yet.”

“Let’s see if I can find you in the system.” Madeline clicked around on her desktop. “Name?”

“Tennessee Church Stayton.”

“Tennessee?” The man I’d noticed earlier was seated near the registrar. As soon as I said my name, he stood and walked closer. He wore a ski jacket opened to reveal a T-shirt supporting a cancer charity run. He was also holding his right arm, but it was his startled expression I noticed more. “Tennessee Church?”

“Um. Yeah. It’s Stayton now, but yeah.” I peered closer at the man, mind drifting back fifteen years to a much younger face I’d never forgotten. “Tate?”

“Yes!” The guy— Tate— beamed at my guess. “I’m Tate Johnson. And how the heck are you, man? Long, long time no see.”

“ Tate. ” I breathed his name, tasting A&W Root Beer, Jolly Rancher candy, and a whole host of other memories from my tween years and the best friend I’d never forgotten. “I...I thought you looked familiar.”

“Uh? Boys?” Madeline gave a little cough. Oh yeah. We were in an ER, not a class reunion. I gave a sheepish smile as she pointed at Tate. “Much as I hate to interrupt this little reunion, Johnson, I need you to sit your hot EMT ass back down.”

An EMT? I had a hard time reconciling this buff healthcare professional with the skinny kid I’d once known and shared a love of trouble and daredevil escapades with.

TNT people had jokingly called us.

“Sorry, Madge.” Tate obviously knew her well enough to tease. “I’ll be good.” Turning that infectious grin on me, he added, “And I’m sure I’ll still be here waiting when you’re done, Tennessee. Save you a seat?”

“Sure.” I turned my attention back to Madeline, who’d successfully located my health insurance information. Not continuing to glance at Tate took a lot of willpower, especially when I relayed my address and phone number for Madeline to enter into the computer. The Tate I’d known would have totally kept on listening in, but perhaps this adult version had better impulse control.

After I finished the check-in process, I rewarded myself by scanning the room for Tate. Sure enough, he’d saved me a seat next to him—one of the few open chairs. Not taking advantage of it would be rude, but my stomach fluttered the whole ten steps or so it took to stand in front of him.

“Um. Hi.” Slick. I was so slick. It was no wonder my blind date ditched me at the ER.

“Hi.” Tate was as friendly as I remembered and patted the chair beside him. He’d always been the extrovert to my introvert, my ticket to a larger friend group. “You’re back in town? For good?”

“Yeah, finished my move last week.” Cautious of my injuries, I gingerly sat next to him. “I’ll be working with the local CASA office as an attorney for child welfare cases. I always liked it here, so when I saw the job opening...” I trailed off because having fond but distant memories of a place sounded like a wacky reason to move half a state away. However, perhaps Tate didn’t agree because he kept right on smiling.

“That’s awesome, man.” He narrowed his eyes as he peered closer at me. “But why

not tell anyone you're back in the area?"

"Who would I tell?" I wasn't playing stupid. My phone truly did lack a single Mount Hope contact, and I knew down to the minute the last time I'd spoken to anyone from here.

"Dude. We were best friends. Practically brothers. TNT. Remember?" Smile fading, Tate made a face like he'd gotten raisins in a cookie instead of chocolate chips. "And then you up and moved. Didn't tell anyone. Not even the teachers could say where you went."

Three-fifteen on October eleventh of our sixth-grade year, I'd stepped off the school bus and shouted goodbye to Tate. A big black car had been waiting beside our old white trailer outside Mount Hope's city limits, and that was it: the last time I'd seen Tate Johnson and Mount Hope both.

"I was taken into state custody." I was an adult now, pushing thirty, well over fifteen years past that day, and still, my voice shook. "The DHS worker decided the best placement was the family of a second cousin I'd never met down near Eugene."

"Oh, Tennessee." Tate croaked like words were fuzzy, oversized things. I sympathized. Tate shifted in his chair as if he might be about to touch me, then winced and rubbed his right arm. "I knew things were never great at home. But that bad? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I couldn't," I whispered, not feeling very adult at the moment.

"My folks would have wanted to help." Tate leaned forward, winced again, then rubbed his closely cropped hair with his left hand. "I would have tried to help. So many people would have helped."

“I work for CASA. I know all the resources for kids in the system now, trust me. But at twelve? I wasn’t going to tell a soul how out of control my parents’ drug problem had become.” I paused to try to slow my heart rate. Tate wasn’t lying. His family would have readily offered assistance. But their warm and loving vibe with an always-welcoming house was precisely why I hadn’t been able to say anything. “I was scared and confused and ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” Tate sucked in a harsh breath. “You thought it was your fault? God, kid logic is the worst. I’ve seen it on duty, and I hate how kids always seem to blame themselves for bad shit. Hate that you couldn’t tell anyone.” He tried again to touch me but recoiled as soon as he moved his arm. “Ow. Fuck.”

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” He offered me a far gentler smile, and I could see how he was likely good as an EMT, making people feel calmer with a simple sympathetic look. “The curse was because I tweaked my injured wrist. But whatever went down, it absolutely wasn’t your fault.”

“Thank you.”

“You were never tempted to reach out?” Using his left hand, Tate pulled out a shiny phone with a rugged case, staring at it like he expected my pic to pop up. “I looked for you on social media a few times over the years, but I didn’t know the new last name. ‘Tennessee Church’ got nine zillion hits, none relevant.”

“My last name changed when my foster family adopted me. And I’m not really much on social media stuff.” I stared at my swollen hand, studying the bruising rather than trying to figure out what it meant that Tate had searched for me. “I share pictures of my cat once in a blue moon, but otherwise, I tend to forget the accounts exist. Also, for a lot of years, I felt misplaced shame and guilt over how I was forced to leave.

Then I saw the job opening here, and it seemed like a sign.”

“Absolutely.” Tate was back to beaming, voice warm and welcoming. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Thanks.” A family of four trekked past us, jostling my arm as they passed. “Ow.”

“Oh crap.” Tate glanced down, seemingly only now noticing my injury. “Your right arm is hurt like mine? What happened?”

“It’s a long, rather embarrassing story.”

“I’ve got nothing but time. And I’m an EMT. I’ve heard worse, I’m sure.” He winked, an absolutely devastating addition to his charm. “And done worse. Likely today. Spill.”

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Chapter Two

Tate

Tennessee was back in Mount Hope. I'd spent fifteen years wondering what had happened to my best friend, and now that he was here beside me, I was practically giddy. Who cared that we were in an ER waiting room? It was Tennessee , and somehow, I'd known from the instant he'd walked in. He didn't look much like his twelve-year-old self, what with a fuzzy beard and long hair in a neat ponytail and all, but he had the same straw-colored hair and pale-blue eyes with a sharp nose. Same tall, skinny build. My mom would be beside herself, wanting to feed Tennessee up the same as before. I wanted to hear everything he'd been up to, starting with how he injured his arm. It was more than a little funny that we had similar injuries on the same exact day, no less.

Tennessee took his sweet time answering my question. But I remembered his long pauses from the past and was patient without rushing to fill the silence.

"It was a terrible blind date," he said softly. Too softly. My overprotective hackles went up, and I leaned forward.

"Did someone hurt you?" I demanded. I had plenty of friends on the police force for our small town...but forget an official investigation. I'd handle this one myself. I hadn't been able to protect Tennessee when we were younger. I hadn't known how bad things had been for him, a fact that made my chest ache worse than my sore arm. We might not know each other as adults yet, but no way would I let anyone harm him now.

“Chill. Nothing like an attack or something.” Tennessee groaned before shifting in his chair, clearly embarrassed. “This artificial intelligence app promised to find me a soulmate. And I stupidly believed it could.”

“ Oh. ” My eyes widened. I had a hunch, and honestly, if I hadn’t been so gobsmacked to see Tennessee here in Mount Hope again, I might have guessed sooner. “The CUPID algorithm?”

“You’ve heard of it?” Tennessee studied me closely. Very closely. With anyone else, I might call it a once-over, but Tennessee was too earnest to be truly checking me out.

“Of course.” I held his gaze. I had zero qualms about coming out to him, even if he hadn’t given me a clear clue first. “The queer community around here is small but mighty, and the Heart2Heart app keeps me connected with everyone and my Portland friends too.”

“Ah.” Tennessee swallowed hard and licked his lips. Like his eyes and hair, his lips were pale, a soft carnation pink, and I couldn’t help wondering if they turned darker after kissing. “I...uh...um...”

I chuckled. “Apparently lots we both didn’t know back in the day.”

“Indeed.” He coughed, cheeks turning almost the same shade as his lips. “Anyway, the algorithm promised to find me a soulmate by Valentine’s Day. And CUPID arranged a blind date for me, which turned out to be skating downtown by the carousel. I should have known it was doomed.”

“That doesn’t sound too heinous of a date location.” Downtown Mount Hope by the riverfront had several historic attractions, including a large old carousel that had been well-maintained for decades. In the winter months of recent years, the park that surrounded the carousel offered ice skating and a pop-up hot chocolate food truck. “I

can think of way worse ideas.”

“For people with any sort of coordination, sure.” Tennessee slumped in his chair. “But somehow, I managed to face plant mere seconds after stepping on the ice.”

“Oops.” I tried not to laugh, but Tennessee had always had a reputation for being the clumsier one. Across from our seats, the wannabe grill master had been called back to an examination cubicle, but the waiting area stayed bustling. In the distance, sirens sounded. Usually, the sound would make me eager to be on shift and part of the action, but surprisingly, I was right where I wanted to be at the moment. “Hey, where’s the date now? Your soulmate?”

If CUPID had picked him for Tennessee, the dude had to be impressive. I’d heard of several happy matches started by CUPID. However, Tennessee made a sour face, nose wrinkling and lips pursing. His mouth wasn’t particularly full, but his upper lip formed a perfect little bow. I hadn’t noticed Tennessee’s appeal when we were preteens, but then I’d been a bit of a late bloomer when it came to hormones and figuring out what made my motor rev.

“Some soulmate he turned out to be.” Tennessee all but spat the words. “Gunter is definitely not my ideal match. He dropped me at the ER and split.”

“Gunter? Gunter who owns the CrossFit-clone gym downtown? CUPID gave you him ?” I shook my head. The algorithm had to be malfunctioning. “He’s a jerk.”

“To be fair, I hardly gave him reason to stick around.”

“Basic decency should have been reason enough,” I said firmly. The queer scene in the Gorge was small, and I’d seen Gunter in action plenty. Not that I was the pretty-boy type Gunter went for, but I preferred to steer clear of his mountainous ego. “And I remember you being pretty fun to be around. We got up to some great adventures.”

“We did.” Tennessee offered me a small sentimental smile that made my heart swell. “I’m not nearly as daring these days though.”

“That’s a shame, but maybe you simply haven’t had a good reason.” My tone had tipped into flirty territory, so I tempered it with a friendly grin. “I remember you climbing trees and jumping off high dives.”

“Maybe I haven’t had a you pushing me to take risks.” His smile wasn’t at all flirty, but it was warmer. He was gradually becoming more comfortable, and I’d take that over any amount of banter. I nodded encouragingly as he continued, “Tell me your injury story is worse?”

“More boring. It was the annual Lonely Hearts Day at the ski slopes, and a bunch of us hit it up to snowboard.” Nearby Mount Hood had been a popular winter sports destination for generations, and this time of year, I was a regular on my days off. “I was showing off?—”

“Still Tate, I see.” Tennessee’s laugh was close to a giggle, which was adorable.

“Yep.” I stuck out my tongue to see if I could get another laugh. “Anyway, I misjudged my trick and took a header while trying to avoid a pack of newbies who shouldn’t have been on the larger hill.”

“I sympathize. With both you and the newbies.” Yep. There it was. Another chuckle. His laughter managed to erase the last decade and a half and made me remember how much I loved being silly and joking around with him.

“Yeah, well, usually I’m made of rubber. But I guess I’m getting old or something.” I looked down at my arm. I knew how to fall, knew not to stick my hand out, and what had I done? Stuck my hand out as I fell and likely horked my wrist as a result. “Pretty sure it’s a clean break at least, but it doesn’t feel like a normal sprain. And fuck

me—sorry. Language.”

“Cursing doesn’t bother me.” Tennessee’s prim and proper appearance in a white button-down shirt, dark pants, and wool coat made me doubt his words.

“Ah. Good to know.” I examined my swelling. Yep. I’d messed something up good. “If my wrist is broken, I’m looking at weeks of light duty, which sucks.” I had sick leave, but likely, my boss, Heather, would be able to find tasks for me around the station. Maybe if I was lucky, she’d let me drive, but usually, we needed our drivers able to lift in an emergency. “I’d rather be out there working, especially since we’ve been shorthanded lately.”

“That does suck. Luckily, I’ll be able to work regardless, although typing will be a challenge. And everything else involving my dominant hand.” Tennessee gave a dejected sigh. “At least you’re left-handed.”

“You remembered.” I brightened at the revelation. Around us, more patients had filtered in while others had been called back. Some of those had arrived after us, but I was enjoying talking with Tennessee far too much to be impatient.

“Of course.” Tennessee gave another of those soft, small smiles. “Maybe mine is just a sprain. No idea how I’m going to tie my shoes, let alone pop the top on Clifford’s cat food if they put me in a cast.”

“Clifford?” I laughed because, naturally, Tennessee had a ridiculously named cat. He’d always been an animal person like me, and his parents’ rural trailer home had included any number of barn cats. I’d often helped Tennessee in his efforts to care for them when no one else seemed to bother.

“Clifford is a big orange-red cat who thinks he’s a golden retriever.” Tennessee’s tone turned fond. “He plays fetch and loves going for walks on his harness.”

“That’s too perfect. I’ve got a dog?—”

“Can’t imagine you without one. What did you rescue this time?”

“A dainty little terrier named Mouse, who’s afraid of everything and rather aloof, but we’re working on it. I joke she’d make a decent cat, actually. She’s probably asleep on the back of my couch right now.”

“Aww.” Tennessee’s gaze caught mine, and the direct eye contact gave me pause. I liked him like this, warmer and looser, less anxious than he’d been at first. And the warmth and caring in his baby-blue eyes made me wonder what else I could do to earn his affection.

“Johnson?” A nurse I vaguely recognized called me from near the double doors leading to the back with the examination cubicles. “Let’s get your vitals and get you off to radiology.”

“Quick. Give me your number.” I flicked my phone open to my contacts screen.

“My number?” Tennessee’s eyes went wide like I’d asked his underwear preference.

“Yeah. For after we’re both done. I’ll give you a ride and help you with the cat food. And anything else.” If I was going to be out of commission as an EMT for a while, I’d have plenty of time on my hands, and there was nowhere I’d rather spend it than getting to know Tennessee all over again.

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Chapter Three

Tennessee

I didn't truly expect Tate to wait for me. Sure, he had messaged several cheery updates while we were in separate exam rooms. And we'd passed in the hall on the way to radiology with our respective attendants. But somehow, I expected him to have better things to do than follow through on the ride home and the help he'd offered. However, there he was, waiting on a bench near the main lobby when I finally emerged.

As I approached Tate, I held my arm up. I had an ugly black cast with Velcro straps stabilizing my wrist, the same as him. "We match."

"We do." He held his own cast aloft. "Hairline fracture of the radius."

"Buckle fracture." I made a face. "I have to see an orthopedist next week for a consult."

"I know a good one." He smiled broadly at me. "Mine should be fine in six weeks, but six long weeks of light duty, damn it."

"Poor baby. Less work and taking it easy sounds miserable for a go-getter like you." I smiled back. Despite all the years that had passed, he was still delightfully Tate. "The doctor said my cast should take six weeks as well. Maybe we can meet up again for a cast-off celebration?"

I hoped that sounded friendly and not suspiciously date-like. We might be old friends and both queer, but that didn't mean anything.

Tate snorted. "Ha. You're kidding yourself if you think I'm letting six weeks go before I see you again."

"I guess we do have some catching up to do," I said slowly. I wasn't entirely sure how to take his enthusiastically possessive reply.

"And it sounds like you might need help feeding Clifford." Standing, he pointed in the direction of the signs leading to the parking garage.

"You remembered my cat's name?" I wasn't sure why I was surprised. Tate had always had a good memory. "And I really can get a ride back to my place. I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"It's no trouble." He continued his confident march to the parking facility, leading me to a bright-orange midsize truck.

"And you're okay driving one-handed?"

"Of course." He gave me a withering look as he used his left hand to dig out his key fob. "My truck is automatic, so hopefully, shifting won't be a hassle. Hurt a bit driving back from the mountain, but I managed. And I better figure it out because no way am I going six weeks without driving."

"I might," I admitted. I'd almost volunteered to help shift, but that sounded way too suggestive even in my brain. "I suck at anything left-handed."

"Is that so?" Tate sounded more than a little flirty, but then he shivered and tugged his ski jacket closer. Maybe he was simply cold. Or something. People didn't usually

get flirty with me, hence looking on the Heart2Heart app for my soulmate. Before I could figure out Tate's intent, he unlocked the truck. "Come on, get in."

"This is definitely your vehicle." I laughed as I glanced around. Of the two of us, I'd always been the neater one, using order in my room and belongings to mask the chaos of my home life. Tate, like his siblings, had done his share of chores, but his room had been comfortably messy. Likewise, his truck wasn't filthy, but it featured a dog seat harness and open gym bag in the backseat, several hoodies next to the bag, and a few assorted energy drink cans on the floor.

"Yup." Wincing slightly, Tate put the truck in gear. "Now, where to?"

"525-A Prospect Place. It's downtown in an older home converted into a three-plex." I reached for Tate's navigation screen, but he waved my hand away.

"I know exactly where it is." Tate was nothing if not confident, and I was rapidly discovering that I really liked seeing his tween cockiness translated into adult swagger. "I love that little street and all the historic homes." He paused to wait for the gate to lift to let us out of the parking structure. "One of our senior paramedics lives on Prospect as well. That's part of why we're short-staffed right now. He's on leave while his doctor husband battles cancer. It's not looking good."

"That's terrible." My stomach twisted. Hearing such grim news made my own search for a soulmate seem trivial.

"Yeah." Tate nodded as we headed away from the hospital and toward the Mount Hope historic downtown. "My mom's sent food a couple of times. I'd like to send them my famous brownies, but my studio apartment's oven is teeny and unreliable."

"I have a pretty big kitchen." I tried to sound all casual and not like I was busy dreaming up more excuses to see Tate. "My unit is downstairs and includes the

original living and kitchen area, so it's pretty spacious. And if you're going to help me with Clifford, the least I can offer is a loan of my oven sometime."

"Nice." We stopped for a red light, and he beamed at me as he flipped his turn signal. "Would you mind if we swung by my place first so I could grab Mouse?"

"Your dog?" I bit my lip. I wasn't opposed to the request, but I was a bit confused. "You can just drop?—"

"And let Clifford or you starve?" Tate scoffed, shaking his head. "Hardly. I want to help. I really do, but I don't want to leave Mouse alone too long either."

"Well, all right then." I'd forgotten how easy it was to let Tate have his way. We might have been known as the TNT duo, but all our adventures had been Tate-initiated with me happily along for the ride.

"My studio is between here and your apartment anyway. My brother—you remember little Ricky—let the dog out a couple of hours ago, but it's been a long day for my baby."

"For all of us." I agreed as Tate pulled into a newer apartment complex on the eastern edge of downtown. After parking, he was as fast as promised, darting into the building to return moments later with a small terrier with gray wiry hair, wide expressive eyes, and pointed ears tucked under one arm.

"Meet Mouse." Tate buckled her into the dog seat harness, which let Mouse safely look out the window. Mouse didn't bark at me, but she did give me a heck of a scowl, which made her look even more like her rodent namesake. "Hope she doesn't upset your cat, but I can keep her on her harness."

"Awww. She's cute." I smiled at the dog, who seemed in no hurry to warm up to me.

“Clifford likes dogs, generally. He’s pretty fearless.”

“Mouse is not very brave, but she’s too standoffish and nervous to give chase to a cat. She’ll likely give Clifford a wide berth.”

“It’ll be fun to see how they both react,” I said as we continued our journey to Prospect Place, a treelined street a few hilly blocks beyond downtown. When I’d last lived in Mount Hope, I couldn’t fathom residing in this neighborhood of well-maintained, larger older homes, many of which had been turned into multi-dwelling units for young professionals eager to be within walking distance of the vibrant downtown coffee shops, eateries, and brew pubs. As a kid, the rural outskirts of town seemed the best I could do. When I found the listing for this apartment, I jumped at the chance to further distance myself from the past.

“Park in the back.” I directed Tate to the spot next to my small compact. The carousel and skating rink were close enough to my place that I’d opted for a chilly stroll downtown rather than trying to find parking for my date with Gunter.

I waited for Tate to unclip Mouse and place her on a hot-pink harness before I led the way to my apartment. The stately late-Victorian-era home had a single entrance. Once inside, the grand staircase led to the two smaller upper units while my apartment occupied the whole lower floor.

“This is a nice place.” Tate looked around my spacious living room, which featured a non-working brick fireplace, numerous built-ins, and hardwood floors. Beyond, a short hallway led to the bathroom and bedroom while the nearby dining room flowed into a remodeled version of the original kitchen. “Wow. You almost never see actual dining rooms in apartments.” He whistled low, continuing to glance around. I’d positioned my gray fabric couch near the bay window with the TV and my Swedish-style recliner opposite. My too-small table and chair set occupied the large dining room. I didn’t own much stuff, but what I did have was neatly arranged. “You’ve

already unpacked?”

“Boxes make me nervous,” I admitted. Not only did I have issues with clutter and mess after living with my parents, but boxes meant moving and instability. “I never sleep well until I’m fully unpacked.”

“I can see that.” Tate set Mouse on the floor right as Clifford ambled into the room, yawning and stretching like he’d left a prime napping spot on my bed.

“And here’s Clifford.” As I’d predicted, the large orange cat wasn’t in the least bit intimidated. He went right up to Mouse and gave her behind a generous sniff, which made the dog jump and Tate burst out laughing.

“Okay, you were right. He does think he’s a dog.” He kept chuckling as Clifford circled Mouse, who attempted to retreat behind Tate’s muscular leg. Finding the dog less than amenable to his overtures, Clifford stalked to the couch and flopped onto the cushions. Tate turned back toward me. “Food for the cat or food for the humans first?”

“Not sure what I have in the way of human dinner food. I need a big grocery run to stock my new kitchen here.”

“I can help with that,” Mr. Confident bragged. “I know a dude with a truck. And I’m on dinner as well. You still eat meat?” As soon as I nodded, Tate clicked around on his phone. “Tacos will be here in twenty minutes.”

“How is it possible you’ve become even bossier?” My tone was more awestruck than complaining, and Tate simply grinned wider.

“Maybe I’m simply that awesome.”

Not sure what to do in the face of all Tate's sunny energy, I went to sit next to Clifford on the couch and bent to untie my shoelaces, only to wince as I tried to use my right fingers. The black cast further restricted my range of motion, and I made a frustrated noise.

"Here, let me help." Tate knelt in front of me, far more agile with his cast, and before I could protest, he'd removed both my shoes.

"Thanks," I whispered. I had no idea why I'd lowered my voice, only that the moment suddenly seemed big and important. Our gazes met. Held. I inhaled sharply. Tate on his knees on the rug in front of me was pure fantasy material, but it was his expression, joyous and sentimental at once, that made my heart tug with longing.

"There." He set my shoes aside before removing his own and hefting himself beside me on the couch. "Together again. TNT. What sort of trouble do you want to get into first?"

I gulped. Was he flirting, or was he simply being Tate? I hated that I couldn't tell, but as in the past, I was more than ready to follow him into whatever adventures he dreamed up.

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Chapter Four

Tate

The winter sun shone bright as Mouse and I waited on Tennessee's front porch on Sunday morning. My wrist still throbbed, but my step was light and my heart hopeful. Having Tennessee around again gave me a new purpose.

"Good morning!" I chirped as Tennessee swung open the door. He wore flannel pants and an inside-out T-shirt, and his long hair flowed around his shoulders. Oops. I might have forgotten that not everyone was used to working my crazy hours. I was blessed with being able to be alert on night, day, or swing shifts, but Tennessee had rather clearly been sleeping in and still looked groggy.

"Uh." He rubbed his fuzzy beard. Adult Tennessee had this whole hippy Jesus look going on that I surprisingly dug. "Good morning to you."

"Donut?" I handed him the white bakery box from House of Donuts downtown.

"Um. Sure." He awkwardly accepted my offering with his left hand and set the box on the nearby entryway table. "You came over at eight on a Sunday to bring me donuts?"

He sounded more than a little confused. Probably my fault for not making my intentions to see him again today clearer, but I'd been riding a high of good tacos and great conversation. We'd had so much to talk about, from my EMT work to his law school and clerkship experiences. Leaving after dinner had been hard, but eventually,

I'd run out of excuses to stay. I had, however, promptly dreamed up my plan for this morning on the drive home. And more accurately, I hadn't told Tennessee because I didn't want him to put me off. Grownup Tennessee was as polite and unlikely to ask for help as kid Tennessee had been.

"No, I came over to ensure Clifford had a fresh can of food." I smiled encouragingly as I, Mouse, and my big bag made our way into the apartment. I'd offered to open a can for the cat's breakfast and leave it in the fridge, but conveniently, Tennessee had said Clifford was unlikely to eat it cold and pre-opened. "You said he was finicky."

"I did." Fishing a hair tie out of his pocket, Tennessee smoothed his rumpled hair into something of a presentable ponytail. Darn. I'd been having fun imagining that hair falling all over my skin. Tennessee, all prim and proper, didn't serve my purposes nearly so well. "Thank you for thinking of Clifford."

Said cat was lounging on the couch, soaking up the sun, and hardly looked in danger of starving. He had to be a good fifteen pounds, at least, and definitely weighed more than Mouse, who gave the air a delicate and haughty sniff. Tennessee moved the donut box to the dining room table, so I followed him, dragging a reluctant Mouse along. For a dog, she could be as stubborn as a mule and definitely as stubborn and reluctant to follow orders as most cats.

"Of course." I undid Mouse's leash so she could go hide under the couch. She'd spent most of the night before there, no more interested in the cat than in making friends with Tennessee. Unlike me. I had plans. "And the donuts are a bribe."

"A bribe?" Eyes going narrow, Tennessee pursed his lips.

"You sound like you need coffee." I reached into the bag of groceries to remove the thermos of French press brew I'd packed. "Luckily, I brought some of that as well."

“Thank you.” He fetched two cups and two small plates from the kitchen and set them on the table. “Explain the bribe.”

“You said I could use your oven,” I said airily as I poured each of us a cup of coffee. My mom liked to say I was a human bulldozer when it came to getting my way. She wasn’t wrong, but in this case, my forwardness was motivated by the weird certainty I’d had since I laid eyes on Tennessee yesterday. We were supposed to be best friends again. Maybe more. Was like at second sight a thing? I hoped so. Tennessee nodded before sipping his coffee carefully, so I continued, “And tomorrow and Tuesday, I’m scheduled for light-duty shifts, so I was hoping that after I feed Clifford, I could whip up two batches of my famous brownies. One for us and one for the family I was telling you about down the street.”

“Are your famous brownies the same rocky road variety you invented at eleven?”

“Sort of.” I grinned because the Tennessee I knew was a total chocaholic. No way could he resist me. “Those first batches started with a mix and my mom’s pantry.” I unpacked my bag onto his table, revealing high-quality dark chocolate, local nuts, gourmet marshmallows, and other key ingredients. “The ones I make these days are a from-scratch evolution of that general idea.”

“I’m in.” He nodded—exactly as I’d hoped—before drinking more coffee. “I remember being impressed your mom let you experiment with food. And the results were pretty good.”

“I’ve only gotten better with age.” I winked, loving how Tennessee turned four shades of purple before busying himself with selecting a chocolate-maple donut. “And my mom wasn’t about to let any of her kids out of the house without basic cooking skills. You should have seen her when she heard my apartment stove only has two burners.”

“The horror.” Tennessee managed to sound a lot like my mom, who’d never met a stranger she didn’t want to feed.

“I know.” Chuckling, I glanced toward Tennessee’s spacious kitchen. “But I work so many hours that paying for more than a studio doesn’t make sense. Mouse came along more recently, though, and that’s been an adjustment, having a dog in studio living.”

“Mouse might like a yard.” Tennessee nodded thoughtfully before pointing at the door in the rear of the kitchen. “Mine is shared with the upstairs tenants, but it’s fenced if Mouse needs to go out while we bake.”

“Perfect.” I loved how Tennessee had effortlessly included himself in my brownie plans. “Do you take Clifford into the yard?”

“Only on his harness.” Tennessee blushed and took another big bite of donut. “Someday, I want to build him a cat patio.”

“A catio? I love that idea.” A shiver raced up my back as I helped myself to a strawberry-sprinkle donut. I swore I could see an older ranch home with a deck out back with one of those cat enclosures and Tennessee in the kitchen with me. I wasn’t sure whether it was a glimpse of the future, though, or a particularly vivid memory. “Remember when we used to dream about remodeling the house next to my folks?”

The old owners had moved out the summer between our fifth- and sixth-grade years, a hot, sticky summer that had stretched on and on. We’d had numerous adventures on the vacant property until flippers bought the place. Spying on the remodel turned out to be way more interesting than climbing the back cherry trees.

“We were going to be roommates.” Tennessee’s nervous laugh was adorably close to a giggle.

“We were funny.” I laughed along with him. “Maybe our willingness to live and work together should have been a clue we weren’t straight?”

“Probably.” Tennessee blushed again and studied his remaining half-donut like it was a textbook. “How did your parents take it when you came out?”

“Ha.” I loved this memory, so I smiled broadly. “I didn’t so much as come out as announce I was taking a dude to prom and ask to borrow Dad’s Charger.”

“Balls.”

“Yep. Didn’t earn the car and got a really embarrassing safe-sex lecture, but that was that.” I shrugged and downed the last of my coffee. “Mom bugs me monthly about settling down with the right person, but that’s moms for you.”

“Yeah.” Tennessee’s voice went faint and distant. Oh right. Not everyone had a mom to nag them and love them and bake them casseroles and all that.

“Sorry.” I set aside my donut. “I forgot?—”

“Don’t apologize.” He held up a hand. “I’m glad families like yours exist. And my foster mom, Barbara, is amazing. She and her husband fought to adopt me, and we talk on the phone all the time.”

“That’s awesome. Are they sad you moved back here to Mount Hope?”

“I don’t think so. Their family moved south of Portland a few years ago when my foster dad’s company relocated him. I’ll be able to visit often.” Tennessee’s voice was stronger now, more thoughtful. “And Barbara says the move is good for me. Something about coming full circle.”

“I like that.” I peered deeply into his pale-blue eyes. Why hadn’t I ever noticed how hypnotizing they were? And I did love the idea of us also coming full circle. We’d started here, and after Tennessee up and disappeared, we’d had unfinished business. Now, as adults, the nature of that business had shifted. We’d been TNT once before, and it felt gravely necessary to find out if we could be explosive together. If our potential was as great as I was coming to suspect.

The moment dragged on, and I stepped closer to Tennessee. Cautiously, I touched his shoulder, outlining the exposed seam with my left thumb.

“Get dressed in a hurry?” I asked in a husky whisper, liking the idea of him sleeping shirtless.

“Oh. Uh. Yeah,” Tennessee stammered. “I should put some real clothes on.”

“Need help?” I wagged my eyebrows, delighting in the choking sound that escaped Tennessee’s throat. “I meant because of your cast, but you’re fun to shock.”

“Glad to amuse you.” He beat a hasty retreat to the dining room entrance. “Be right back.”

I left him have his escape. I could have followed, and he likely wouldn’t have pushed me away had I made a pass, but even I had limits. I’d let Tennessee warm up to the idea of us as more than friends and happily enjoy his company and the delicious anticipation in the meantime. He emerged in jeans and a U of O law school T-shirt, and after a brief stint in the yard for Mouse, we started the brownie recipe.

“So, what’s the plan for CUPID?” I asked as I measured cocoa powder, careful to avoid sprinkling my cast and not even trying to hide my fishing expedition about his personal life. “Gonna get back on the app?”

“I am one hundred percent done with app dating. Never again.” Tennessee was super cute when he got all dramatic.

“Good to know.” I nodded sagely. “I had a similar revelation last year, much to my mom’s dismay. No more apps.”

“Better single than another bad match.” Tennessee walked right into the trap I was laying. Now, all I had to do was show him that we would be the furthest thing from a bad match.

“Word.” I grinned at him as I incorporated the cocoa into the sugar and butter mixture. “But that means you’re free on Wednesday night.”

“I am,” Tennessee said slowly, eyes narrowing.

“Good.” I wasn’t about to be deterred by his skepticism. “Wanna have a Pal-entine’s Day outing?”

“Like what?”

“Geez. So suspicious.” I waved the wooden spoon I’d been stirring with at him. “Pal-entine. Two pals who’d rather not be alone on the day of hearts and roses. I’m off at three-thirty that day, but I assume you work until five?”

“Yeah.” His tongue darted out to lick his lower lip. Predictably, heat gathered low in my stomach. Lord, I had it bad already.

“Good. I’ll pick you up at six. Dress warmly.” I chortled happily to myself. Let my plan to show Tennessee I could be his perfect Valentine begin.

Chapter Five

Tennessee

Valentine's Day dawned like the prior two days—sunny and with a cheerful message from Tate. He'd stayed most of Sunday at my place, helping feed Clifford, baking brownies, and watching movies we remembered from middle school while the treats cooled. Then we'd walked the dog up the street to deliver the brownies to his coworker's front porch and ordered Thai takeout for an early dinner because we couldn't live on chocolate and sugar alone. He'd left late in the evening with a promise to text while on duty the next two days, and he'd been true to his word.

Morning! Had a quiet shift. Nothing like doing supply inventory to make me itchy to get back out there. Hope you have a good day saving the world! See you at six.

My stomach fluttered as I placed my phone near the computer on my desk. The birds outside my office window seemed as unusually cheery as I felt. The local CASA office was located near downtown in an older brick building across from the square that housed the county courthouse.

I liked how impressed Tate was with my work for CASA. He appreciated how my job was to advocate for kids in the DHS system. I hadn't had unconditional support like his in a while. Most of my law school friends had gone on to well-paying big firm jobs, and my love of nonprofit work was a bit of an oddity. My foster parents were great, but they also worried about my choice of a low-salary career path. Tate's cheerleading was more than welcome, but I was also giddy for his Pal-entine's Day plans.

Not a date. Not a date, I reminded myself for the hundredth time. But regardless of knowing Tate's interest was likely purely platonic, a rekindling of an old friendship and a chance to help me out while I was injured, I couldn't help the spark of hope every time he messaged. And several times on Sunday, I'd caught him staring at me with what seemed like more than friendly intent.

However, I was notoriously bad at telling when someone was interested, and the last thing I wanted to do was make Tate uncomfortable. I'd been trying to avoid flirty comments or unnecessary touches.

By six, I was dressed in a nice blue sweater and thick jeans, following Tate's orders to dress warmly. I'd also learned since Saturday that clothes with buttons were my enemy, as were shoes with laces. Luckily, my winter boots were zipped up, not tied, and I managed my coat zipper right before Tate buzzed my apartment doorbell.

"You're ready." His clear pleasure at my punctuality made my chest expand. He also wore a thick coat and jeans. A hint of a red sweater peeked out from the coat, and unlike me, he'd figured out how to do hiking boot laces one-handed. "You probably won the graduate school attendance award."

"Almost." I returned his smile. "Lateness makes me anxious."

"I know. Which is why Mouse and I are on time." He gestured down at the dog, who wore a pink quilted coat and an unhappy expression.

"Mouse looks like she'd rather skip whatever outdoor activity you have planned and lounge on the couch instead." As soon as I said the words, the dog tugged on her leash, doing her best to get over to the couch where Clifford was sprawled, grooming his nether regions, not a care in the world.

"Probably." Tate frowned before reaching down and unclipping Mouse. "Maybe I

should leave her here with Clifford, pick her up after our... thing .”

“That works.” Trying not to dwell on whether a thing was in the same universe as date, I moved a fuzzy throw blanket from the back of the couch to the seat next to Clifford, making a little nest for the small dog. “There. All set.” I returned to the doorway and Tate. “Still not going to tell me where we’re going? Please don’t say ice skating.”

“No, not ice skating, although I do think you deserve a better experience than your one disastrous date.” Tate ushered me out of the house and toward his truck. “I bet you could get the hang of it if I helped.”

“I wouldn’t take that bet.” I wasn’t entirely sure whether he meant ice skating or dating, but either way, my hopelessness would be no match for Tate’s enthusiasm.

“Ha. I’m a good teacher.” He paused by the truck to give me a pointed look that made heat zoom to all sorts of under-used locations. I wasn’t a virgin, but I wasn’t that far off either. However, even I, the walking dating disaster, could hear the flirt in Tate’s voice and see the heat in his eyes.

“I’m sure,” I mumbled, knowing full well I was blushing yet again. My thoughts shifted from whether Tate was flirting to why. Was this all simply part of helping me out post-injury? Was anyone truly that helpful? Or was there something else at work here, something born in that long-ago friendship? My pulse galloped like someone had cranked the carousel downtown to high speed.

“You look warm,” Tate said as we climbed into the truck. “I better turn the heater down before you overheat.”

“Thanks.” Spontaneous combustion was indeed a distinct possibility, but not for the reasons Tate assumed. I adjusted my coat before buckling my seatbelt. I half expected

him to head downtown, where most of Mount Hope's non-chain restaurants were located. Instead, he pointed the truck toward the rural road leading out of town, where scant few houses and orchards gave way to Christmas tree farms before the landscape shifted into what seemed like endless state-owned forests.

I wasn't as familiar with this part of the Mount Hope outskirts. My parents had lived on the eastern edge of town, where there were fewer orchards and more derelict mobile homes and acres of invasive blackberry vines taking over flood plains for the area's many rivers and streams. Thus, I didn't guess our destination until Tate pulled into a deserted parking lot for a state park trailhead.

"We're climbing Promise Point?" My voice went up a few notches. The weather was clear but decidedly nippy. And dark. Very dark, with only the truck headlights to cut through the forest. "At night?"

"Relax. It's an easy walk, and I brought a flashlight." Tate parked with his usual confidence. And he was likely right. A few solar lights dotted the parking area, so it wasn't as pitch black as it had first seemed. I hadn't done the trail myself, but it was popular with tourists to the Gorge. Rather than miles and miles long, most of the trail's difficulty was in the steep steps up the rocky butte to the vantage point at the top. If we weren't each already sporting injuries, I might be less apprehensive. Tate patted my leg, pitching his voice more soothing. "Trust me. The view of the town is more than worth the steps."

Tate was, as always, right. Most of the area's snow was in the upper elevations and surrounding mountains, but the steps were still slick, making for a slow climb. He'd come prepared, though, in sturdy hiking boots and with a high-powered flashlight for each of us. More than once, Tate had to steady me, not that I was going to complain about his hands on me. And after we made it to the top of the incline, I certainly wasn't going to complain about the spectacular view of downtown Mount Hope twinkling beneath us.

“I’ve never been up here.” I gazed around in wonderment. The flat circular area was ringed by a low stone wall, and a few scattered rustic benches added to the sense of a hidden oasis. We were a scant fifteen minutes from downtown yet a world away.

“I figured as much.” Tate dusted the leaves off one of the nearby benches before gesturing for me to sit with him. The stone was dry but freezing, and I shivered. “Here.”

Tate put an arm around me, pulling me in against him as naturally as if he’d been doing it for years. His cast was a heavy weight on my shoulder that strangely reassured me. This wasn’t just anyone I was alone up here with. It was Tate. TNT. Nothing bad had ever happened with him along for the ride, and all week, I’d felt buoyant, blessed to have found him again in the ER of all places.

“I like this,” I whispered.

“Me too,” he whispered back with a little chuckle. “After dark, when the weather is warmer, this is mainly a teen and amateur photographer hangout, which is a shame because more people should know what a cool night view this is.”

“It really is.” I sat quietly, trying to take in all the glittering details of the valley below us. I also breathed deeply, absorbing Tate’s nearness and warmth, his woodsy scent and soft exhales. The view wasn’t the only thing worth memorizing.

“I forgot how pretty Mount Hope is,” I said softly after a while. “Forgot how much I liked it here. But now I’m so glad I saw that job announcement.”

“I am too.” Tate shifted, turning more toward me. “Welcome home, Tennessee.”

The air was frosty enough that my cheeks and nose stung, but still, I couldn’t look away from Tate, who was suddenly way more compelling than the world-class view.

He was close enough now that I could feel his warm breath. Time slowed along with my heart, which threatened to pound out of my chest, a bass drum marking each second of Tate's approach. He moved with glacial precision, his destination beyond obvious but his pace such that I could easily pull away.

As if.

I'd waited my whole life for this moment without even knowing it.

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Chapter Six

Tate

I'd brought Tennessee up a mountain or, more accurately, a very large hill merely for the chance for the perfect first kiss. And sitting side-by-side on the bench with the city of Mount Hope below us, the moment wasn't going to get any better than this.

I moved in slowly, putting the brakes on my usual pedal-to-the-metal approach to life. Not only was Tennessee skittish, similar to my dog and her timid disdain for change, but he also deserved a gentle wooing, not a steamroller. I needed him to want this as much as I did. I could be happy with the privilege of being his best friend again, but now that I'd met his grownup self, I wanted so much more.

I wanted everything.

But I could be patient.

So, I waited, mouth millimeters from his. So far, so good. He didn't pull away. And then he did something even better: he smiled.

A happy, shy little grin before a chuckle escaped his lips.

"Don't be nervous," I whispered.

"I'm not." He was lying, but under the nerves, the adorable eagerness in his eyes was all the encouragement I needed.

“Good.” And then I kissed him. A soft brush of lips. His fuzzy beard was an unexpected delight, one of a dozen new things I loved about adult Tennessee. I couldn’t wait to add even more things to the list.

Tennessee’s laugh turned to a gasp, then a small moan as he leaned in to meet me partway. “Yes.”

I traced his lips with the tip of my tongue before deepening the kiss. He tasted like Valentine’s Day—a mix of mint, chocolate, snow, and earthiness. Sweetness and lust mingling. I’d had other first kisses, but I couldn’t recall a single detail right then. Rather, I wanted a snapshot of this exact moment for the rest of my life.

The certainty I’d felt ever since Saturday intensified with every movement. My chest ached from holding back the rising swell of my emotions. But somehow, I simply knew.

This was my last first kiss.

I was determined to take my time. He made a delighted noise as I explored and tasted, making it harder to go slow, but if this was the first kiss of the rest of my life, I could damn well make it last.

And last it did, Tennessee clinging to me with his left hand as I gathered him even closer. We kissed as the night sky darkened, more stars arriving to observe the shift in my universe. We kissed as we both shivered and laughed and kissed and shivered some more.

“I don’t wanna move, but I don’t want to turn into a snow cone either.” I gave a frustrated moan, reluctantly letting my good sense return. “Want to warm up in the truck?”

I stood before I could give into the temptation of more chilly kisses and offered him a hand.

“Is that what the kids of Mount Hope are calling it these days?” Chuckling, Tennessee let me tug him off the bench.

“Follow me, and I’ll show you.” Flipping on my flashlight’s high beam, I carefully led us down the rocky stairs. Our competing injuries made it nearly impossible to hold hands, but I kept close and paused at the base of the stairs to steal one more kiss. He greeted me like I’d been away weeks rather than three minutes, and his eagerness was a better aphrodisiac than anything ever dreamed up for Valentine’s Day.

“Did you bring me up here to make out?” He laughed, but there was an underlying seriousness. Tennessee had a big, vulnerable heart, and he needed to trust that I wouldn’t hurt it.

“No. Well, yes. The kiss was planned, but I brought you up here to formally apply for the position of boyfriend you have open.” Keeping my voice all professional, I met his gaze before smiling hopefully.

“Soulmate.” His tone was somewhere between confused and censoring. “The CUPID algorithm was supposed to find me a soulmate.”

“Oh.” All the air left my chest at once. Tennessee didn’t want to date me. He wanted to hold out for his supposed soulmate. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do.” He awkwardly reached for my left hand with his. “The algorithm may have glitched, but somehow I keep thinking... maybe. Like this could be it? For both of us?” He gulped loudly. “Sorry. It’s way too soon and?—”

I cut him off with a swift kiss before he could ramble himself into more doubt. “Not

too soon at all. I feel the same way. Like this was somehow destined. Like I've been waiting for your return."

" Yes. " Smiling broadly, he was the one to initiate the next kiss, which lingered, going from sweet affirmation to sexy promise. I would have happily kept going until our flashlight batteries ran out right there at the base of the trail, but Tennessee shivered.

"Some boyfriend I am if I let you freeze before dinner." Chuckling, I pointed at my truck, flicking my key fob for remote start. "Into the truck with you."

"There's dinner?" he asked as he climbed into the passenger side.

"It's Valentine's Day. Of course there's dinner." I gave him a pointed look. I might not have that much personal experience with long-term relationships, but I'd watched my parents and other happy couples over the years. I wanted to make Tennessee feel valued and treasured, not only on holidays. "But you have to guess where I made reservations for us."

"Reservations?" Tennessee's expression turned befuddled. Understandable. Mount Hope was small enough that few places even took reservations. "Tell me you didn't make your mother cook on Valentine's Day."

That earned a huge belly laugh from both of us as I cranked the truck's heater. Tennessee had always loved her cooking and had proclaimed hers the best food in Mount Hope more than a few times.

"I thought about it," I admitted. Tennessee's love of her fried rice dishes and barbecue chicken was almost enough to have had me making the call. "My dad's taking her out for Japanese steak, but she would have happily cooked for us. She's going to be delighted we're dating."

I was more or less assuming that Tennessee's lack of argument and repeated kisses meant he was on board with my plans, but I was still relieved when he nodded. "You think so?"

"Me with a boyfriend? Winning. Me with a boyfriend who happens to be you? She'll be dancing down the aisles at church and calling wedding planners."

Tennessee made a strangled noise as he blinked a few times.

"Breathe." I patted his thigh with my hand, flexing my fingers against my cast. "No one's proposing. Yet."

"Yet." Eyes wider than fried eggs, he swallowed hard but didn't break eye contact.

"Yet," I assured him with a huge grin. Removing my hand, I put the truck in Drive. "Now come on, keep guessing about dinner."

Mouth twisting, Tennessee thought for several long seconds as I headed into town. Deciding to give him a clue, I hummed a line from an oldie I knew he'd recognize.

"No way." He smiled slowly, head tilting. "Pinball Pizza? Is that place even still open?"

"Yup." I beamed at him. The seventies-era pizza place had been largely untouched during our childhood—plastic chairs, scarred wooden tables, lots of ancient video games lining the walls, and mediocre pizza heavy on traditional favorites like pepperoni. We'd loved it. Tennessee's family never ate out, but my mom had always made sure to include him in our celebrations there.

"And they take reservations?" His tone was understandably skeptical.

“They’ve remodeled. Gone upscale like the rest of downtown. We probably could get a table without reservations, but they are pretty popular these days. New ownership with a liquor license. New menu too, with gourmet toppings and a wood-fired crust. Refurbished game machines, but same building. Same name.”

“Same us.” Tennessee gave a happy sigh.

“Same us,” I agreed. Pausing for a stop sign near town, I met his gaze. “New start?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, voice sounding decidedly dazed. “This is turning out to be some date.”

“We haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.” I wagged my eyebrows at him.

“Oh.” His mouth made a perfect circle, pale skin looking even more so.

“Chocolate, Tennessee. Chocolate.” I pitched my voice soothingly. I’d already figured out that Tennessee wasn’t the hookup type and likely had far less experience than he’d admit. “There’s a candy store near the pizza place, and I picked up some truffles for dessert. I’m not expecting sex, promise. We can take things slow.”

“Hmmm.” He considered this for a few more blocks. “What if I don’t want slow?”

“Then we can take it fast but make it last.” I beamed at him. “We can set whatever pace you want.”

“We want. Our pace.” He exhaled hard. “I think I like the hurry-up-but-make-it-count plan. I’m not feeling all that patient.”

“Me either.” Chuckling, I gave him a heated look. “How fast can you eat pizza one-handed?”

“Very.”

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Chapter Seven

Tennessee

I'd never scarfed down pizza as fast as I did that Valentine's Day with Tate. The special was a delightful heart-shaped pie with a chicken, fig, arugula, and balsamic topping. A far cry from the pepperoni and pasteurized mozzarella of our youth, but I doubted either of us fully appreciated the pizza or the ambiance. The remodeled space was fun with lots of classic pinball and video games, but the only playing I was interested in was more kissing with Tate.

"We'll have to go back to Pinball Pizza soon. I want to challenge you to that rare street fighting game they've got in." After parking the truck, Tate led the way back to my house. "But right now, I'd rather wrestle you for fun, not points."

He laughed, and so did I, but my stomach also quivered. Tate undoubtedly had way more experience than me, and while I was desperate for whatever we were about to do, I was also a little nervous.

Okay. A lot nervous.

"You're probably way better than me at...wrestling," I murmured.

"What? No way. You never met a video game you couldn't best me at. You're the strategy king." Completely missing my attempt at innuendo, Tate waited for me to unlock the front door, then my apartment door. Thankfully, neither of the upstairs units had lights on. A little auditory privacy might be nice if I could ever get a handle

on my nerves and racing pulse.

But then again, if I had a cardiac event, I did have a trained EMT to give me mouth-to-mouth. The thought allowed me to relax while we removed our coats and shoes and made our way into my living room.

“Aww. Look.” Tate stopped in front of my couch. Unlike most canines, Mouse had stayed on the couch rather than greeting us. Clifford had joined her in her blanket nest, spooning behind the small dog. He opened an eye, daring us to disturb their domestic harmony. “They’re cuddling.”

“They are. I like it.”

“Hate to kick them off the couch.” Tate winked at me. Couch. The spot where one might reasonably assume we could make out. Or more.

“I...um...” I glanced over at the hallway. Maybe more kissing and making out was too juvenile anyway. If Tate were truly my boyfriend now, he didn’t need me all Muppet-flail at the thought of sex. Which I did want, especially with Tate, as opposed to some random hookup, which had never once interested me. But the gulf between wanting sex and doing sex was relatively uncharted territory for me. “We can...that is, I have a bed.”

“I’m sure you do.” Tate chuckled and stretched to give me a fast kiss. He was shorter, a fact I kept forgetting because he was far broader and more muscular. And commanding. Few people I’d met could take up space like Tate did, which threatened to overwhelm me every time we touched or kissed. “We’ll get there as far as bed, but remember what I said. There’s no rush.”

And with that, he backed me against the wall near the door, more barely there soft kisses and touches on my neck, shoulders, and upper arms. Like me, he was limited

by the cast on his other arm, but unlike me, it barely seemed to hamper him. In fact, his left hand was so talented that I found myself relaxing way more than I'd thought possible.

I was dangerously close to purring like Clifford simply from Tate petting me, and like a cat, I stretched into the contact, inviting more. Tate seemed to instinctively know that light touches and kisses worked far better for me than groping and intense tongue action.

"This is nice." I sighed happily, sagging against the wall. My knees were deliciously rubbery, brain cells all muddled, and I barely registered Tate steering us over to my Swedish chair. As competently as he did everything else, Tate managed to arrange us both in the chair with no one landing on the floor. I reclined as Tate straddled me, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"See? No need to rush to bed." He grinned down at me. "This is cozy, and the pets don't have to move."

"True." I smiled back until the chair gave an ominous squeak. "This isn't exactly designed for two..."

"Relax." Tate cupped my face in his hands. I loved how he made me feel precious and fragile yet strong. "I'm an EMT. If it dumps us on the floor, I know first aid."

"Kiss it and make it better?"

"Exactly." He proceeded to do exactly that, kissing me until I was certain there wasn't much better on earth.

And then he moved.

Subtly at first, little shifts as he ducked his head to kiss my neck or stretched to lick my ear. Then more deliberate rocking against me, the sort of rhythm I couldn't help but mimic. We might well break the chair, but hell if I could be bothered to care. Two broken wrists? A minor price to pay for how amazing this felt.

Heat bloomed all over my skin, every nerve ending on red alert. I was achingly hard, and being able to feel his erection against mine, even through our jeans, was almost unbearably erotic. My breath came in little pants. I could come only too easily from this kissing and friction combo, but I wanted more.

Skin. Skin would be good. But when I reached for his sweater, my cast got in the way, and while my left hand was decent at skimming over his sides and back, it lacked the sort of dexterity necessary for complicated clothing removal shenanigans.

I made a frustrated noise. "I'm not sure how to do this."

"It's okay, Tenn." Tate soothed me with a sweet little forehead kiss as he swept his thumb over my bearded jaw. "We don't have to do anything you're not ready for."

"I'm ready." I groaned, more frustration seeping into my tone. "I mean with our casts. They keep getting in the way."

"Agreed. But I'm rather...handy one-handed." Eyes sparkling, he made a jerk-off motion with his left hand.

"Goof." I laughed even as my dick throbbed. Yeah. That. I wanted his hands all over me, my cock very much included. "I think I'm ready to show you my bed."

"Are you?" Tate bounded off me and offered me a hand out of the recliner before following me to my bedroom. He waited patiently while I flipped on the light, which suddenly seemed far too bright for the small space. My double bed was neatly made

with a gray comforter set, and the only other furnishing in the room was a secondhand nightstand with a goose-neck lamp. “Nice bed.” Tate remained way too close to the door, regarding me through cautious eyes. “Is that all you want to show me?”

“No.” All my nerves came rushing back. I fiddled with the edge of my fuzzy sweater. Skin. I wanted his skin and mine touching, preferably on the bed, but getting there seemed like a huge leap. “I want to do things too. Not just show.”

I glanced up at the overhead light, praying for guidance to sound less like a teen virgin and more like the professional I was. I could be so well-spoken in court and yet so out of my depth here.

Thankfully, Tate finally took pity on me and entered the bedroom. He flipped off the big light before turning on the bedside lamp and pointing the beam down at the floor, giving the room a dusky glow. Not dark, but not nearly so overwhelming either.

“That better?”

“Yes, thank you.” I met him halfway, pulling him close, putting all my relief and desire for him to lead into my kiss. I gave a contented sigh when he did exactly that, taking over the kiss until my thoughts were pleasantly jumbled again. Drunk on kisses and without the harsh light, undressing seemed far more manageable, especially with Tate leading the way.

My curiosity over his body overcame my own insecurities. I might be skinny and pale, but Tate was worthy of all the admiration—thick, surprisingly fuzzy chest, dark nipples, beefy biceps, and lean abs. A tattoo graced his upper right pec, and I gasped.

“Is that a stick of dynamite?”

Chuckling, he glanced down at his thick and heavy cock. “Pretty sure it’s just average?—”

“I meant your tattoo.” I reached out to touch the design featuring a popular cartoon character getting ready to light the dynamite. “You got a TNT tattoo?”

“I did.” His face darkened, a rare blush, as he glanced away. “I always was the reckless one.”

“I love it.” I dropped a reverent kiss onto the tattoo. Maybe he was right, and this thing between us was simply meant to be. Destiny.

I kissed his mouth next, and he kissed me back with a new intensity. He toppled us both gently onto the mattress, solving my question of how to make it to the bed. Looming over me, he gazed down tenderly.

“God, you’re so hot. How did you get so hot?”

“Hey, I’m wondering that too.” I laughed and touched his tattoo again.

“We can kiss all night.” He dropped a light peck on my nose before claiming my mouth again. “Heck, simply cuddling would be awesome.”

“You’re sweet.” Smiling, I kissed him back. “But I do want...more. Just not sure what. Not a lot of...imagination.”

“I’ve got you, Tenn.” He touched me lightly all over—my beard, then my collarbones, each nipple, my quivering abs, and at last, my aching cock.

“Yes.” I stared down my torso at my cock in his hand. Tate’s hand was big and broad and utterly perfect. My hips jerked upward, not waiting for permission. “Oh yes.”

“Easy.” Tate loosened his grip right before I was about to shoot on the second pass of his hand. “Not yet. I’m trying to go slow here.”

“Go fast instead,” I begged.

“How do you do it when it’s just you?” he asked conversationally as if inquiring about the snow forecast.

I made an impatient noise. “I haven’t managed to jerk since breaking my wrist.”

“Poor baby.” He tortured me with more feathery touches along my cock, not nearly enough to make me come, but plenty to drive me crazy.

“But when I can jerk, it’s always my right hand, usually with lotion.” My face heated. I couldn’t believe I was revealing all this. “I’m pretty boring.”

“You are not,” Tate scolded. “Show me the lotion.”

Figuring this was about to head all sorts of good places, I fished the small bottle out of my nightstand with minimal embarrassment. This was Tate. It was difficult to stay too self-conscious.

“Oh, I like this.” I moaned as he gripped me with a slick fist. This was going to be over in three point four seconds, and I hadn’t even touched him yet. I reached between us, trying to match his rhythm, but the angle was all wrong for using my left hand. I huffed out a breath. “I want something for you too.”

“Trust me that anything I do to you is for me as well, but let me show you something else?”

“Gladly.” I happily let him arrange me on my side, him spooning me from behind.

“We’re like our pets.”

“We are.” He matched my silly tone before further adjusting us. And then there was no room for silliness, only sexy, him angling his cock between my thighs while stroking me with a slippery hand.

“Oh, this works.” I closed my eyes and sank further into the sensations of him behind me, warm and urgent. His woodsy scent was stronger like this, and the faint tickle of his body hair revved my nerve endings even higher. He lightly nipped at my shoulder blades as he held me tightly.

“Yeah it does.” Groaning, he moved faster against me, grip tightening on my cock.

“I’m not going to last,” I warned. It had been too long since I’d done this myself, let alone with another person, and much as I wanted to go all night, my body had other ideas.

“It’s okay, baby.” Tate licked my spine. “Go fast, then slow later.”

“Later.” I breathed the word like a promise. “I’m... Tate.”

Being this close to the edge, sharp and unknown, was scary and intense. Pleasure washed over me, and I shuddered hard.

“That’s it. You’re so perfect.” Tate kissed every bit of my back he could reach, reassuring me with his touch as much as his voice. “Tighten your legs for me. That’s it.”

“Are you...?” I trailed off as another wave of good feelings carried me higher. I wanted him to come too, preferably first, but I was already right there. My whole body tensed, ready, but not quite?—

“Come on, Tenn. Come.”

“Yes. Oh. Yes. God.” That was exactly what I’d needed—his command, permission to shut off my always-thinking brain and come in gloriously abundant spurts all over his fist and my stomach. My brain short-circuited, and all I knew was pleasure, overwhelming pleasure. And Tate. He surrounded me, turning all those scary feelings into something warm and wonderful. I came so much that I was still cresting as he sped up, thrusting hard and fast against me, grunting softly.

“Me too. Me too.” He groaned loudly a final time as he came, hot and sticky between my legs.

The mess should have been slightly off-putting, but it wasn’t at all. Made me want to experience that inside of me sometime soon as well. But like he’d said, we had time.

All the time in the world, hopefully. I stretched, content, as Tate fetched a small towel from the nearby bathroom. He cleaned us both up before cuddling back in.

“Now what?” I whispered. Was I supposed to say good night? Ask him if he’d brought a toothbrush?

Before I could let my brain get out of control again, however, the animals both wandered in. First, Clifford jumped onto the foot of the bed, and then Mouse came and delicately arranged herself under the nightstand.

“Well, Mouse clearly thinks she’s in for the night, but in a minute, I’ll find pants and take her to the backyard so she doesn’t wake us at five.” Tate gave my neck a friendly lick. “Okay with us staying over?”

Ah. That. That was what came next, and I liked it. Easy and wonderful, like everything else with Tate.

“Please.” I smiled up at him as he hefted himself upright.

“Good.” He bent to kiss my mouth. Lust momentarily dampened, the kiss was more affectionate, but I reveled in its quiet familiarity. “In the morning, I’ll make you coffee. Send you off to save the world with a smile.”

“You’re already the perfect boyfriend.” I smiled so hard I had to be almost literally glowing.

“Yep.” Tate laughed before he sobered. “In all seriousness, I’m not perfect. I’m messy. I can be bossy.”

“You think?” Sitting up beside him, I dropped a kiss on his bare shoulder. “I should have said that you’re perfect for me . Because I know you’re not some fantasy dude dreamed up by an algorithm. You’re Tate, my best friend. And you’re the perfect boyfriend for me.”

“Awww.” Tate’s features went soft with more emotion than I could remember ever seeing in his dark eyes. “You too, Tenn. You too.”

“Me?” I knew Tate was a catch. But me? “Even CUPID was stumped by me.”

“Yes, you.” He lightly nipped my neck. “And maybe CUPID led you straight to me. I’ve never met anyone with as big a heart as yours, who cares as deeply. You’re hot, sexy, amazing...”

I cut him off with a fit of laughter. “I’m already yours.”

“I know.” He kissed me soundly on the mouth. “But I’m going to keep on making sure you know it. Deal?”

“Deal.” I kissed him back. Funny how he’d only been back in my life for a matter of days, and now he felt like home. Like my whole future too. TNT. Together forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:30 am

One Year Later

Tennessee

“Don’t let me fall,” I begged as I took my first wobbly step onto the ice rink. “I don’t want another cast.”

“As if.” Tate scoffed, but he did hold my arm that much tighter, tucking me against him. “And you look so sexy in black.”

“Tate.” I tried to sound stern but failed miserably. Ever since the rink had opened at the park in December, he’d been on me to come skate with him. Finally, he’d worn me down by claiming all he wanted for Valentine’s Day was hot cocoa and ice skating. I would have eventually agreed, regardless, but he said he wanted to replace my disastrous last skating outing with a new, better memory. Which had made a lot of sense until I was actually here: thin blades on my feet, ankles feeling more like bobbleheads, sitting seeming like the far more prudent course of action.

“Skate with me.” He used the same cajoling tone that had worked on me so many times the last year. Hiking the falls. River swimming. Getting on a boat. Snowboarding. Moving in together. Whenever I’d had nerves, he’d had certainty and swagger. He didn’t doubt, and following him inevitably led to fun new TNT adventures. “One turn, and then I’ll get you the biggest hot cocoa they offer. Promise.”

“Whipped cream?” I let him guide me a few tentative inches. The rink was more crowded than when we’d walked Mouse and Clifford at the park. They had matching

snow booties and seemed to enjoy their outings as much as we did. The rink was usually the territory of young families, nervous tweens, and giggly teens, but today, there were a lot of spectators around the edges and more skaters than I'd expected. Valentine's Day rush, probably.

"Yep." Tate waggled his eyebrows at me. "And the rest of the night is all yours. Pizza, brownies, and that new legal drama you like."

"I do like correcting their mistakes." I grinned and managed another fraction of an inch of forward momentum.

"I know you do, baby." Tate tugged me a little harder. We moved, but I managed not to yelp and let him lead, as always. "Now, hold on tight. Right foot. Left. Slow and easy."

"We're doing it." A shaky giggle escaped my throat as we made actual progress, making it past the first turn. "Oh my gosh, we're really doing it."

"We are." He beamed at me, pride clear in his shining eyes. But then he stopped.

"Hey," I protested, looking around, not seeing a reason for the pause. "Why are we stopping?"

"Now he wants to keep going." Tate gave me an epic eye roll. "Of course. See? Just like snowboarding."

"Maybe," I allowed.

"Probably." Tate grinned more at me and then carefully let go of the death grip I had on him and dropped to the ice in front of me.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Tate said with way more patience than I likely deserved.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

Laughter sounded from the spectators nearby, and for the first time, I looked past my fear of falling and recognized faces. My boss from CASA. A few of Tate’s first responder friends—who had become my friends too—Tate’s parents. His siblings. Even my foster parents had made an appearance. Everyone who’d mattered to us over the past year, including Madge, our favorite ER clerk.

“Here?” My voice was shakier than my knees, which was really saying something.

“Here.” Tate was, as always, the firm one. “Told you. The proposal was a when not if.”

“Wow.” My head swam, vision blurring a tiny bit before I blinked.

“Breathe,” Tate ordered as he pulled out a simple gold ring. “Tennessee, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I love you more than I ever dreamed possible, and you make me so happy. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” Finally, something I didn’t have to think about and a challenge I’d gladly accept. “Yes. A million times, yes.”

I reached for him, forgetting I was on skates, and wobbled like a tray of Jell-O squares.

“Careful.” Straightening, Tate steadied me before kissing me soundly. “I’ve got you.”

“You do.” I kissed him back, and the whole rink cheered. “Did you really tell the

whole town?”

“Most of it.” Tate shrugged. “They love us.”

“You’re easy to love.” I touched the back of his neck, brushing his closely cropped hair.

“You too, Tennessee.” He turned to peer deeply into my eyes. “They all love you. This is your hometown too.”

He was right. I’d come back to Mount Hope for a reason, and I’d found exactly what I hadn’t known I was looking for.

“And you’re my soulmate.” I kissed him again. “Turns out, breaking my wrist was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Me too.”

Thank you for reading! If you’d like to see more of Tate and Tennessee, they make some pop-up appearances in my Mount Hope series, which starts with book one, *Up All Night* . Flip the page for a sneak peek of Sean and Denver’s happy ever after!

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Mount Hope, Book 1

Denver

The hot ginger firefighter was in for breakfast again. A little older than my thirty-nine and on the shorter side, but oh so easy on the eyes. Third time this week, but his first after a shift change. Knowing the shift schedule for the nearby firehouse was an occupational hazard, not the result of stalking any first responder eye candy.

I might look, but uniforms were far from my usual. Give me someone scruffy, a little feral, a lot wounded... Okay, hot messes were my personal kryptonite. A habit I was trying hard to break. I'd given up smoking, partying, and I'd been working the overnight shift here at Honey's Hotcake Hut for over eighteen months now. I was almost a regular upstanding citizen. Almost.

Sizzle. Two eggs over easy joined the not-too-crispy bacon on my griddle as I finished the previous order while Tammy got the firefighters situated at the counter. Only three of them today, down from their usual full-shift crew looking for after-midnight chow. We were one of the very few twenty-four-hour options for food in Mount Hope, so I didn't kid myself that the new guy had been coming around to see me specifically.

I did, however, nod at all three of them as Tammy poured their coffee and doled out glasses of juice.

"No middle-of-the-night munchies run?" I teased the group as I plated the order for the only other patron at the counter, an old farmer named Ed who spoke little, tipped

less, but came in like clockwork every Saturday. Near the window, a hungover group of twenty-somethings nursed coffee refills while picking at half-eaten plates of loaded hash browns.

“We were up all night babysitting the last of a warehouse fire out south of town.” Ginger’s younger friend, a blond firefighter I’d privately nicknamed Fireman Flirty, answered first. Flirty’s real name was Caleb, and he’d demonstrated a willingness to banter with everyone from eight months to eighty.

“And now we’re starving.” Ginger groaned. He wore jeans and a blue pullover rather than his usual uniform. The look made him seem far more approachable, a quiet vulnerability in his eyes that did something for me. “I could murder a stack of pancakes.”

“That’s rather violent.” Caleb laughed easily. “But I’d like to make out with some bacon about now.”

“Your usual meat-lovers omelet with a side of bacon?” I asked, already prepping. Caleb was as predictable as he was flirty.

“You know it.” Chuckling, Caleb jerked his head toward Ginger. “And whatever my friend here wants. I owe Sean big time after last night.”

“Hey, I’m enjoying being out in the field.” Ginger— Sean— held up his hands. The name suited him, a short, sharp, masculine nod to his Irish looks. And damn it, of course, he had dimples. Adults had no business with dimples. Too damn devastating and possibly as tempting as wounded eyes and pouty lips. “Saving Caleb’s ass a mud bath was a bonus.”

“And what a cute ass it is.” Tammy smirked as she topped off the coffee. Like Caleb, she was an unrepentant flirt. Somewhere between fifty-five and seventy, not that she’d ever fess up to that many years, Tammy looked like Dolly Parton’s redheaded

half-sister. Like me, she'd had her share of hard-living years, but her smile and quick wit kept diners coming in. "Good thing you didn't get dirty. Might have had to offer you a sponge bath myself."

"Don't encourage him." The third firefighter grimaced. Tom Johnson had been coming in for as long as I'd been at Honey's, and he'd been grumpy the whole damn time. "And I'll take some of those loaded hash browns. Gotta recall my misspent single youth."

"Coming up." I nodded even before Tammy added the order. Johnson's unhappily married state was a frequent source of his complaints and his attempts at jokes.

"And you, sweetie?" Tammy asked Sean. Busy at the grill, I still managed to listen for his reply.

"Can't decide. I'm torn between an omelet and hash browns. Or a skillet. Decisions." Sean's tone wasn't nearly as flirty as Caleb's, but I liked his friendly yet strong voice. Made me feel a certain warmth I hadn't had much of this long damn winter.

I briefly turned back to the counter. "Want me to surprise you?"

"Take Denver up on it," Tammy urged with a cackle. "His surprises are usually worth it. Usually."

"Sure thing. Save me from myself." Sean offered a grin, and those dimples were even better in high-definition. Made me want to make him smile more, an unfamiliar urge outside of the normal desire to make sure our diners left happy.

"Any allergies?"

"Only to good taste." Answering for Sean, Caleb pretended to shudder. "Pineapple does not belong on pizza."

“Hey, I ordered the usual suspects too.” Sean rolled his eyes at the younger firefighter.

“I should take you to Pinball Pizza. Teach you what the good stuff tastes like,” Caleb countered as I continued to work on their orders.

“You asking the newbie out?” Johnson didn’t sound horrified as much as curious, which was about what I’d expect from this crew. Like me, Caleb seemed to have an equal opportunity dick, and I’d seen all manner of pairings among the area’s first responders. Interestingly, Sean blushed but didn’t do the straight-guy bluster thing.

“If I ask someone out, there’s no doubt.” Caleb gave a flirty wink that set Tammy to laughing.

“You’re a heartbreaker, for sure.” Tammy moved to the register to ring the college kids out, then seated an older couple in a booth and a trucker at the counter. We were starting to pick up, and I was happy to see Amos wander in for his shift about that time, followed by two more servers. Tammy was busy filling the day crew in on how the overnight went, so I delivered the firefighters’ orders myself.

“Meat-lovers special. hash browns.” I slid Caleb and Johnson their plates. “And for you, a Hawaiian omelet.”

“I love it.” Sean treated me to another dimple show, and the flex of his biceps as he reached for the hot sauce offered even more to like. “Thank you.”

Amos had already fired up the second grill, so I took a breather to lean on the counter. “So, newbie, what brings you to town?”

“He thinks you’re a rookie.” Caleb made a sound between a cough and a laugh, which made me wish Sean had come in without the audience. “Tom was joking earlier. Sean’s not really a newbie. Captain out of Seattle. But he’s Chief Murphy’s

son. Mount Hope royalty.”

“Hardly.” Sean snorted. “But to answer the question, I’m helping out an old friend and making my folks happy at the same time.”

“Ah.” I’d had a vague sense of knowing the dude all week, and the pieces finally clicked into place. “Bumped into you at Doc Wallace’s service, didn’t I?”

I didn’t know exactly why I’d gone to that funeral. Neighborly thing to do, but I was hardly known as the neighborly type. And while Dr. Wallace had been my doctor and someone who’d helped me, I wasn’t sure I’d call him a friend. I’d run into Sean here on my way out of the church when my head had been a jumble of conflicting thoughts, and it was no wonder I’d needed time to place the connection.

“Yep.” Sean’s ready answer said he’d known who I was all along. “I’m staying with Eric and covering for a firefighter on maternity leave.”

“Good for you.” Tammy floated over to refill the coffee cups again. “I’m sure those Wallace-Davis kids need all the help they can get.”

“Yep.” I gave a last nod before turning to clean my grill and get ready to clock out. Figuring out where I knew Sean from had unsettled me some, but the cleaning routine cleared my head. Honey’s Hotcake Hut was located in the same aging building it had occupied for fifty-something years. Not the fanciest or newest joint, but with so many nurses and first responders among the regulars, the place prided itself on cleanliness, something I appreciated too.

I heard Tammy ring up the firefighters shortly before we clocked out at seven. Already counting down to a hot shower, I headed for my ancient red Chevy. To my surprise, I found Sean standing next to a much shinier blue truck. A deep scowl had replaced his dimples.

“You still here?” I asked as I approached. “Truck problems?”

“Locked my dumbass out. Not even sure how.” He made a sour face as he pointed at the keys laying on the passenger seat. “I’ve got a spare back at Eric’s, but I don’t want to wake him or the kids up early on a Saturday. And God knows I’m not calling the station.”

“The teasing might do you in,” I agreed. The firefighters were among my favorite customers, but they could be a rowdy bunch.

“Guess I might as well start walking.”

“Nah.” I shook my head and pointed at my truck. “Get in.”