



The Wounded Mountain Man (Lovin' in the Mountains #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Wade

When a training accident ends my military career before it properly begins, I'm lost with no clue what to do next. After wallowing in self-pity for a year, I finally return to the small mountain town I grew up in.

When I show up on my best friend's doorstep unannounced, broke, and smelly after two days of hitchhiking, Logan takes me in and makes me feel like I'm not a total loser. We quickly fall back into our usual rhythm, and it's like we were never apart.

Spending time with him reignites a flame that refuses to burn out. That we could be more than just friends. Even if he left no room at graduation for anything else to develop.

Logan

Wade arriving unexpectedly is a surprise, but it's something my ASD brain can process and manage. Catching a close-up of his wet, glistening body as he steps out of the bathroom without a towel? Uh, that's another thing entirely.

I've carved out a simple, quiet life for myself in the mountains. Being on the spectrum—I'm super organized, have strong attention to detail, and am routine-oriented—has made my love life nonexistent. It's got nothing to do with my feelings for Wade.

I realized I was in love with him in high school, but I made a mess of things at graduation. Now that he's back, maybe I can make up for that mistake? And if I can, maybe he'll stay for good.

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Page 1

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There's a well-known meme of Homer Simpson falling down a cliff in an endless loop of painful bumps, crashes, and d'ohs. It's a metaphor for failure, of things going from bad to worse, capturing a seemingly never-ending downward spiral.

That meme sums up my life just about perfectly.

I crank the tap as far as it'll go and turn away from the tiled wall, letting the spray fall onto my neck, shoulders, and back, as if a little hot water will do anything to relieve the tension stored in my muscles.

Can't believe I'm back here.

And by here, I don't mean showering in my best friend's bathroom—although, there's a whole world to unpack there—but back in my small hometown of Thickehead. Five generations of Bensons have called these mountains home, and I'm a proud mountain man through and through. I knew I'd return here after serving, but I never thought I'd return so soon and be in the state I'm in.

Lost and directionless, with no clue what to do next.

Broke, with exactly seventy-eight cents in my bank account and five rolled-up hundreds my stepdad, Dale, slipped into my hand before I left his and Mom's place in Scottsdale and hitchhiked across two states to get here.

And wounded by a stray bullet that halted my military career before it properly began.

All I've ever wanted is to follow in my father's footsteps and join the military. He served and sacrificed his life in Afghanistan, while my older brother, Charlie, is currently on deployment overseas.

From the moment I set foot at Fort Benning near Columbus, Georgia, fresh out of high school, a feeling of rightness settled over me. I was meant to be there. I completed basic training with flying colors before moving on to advanced training in infantry and combat arms.

My first duty station assignment was in Fort Carson, Colorado. I loved working with mechanized vehicles, engaging in mountain warfare training, and taking part in combined arms live-fire exercises.

Until one day, during one of those live-fire exercises, we were out in rocky terrain when a bullet from one of my battle buddies struck a rock and ricocheted straight into my hip and shattered the bone, destroying my life forever in a split second.

A growl emanates from deep in my chest, and I punch down on the pump dispenser of Logan's body wash a few times. Vanilla and almond fill the steam-laden air, and for a moment, the simmering anger and self-pity that have taken up permanent residence inside of me take a back seat as my lungs fill with the familiar scent of my best friend.

Logan Parker-Gillis.

Despite being the polar opposite of me—he's Mr. Super Reliable, always organized, has a freaking mortgage at the age of twenty-three, and I'd bet that his sock drawer is sorted by color and style—I can't remember a time when we haven't been friends. His family have lived on the mountain almost as long as mine, and we've always been in each other's lives.

Growing up, it felt familial. And then teenage hormones kicked in, and I realized a guy could make me pop a boner as easily as a girl could, and things with Logan got interesting.

Any sense of brotherliness between us vanished—from my end, at least—replaced by thoughts and feelings and fantasies that were in a whole other realm.

We had a double coming out freshman year of high school. The night I told him I was bi, he told me he was gay. It kicked my already overactive imagination into overdrive. Maybe we could be more than just best friends?

Sadly, for the rest of high school, nothing romantic happened between us. Neither one of us really fit in—he was a nerd, I was the bad boy who skipped class and would smoke cigarettes in the toilets—but we didn't care about anyone else. We had each other. Hiking, fishing, exploring caves, soaking in hot springs—you name it, we did it together. I was scared to tell him how I felt and mess things up.

And then we had a moment.

It happened at graduation. Just before the ceremony. We were huddled in the corner of a classroom together, in our own little world as usual, shooting the shit as our classmates nervously buzzed around us and Logan's two brothers—he's a triplet—commanded the limelight as usual.

He and I were discussing something, can't remember what exactly, when we stopped talking and turned to each other at the same time. It felt like a scene straight out of the movies, where the noise and people and everything fades away, and all that was left was just him and me.

I reached out and curled my fingers around his. The explosion of warmth that simple touch ignited in me almost made me come on the spot. I leaned in, closing my eyes

way too early—rookie mistake—and angling my head ever so slightly in the universal signal for I'm coming in for a kiss.

Until he said two little words.

"We shouldn't."

My eyes flew open, and I pulled back so sharply I almost tripped over my gown. The sting of his words pierced through my chest, but I did my best to brush it off. "Shit. Of course not. Sorry."

"No. It's just?—"

He was cut off by his brothers pulling him in for a selfie, then a few moments later, Ms. Buchanan, the school counselor, entered and started barking out orders about leaving our cell phones in the designated boxes in the classroom and lining up alphabetically.

The moment was gone, like it never happened. We've never brought it up, so I like to kid myself that maybe it didn't. Maybe I daydreamed the whole thing. I'm either deluding myself or facing the truth that there's no way a guy like Logan could ever be interested in a guy like me. Especially now in the state I'm in.

I finish showering and notice the tap is leaky. I'll have to fix that. Biting back a grimace, I lift my leg out of the shower-tub combo and guide it onto the tiled floor. Despite initial treatment at Evans Army Community Hospital and months of rehab following the accident, reduced mobility and chronic pain are now a fact of life.

I look around for my towel and curse under my breath when I remember I left it on the edge of my bed. Logan had folded it neatly into thirds and left it there in his immaculately clean guest room when I showed up out of the blue, smelling like I

hadn't showered in two days—because I hadn't—after hitchhiking across state lines from Mom's new place in Scottsdale to the mountains of California.

I amble over to the bathroom door, ignoring the dull pain in my leg while brushing water off my arms and chest. The guest room is directly opposite, and Logan's in the kitchen making dinner, so even though my movements are hindered, I should be able to grab my towel and duck back without getting his floors too wet or him seeing me.

I open the door and almost walk straight into the top of a mop of curly dark hair. "Whoa."

Logan straightens, taking a half step back. His impossibly innocent round blue eyes, like a kitten's, are wider than normal as they zoom up and down my body.

My naked body.

My hands fly to my junk. "Shit. Sorry."

He meets my gaze, his cheeks infused with a pretty pink. "No. I'm sorry. I was just leaving you a towel since I figured..."

"I'd leave it on the bed?" I finish for him.

The pink on his face darkens, and he scratches his arm. "Well, yeah." He really does know me better than I know myself sometimes. "Here." He bends over and picks up the towel for me.

"Thanks." I take it from him, our fingers brushing ever so slightly, causing sparks to shoot all the way up my arm to my collarbone. Fuck. Even after all these years, his touch still affects me.

He looks away as I slip the towel around my waist then turns his head back slowly. My belly goes light as that movie-moment sensation returns, reigniting a flame that refuses to burn out.

He rubs the back of his neck. "Dinner will be on the table in three minutes," he says before turning and practically sprinting back into the kitchen, snuffing out any remaining spark of hope I had left.

Guess it's pretty clear Logan and I will only ever be friends.

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I race back into the kitchen, my whole body on fire, turn the cold water on full tilt, and run my hands under it, trying to cool myself down.

Wade's arrival this afternoon was unexpected but something my ASD brain can process and manage. Catching a close-up of his wet, glistening body? Uh, yeah. That's another thing entirely. God, I hope I didn't gawk at him like an idiot or say anything stupid. Everything that isn't him standing naked in my bathroom doorway is now a blur.

My fingers start going numb, so I turn the tap off, dry my hands, and busy myself plating our dinner.

Wade showing up on my doorstep, unannounced, disheveled, and absolutely stinking, has caught me off guard. I'm a creature of habit, and I like routines. I've carved out a simple, quiet, some might say slightly boring life for myself in the mountains where things, for the most part, run according to plan.

Monday to Friday, nine to five, I work as a Program Coordinator at the Thickehead Veterans Recovery Center.

I have weekly Sunday dinners with my folks.

A daily chat thread with my brothers that allows me to stay updated on their latest adventures.

Book club at the library two towns over every first Tuesday of the month.

Rufus lets out a loud meow, like he can read my thoughts and is pissed he's not included in them. "I could never forget you." I crouch down and run my hand through his soft, dense reddish-brown fur. Rufus is a rescue Abyssinian and officially the most beautiful cat ever in the history of everything. I give him a scratch under his chin. "You know you're my number one."

Rufus's ears prick, hearing Wade's footsteps before I do, and he rubs himself against my leg, stretches out his neck, and gives me a sly look as if saying I may be your number one feline, but let's be real about who your number one human is.

"Can I help with anything?" Wade asks.

He's dressed now, leaning against the wall in a clean white T-shirt and gray sweatpants, his wavy dark hair still damp. But the memory of his hard muscles, glistening chest, and long floppy cock isn't going to leave my brain anytime soon, especially since he practically headbutted—or, rather, more accurately, butted into my head—with that thing.

"No, no. I've got it." I leave Rufus. He saunters over to his scratching post while I grab the bowls from the counter and join Wade as he eases himself into the dining nook. I'm trying not to stare in an obvious way, but it's jarring seeing someone who used to be spritely and agile moving so slowly.

"Hope mac and cheese is okay," I say, sliding a bowl in front of him.

He runs a hand through his thick beard—that's also new—and gives a firm nod. "Mac and cheese is perfect."

"Cool."

We start eating, and after a few bites, our eyes meet.

"Is it weird that I'm here?"

"Yes. No. I mean, yes, it's a little weird. But it's good. I'm glad to see you. I've missed you."

He finishes chewing, his rich forest-green eyes not leaving me. "I've missed you, too."

Another surge of warmth throbs through me, but I push it away, just like I've been pushing unwanted thoughts away ever since I realized I was in love with Wade the summer before high school.

For most of our childhood, I couldn't believe he picked me as his friend.

Most people gravitated toward my brothers, Bodhi and Kynan.

We're triplets.

They're identical.

I'm the dizygotic one, different in looks, personality, and in every other way possible.

They're outgoing, charismatic, and even though they're my brothers, I can admit they're stunningly gorgeous, like modern-day descendants of the Greek gods with their sculpted bodies and angular faces, while lucky me inherited all the nerdy, lacks confidence in pretty much most social situations genes.

Living in their shadow has actually suited me just fine. I'm not a spotlight kind of guy. But Wade was the first—actually, the only—one who ever chose to be friends with me over them.

After he and I came out to each other, something shifted. Or at least it did for me. We'd still spend every spare moment together hiking or fishing or swimming, but there was an undercurrent brewing between us, something I could feel but never find words for.

So I kept my mouth shut about my feelings all through high school, and then at graduation, when I finally opened my mouth, I said the two stupidest words of all.

"We shouldn't."

I didn't mean we shouldn't kiss—because I'm ninety-nine percent sure that's what we were on the verge of doing—I meant we shouldn't do it right there. I wanted the first time to be special, romantic, not with the backdrop of my brothers taking cringey videos of themselves twirling in their gowns like idiots.

After graduation, Wade relocated to Georgia to begin his military training, and I went to the local college to study business administration, and despite remaining connected, we never spoke of it again.

I take him in discreetly.

He's chewing slowly, like he's mulling something over, tiny lines appearing around his eyes.

He's got a lot going on.

It's been almost a year since that horrible accident, but full recovery is going to take years, and he might never regain full movement.

I see it every day at work, veterans learning to navigate life with new physical challenges. I wonder if he'll ever be able to go hiking through the mountains or swim

in the lake or any of the stuff we used to.

After Wade finished four months of rehabilitation in Colorado, I assumed he'd return home.

But he didn't.

He stayed with some military buddies in San Diego where, according to him, he did nothing but bum around and sit on the beach, drowning his sorrows.

When he ran out of money, he moved in with his mom and her new husband in Scottsdale.

Our last text was three days ago when he wrote something about not wanting to overstay his welcome. Next thing I know, he's knocking on my front door, asking if he can crash. And shower.

"How's your mom and Dale?"

"They're good. Mom's happy, which is all I want for her. It's been fourteen years since Dad died, and it's time she moved on. Dale's a good guy. He treats her well."

"Was he okay with you staying there?" I've only met Dale a few times before they moved from the mountains to the desert, and he seemed nice, but you never know.

"He was. When I got there, he was midway through converting their carport into an Airbnb studio. I helped him finish it, and he said I was welcome to stay as long as I wanted. It's his second marriage, but since he doesn't have any kids, I think he's digging being a stepdad."

"That's sweet of him."

"It is." Wade sighs, dropping his spoon into his bowl with a loud clunk. "I just felt like a burden. And a total deadbeat loser with no money, no job, no actual prospects."

"Hey. You are not a loser." His defeated eyes meet mine, and he simply shrugs, like he doesn't even have it in him to fight me on it. "What about Hattie?" I ask. "Does she know you're back?"

Hattie is his sister-in-law. She runs the diner that's been in Wade's family for generations.

"No." He shakes his head and picks up his spoon again. "It was a spur-of-the-moment decision to leave."

"She'll be happy to see you. Not to mention Sofie and Jax."

His eyes brighten at the mention of his niece and nephew. "I'll pop in to see them soon."

We eat in silence for a while.

"So, why hitchhiking?"

"I'm broke. Took a little longer than I expected."

"That would explain the smell."

A small smile. "Yeah. It does."

"What are your plans?"

He shrugs again. "To make a plan."

"Well, you're welcome here as long as you like."

"I won't stay long."

My heart sinks. "Why not? Where are you going to go?"

"Don't know. I just don't want to be a burd?—"

"You won't be," I cut him off because he's being ridiculous, and he has the good sense not to argue. We may not have lived in the same town for a few years, but that doesn't change the fact that we are and will always be besties.

If anything, maybe the time apart has done some good. It's helped me see that nothing is going to ever happen between us and that I need to move on. And I have.

Kinda.

Sort of.

Okay, maybe not really.

But I'm sure me not dating or having any sort of a love life has more to do with the fact I'm on the spectrum, like things to be a certain way, and lack any confidence when it comes to guys, and nothing to do with my feelings for Wade that stubbornly refuse to budge out of my heart.

After dinner, we wash up. Well, I insist on washing up since Wade doesn't clean or dry dishes the way I like—I have a long and complicated relationship with suds—so he keeps me company and lets me do my thing.

There isn't a whole lot to catch up on since we message and video chat a couple of

times a week. But I've been really worried about him. He's so down on himself, and as much as I've tried to help, nothing has cut through. Nothing can cut through until he decides to do something. But at least if he's living with me, I can keep a closer eye on him. All I have to do is figure out a way to make him stay.

We move to the back porch, and we're watching the night sky fill with stars when an idea pops into my head. I have to tread carefully, though. I know Wade. If I tell him he should join one of the outpatient programs we have at the center, he'll balk. Him and his damn pride. No, it needs to be his decision.

"Wanna have lunch tomorrow?" I ask lightly.

"Sure. But aren't you working?"

"I am. You can come by. There's a great cafe on-site."

Our eyes meet. His narrow slightly, and I get paranoid, freaking out that he's boring into my brain and picking up on my plan. Surely I'm not that obvious.

"Yeah, okay," he says, and I sigh in relief. "I should visit Hattie in the morning. She'll have my balls on a platter if she finds out I'm in town and haven't seen her."

I chuckle. "Of course."

"But I can drop by after that."

"Awesome."

The first step in my plan to keep Wade here is underway.

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Stepping into Benny's the next day, I'm struck by how run-down the place is. The peeling wallpaper, stools with cracked vinyl, the single row of dull and scuffed Formica tables that run along the length of the front windows. It's a far cry from the bustling diner I remember as a kid.

Back then, Thickehead was a bustling small mountain town attracting a decent weekend and holiday trade.

But then a few of the surrounding towns took off as tourist hotspots with their fancy lodges and farm-to-fork dining experiences, leaving Thickehead stuck in the past.

Business for the diner, and all the other businesses on Main Street, took a nosedive. The private veterans rehab center where Logan works opening an on-site cafe a few years ago was the final nail in the coffin.

Despite being one of the hardest working people I know, Hattie struggles to make the diner profitable.

I take my trucker hat off, and as I approach the kitchen, I'm hit by a wall of guilt.

If things were already tough while Charlie was stationed at San Bernardino, how is she coping now that he's deployed on active duty? Not to mention raising two kids. And what have I been doing? Getting drunk and feeling sorry for myself for almost a whole damn year. Why the fuck didn't I come back sooner and help her out?

There's a middle-aged couple in one of the booths and Old Man Joe perched in his usual spot at the counter, diligently chipping away at his trusty crossword puzzle

book. It's eight-thirty. This place ought to be packed with the morning rush. Instead, it's on life support.

"Hey, Joe." I clap the old man on the back as I walk past him. "How's everything?"

"The world is fucked," he answers, without glancing up from his puzzle book.

"It sure is," I say with a grin. Some things never change.

The kitchen door swings open, and Hattie's eyes widen in surprise when she notices me. "Holy shit. Wade! Gimme a sec." She lifts the two plates in her hands and scurries over to the couple in the booth. When she returns, she flings her arms over my shoulders. "It's so good to see you."

I wince, struggling to take the extra load. She must realize and pulls back immediately. "Sorry, sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No. It's fine." I drop half a butt cheek onto a stool and stretch my right leg out. "How are you?"

"Fine. How are you? And what are you doing here? Did you just get in?"

"I'm...okay. Got in yesterday."

"Yesterday? Where are you staying? Wait." A sly smile spreads across her face. "Let me guess. At Logan's?"

"Yeah." I shuffle my other cheek onto the stool. "Why are you grinning like that?"

"Oh, no reason."

There's definitely a reason, and I know full well what it is. Hattie's more like a sister than a sister-in-law, and she's the only person I've confided my feelings for Logan to.

"Um, this place." I circle my index finger in the air. "How's it going? It looks pretty dead."

"I'm very much alive, thank you very much." Joe throws some serious side-eye my way. He lifts his cup. "And some more coffee would be nice, thank you."

Hattie rolls her eyes and makes her way over to the coffee machine behind the counter. "Coming right up."

Two men and a woman walk in, all in fancy corporate wear. My guess is they're from the veterans center. It's the only place left around here where people wear tailor-made suits that cost more than most folks make in a month. They sit down in a booth, and Hattie approaches them with a smile and menus in hand.

While she's busy with them, I lean over the counter and press the Total button on the cash register, coughing loudly to cover the ding sound it makes. I glance over my shoulder. Hattie doesn't seem to have heard. Good.

I take out four of the five hundreds Dale gave me and slip the notes into the register, closing the drawer as quietly as I can. Hattie is still taking orders, but Joe is staring right at me. I bring a finger to my lips, and he shoots me a quick nod before returning to his crosswords.

Hattie runs the order into the kitchen then returns, staring at me with her almond-shaped hazel eyes, like she still can't believe I'm here. She's real pretty, slender, with freckles dusting her nose and cheeks. Her chestnut hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail with a few wisps framing her face. Most important of all, she makes my brother happy and is the best mom to Sofie and Jax.

"How are the kids?" I ask.

"They're doing well. They miss their dad." A somber look crosses her face.

"We all miss him." I reach my hand over the counter. "Hey, he's coming back."

She tries to muster a smile. "I know he will."

I look around the diner. "In the meantime, I can help fix this place up a little."

"Oh, I'd never ask?—"

"I know you wouldn't." Hattie is a proud woman—must be something in the water supply around these parts—which is why I'm sure that when she finds the money I put in the register, I'll have a hell of a fight on my hands to make her keep it. "But I'm offering."

Her eyes brighten. "Does that mean you're staying?"

"Yeah. I guess. For a while."

"Staying at Logan's place?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Nothing." She starts wiping the counter with a smug expression on her face. "Just wonder how long it'll be until you two finally get your act together, and by that I

mean get naked and do all sorts of hot man-sex stuff."

"Hattie!"

"Twenty bucks says it's within a month," Joe mutters from the other side of the counter. For an old man, he's got remarkably good hearing.

Hattie laughs while my cheeks flame under my beard. No need to let her or Joe know that, technically, Logan has already seen me naked.

"Seriously, though." She stops wiping and pins me with an earnest look. "You guys need to talk."

"We talk all the time," I reply even though I damn well know that's not what she means.

"I mean properly. I'm convinced that if you two had just talked after what happened at graduation, Sofie and Jax would have cousins to play with."

She stares at me for a few long beats, like she's trying to make her message sink in. I give a nod to let her know it has, and then she tells me about how well Sofie, who's eight, is doing in school, getting an A in math, while Jax, who's six, has been referred to an educational psychologist to get assessed for potential learning difficulties. "He's been acting out, too, ever since Charlie left. I can't get him to listen to a word I say."

"Want me to play the bad cop?"

"Would you?"

Her accepting an offer of help so quickly means the situation must be pretty bad.

"Consider it done."

The kitchen bell rings, signaling food's up, and as she takes off, I start formulating a to-do list in my head. Fix the leaking tap in Logan's shower. Patch up what needs fixing around the diner. Have a word with my nephew about treating his mom with respect.

"You leavin' already?" Hattie catches up to me as I head for the door.

"Yeah. Got lunch with Logan."

A grin spreads across her face. "Drop by for dinner? Bring Logan of course."

I nod. "Sure. I'll let you know when."

She embraces me again, mindful of not placing too much pressure on me this time.

"It's so good to have you back."

I inhale deeply, feeling the warm press of her body against mine. "Yeah. It's good to be back."

"And remember," she says, looking up into my eyes. "Talk."

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I survey the common room, tallying the group under my breath. "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen."

Hmm. That's not bad. It's only the third Drop-in Tuesday we've run so far, and the numbers have gone up each time.

"You've done a really good job here, kid."

I turn toward the deep voice coming from my left and see Tex approaching.

He was super supportive of this initiative, and without his help, I wouldn't have gotten even half the turnout.

Former military personnel who live on the mountain aren't the most social of people—something I can totally relate to—but since Tex is one of the most respected guys around here, as well as the Fire Chief of the local wildland firefighting branch, when he summoned these guys to haul their asses in here, they listened.

Well, a lot of them did.

"Thanks." I smile at the man I've known my whole life. He's my dad's best friend, so he's basically like an uncle. Because I feel so safe with him, I've been able to push myself out of my comfort zone and strike up conversations with some of these guys. Me? Semi-social. It's wild.

"I couldn't have done it without you."

"You absolutely could have." He nudges me with his elbow. "You should be proud of yourself, Logan. You've only been working here a few months, and you're already making a positive difference."

"I'm just doing my job," I say, spotting Tex's buddies and my sometimes verbal sparring partners Mitch, Bronson, Lance, and Cliff walking in. "Let the shit talking begin."

He lets out a soft laugh. "We don't tease you that much, do we?"

"You do." I elbow him back. "But I secretly love it."

"Good. I'm glad. That's how I talked most of them into coming."

"By giving them free rein to make fun of me? Nice."

With a hearty laugh, he gives me such a solid clap on the back he almost knocks me off balance. These mountain men don't know their own strength sometimes.

"And now that I know you secretly love it..."

I groan. "What have I done?"

Smiling, he says, "I'll catch you later," then joins his friends, embracing them one at a time, even Bronson, the most standoffish of the bunch.

Just as I'm about to scurry back to my office, having had my fill of peopling for a while, a figure by the entrance catches my eye. I walk over to Wade. "Hey."

"Hey." He tucks his hands into his pockets as he looks around, almost nervously. "Are you free for lunch? If not, it's cool. I can head back to the diner."

"No. I'm free and happy to eat now."

I lead him to the cafeteria next door, and it's only as we're waiting in line to place our orders that I put two and two together about why I'm picking up on a vibe from him. This is his first time back in a military setting since he finished his treatment. It makes sense he'd be in his feelings. But still, he showed up. That's what counts.

"Want to eat in the common room?" I suggest once we get our food.

"Sure."

We go back next door and sit down at one end of the super long dining table. He fills me in on how Hattie is going through a difficult patch—struggling with both Jax being a little shit and the diner, while worrying about Charlie, praying he returns safely—and that he feels guilty for being AWOL while she's been going through all of that.

"I should've come back and helped her." He stabs at his salad. "But what was I doing? Fucking around for the past year, feeling sorry for myself."

"You have every right to process what happened in your own way," I say gently. "And you're back now. That's what matters."

"Yeah. I guess."

When we finish eating, my gaze drifts over to Tex and his buddies kicking back on the couches, engaged in a lively card game.

"Want to meet some people?"

"Uh..."

Sensing his reluctance, I quickly add, "They love to make fun of me."

He grins. "You should have opened with that."

We walk over to the group. "Guys, this is my best friend, Wade. Wade, you know Tex, and this is Bronson, Cliff, Mitch, and Lance."

Wade gives a hesitant wave. "Hey, guys."

"What are you playing?" I ask as Tex begins scooping up the cards, a game having just finished.

"31 Scat," he replies.

"That sounds gross...which is exactly what I'd expect from you guys."

He chuckles. "Well, if there's anyone who knows a thing or two about gross."

The guys all snicker, and I grin. Wade looks like he's stepped into the twilight zone. "It's okay," I assure him quietly. "This is how we talk to each other. Except"—I raise my voice so they can all hear me—"usually I speak slower because, you know..." I tap my temple a few times and then point at each of the group. "Dumb dumbs."

Cliff tosses a cushion at me with his good arm. "Was that fast enough for ya?"

I fumble but manage to catch it. "Now, now," I scold him like I'm talking to a child, placing the cushion on the empty sofa, well out of their reach. "No throwing, please."

"Wanna play?" Tex asks Wade. "It's real easy."

Wade looks at me, seeming slightly unsure. "Go on," I say. "It'll be fun. Plus, I can't

overemphasize this enough—they're really dumb." Cliff picks up the TV remote, and I level my finger at him. "Especially no throwing things with sharp corners."

He puts it back down slowly.

"Yeah. Sure," Wade says, easing himself down onto the empty couch.

"What about you, Logan?" Tex asks. "You in?"

"I might just watch. I have to get back to work soon. And, yes, I do real work around here," I say before someone can chime in with a crack about how watching porn at my desk doesn't constitute work.

Tex deals each player three cards and explains the rules to Wade as they each draw a card while discarding one from their hand when it's their turn. Wade picks it up quickly and soon they're playing and chatting away.

It's all going smoothly until Lance asks, "So, Wade, are you a veteran?"

Wade's mood shifts instantly. "Um. Well. Yeah. But not really." The game stops. All eyes are on Wade as he squirms uncomfortably. "I...I never served. I got injured in a training accident, so I'm not a real?—"

"Yes, you fucking are," Tex interjects as the others nod. "The moment you put that uniform on, you become part of something far greater than yourself."

"You are a real soldier," Mitch adds with conviction.

"That's right," Bronson says, his voice as gruff as ever. "Whether you like it or not, you're one of us."

Wade blinks fast a few times, like maybe he wasn't expecting such a strong response.

Me? I'm high-fiving myself on the inside. This is exactly what I hoped would happen when I invited him to lunch here. That he'd meet these guys and they'd take him under their wing a little. It doesn't matter how many times I tell him he is a real veteran, hearing it from these guys carries so much more weight.

Wade clears his throat. "Whose turn is it?"

I glance over at Tex, and he gives me a small, almost discernible nod, like he knows the deal and he's got this.

"I should get going," I announce. "That porn ain't gonna watch itself." A few of the guys snicker. "You okay, Wade?"

His green eyes flick to meet mine. "Yeah. I'll hang out here for a bit." He turns to the group. "If that's cool?"

My heart does a happy dance when I see them all nodding. The first step of my plan to get Wade to stay couldn't have gotten off to a better start.

"Cool. I'll catch you at home, then." I start to leave then stop. "Oh, and go easy on him, fellas. He cries like a baby when he loses."

I manage to dodge the cushion Wade tosses at me.

Just.

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I inspect the washer, rolling the frayed black plastic between my fingers. "No wonder there's a leak," I say to myself.

I had a feeling that might have been the issue, so I picked up a new washer at the hardware store on the way back from what turned into a few hours of playing cards with the guys. I place the new washer into the valve stem and secure it. Then I put the valve stem and handle back into position, tightening each piece firmly in place.

"There. That should do it."

I brace the shower rod as I step out, glad I could do something, even if it is something small, to repay Logan for letting me crash at his place.

And for introducing me to the guys at the rehab center. Have to say, I wasn't all that eager to go there. I could easily spend the rest of my life without ever setting foot in one of those places again. But I'm glad I went.

I already knew Tex since everyone knows Tex, but the other guys Logan introduced me to were all cool as well. It was also great seeing Logan so relaxed and comfortable. He normally hates social situations, but knowing Tex, I'm sure he played a part in creating a space where they can all banter the way they do and make Logan feel safe.

I don't know whether I'll ever fully believe what the guys said about me being a real veteran, but it felt nice just hanging out with them. That's the thing I miss most about the military, the camaraderie and that deep connection I had with my fellow service members.

I'm making my way outside to restore the water supply when I hear a car pull up. Logan lent me his so I could get around, so I assume it's his coworker dropping him off.

"I'm out back," I call out.

He appears a few seconds later. "Hey," he says with a smile that's only grown cuter as he's grown older.

"Hey."

Seeing Logan dressed in a suit instantly sends a rush of blood to my cock. He loosens his slim, charcoal-gray tie and shrugs off his tailored navy suit jacket, but my eyes are drawn to his impossibly tight pants, how they fit perfectly over his lean, sculpted legs. Now if only I could get him to spin around for me so I could inspect that delectable bubble butt of his in closer detail.

"What are you up to?"

I clear my throat and look him in the face. "I just fixed your leaky shower."

He frowns. "I had a leaky shower?"

"In the main bathroom."

"Oh. I never use that shower."

"I noticed it yesterday, but it's fixed now," I assure him, before he spirals too much about it. "I'm just going to turn the water back on to make sure it's fixed." I've got the broken washer, so I extend my hand and show it to him. "I just needed to replace this."

He steps in closer, gazing intently at my hand for a moment. As he does, his fingers slide across my palm, and my heart starts beating faster.

"Thank you." His voice is low, husky. He toys with the washer, his fingertips skimming along my palm ever so gently. "Tell me more."

"Well." My voice cracks, so I clear my throat and start again. "Well, it was a very big job. Super complicated."

"I bet." He's not even pretending to be interested in the washer now, letting his fingers roam over to my wrist. "Life-threatening, I imagine."

"Oh yeah." I swallow thickly. "There were many, many times I feared for my safety."

He curls his hand around my wrist. I drop the washer, and it bounces along the wooden planks of the patio.

That movie-moment feeling returns with a vengeance as everything around me fades, and it's just me and Logan. Without thinking, I bridge the remaining gap between us, bring my hand to the small of his back, and tug him into me. His warm breath fans across my face as his eyes darken under hooded lids. He wants this as much as I do.

I think?

"Wait."

"No," he cuts me off. "I've waited long enough."

He's waited long enough? Did he just say that? It's a little hard to hear with all the blood rushing in my ears.

His piercing blue eyes lock on mine, and he grazes his fingers through my beard. A small smile. "I like this."

"Just being lazy."

His smile grows, his fingers tracing across the space between my lower lip and chin. "Hope you're not lazy about everything."

A deep growl rumbles from my chest, and I pull him in even closer, his hardness pressing against my thigh, mine against his belly. We'll talk later about all the shit we need to discuss. For now, I'm more than happy to let our bodies do the talking.

I cup his cheek in my hand and lean in. His face comes closer, and the last thing I clearly see is his eyes fluttering to a close as our lips meet. The faint taste of coffee mingles with something citrusy. He lets out a tiny moan, and it's the cutest sound he's ever made.

I bend lower, saving him from having to lift on his toes, as my tongue slides deeper into his mouth. A sudden jolt of possessiveness tears through me. All those years spent waiting, wanting, fantasizing, but being too afraid to do anything about it. All of that suppressed energy pours out of me and into this kiss.

My hands charge through his curls as his land on my ass, kneading my cheeks roughly. He keeps letting out a series of little moans that make my balls tingle, and I could have kept kissing him forever if a certain furball hadn't shown up and started weaving around our legs, meowing loudly.

Logan leans back slowly, his eyes locked on mine. I hold his gaze, only briefly looking down and smiling when I notice the newly red skin around his lips.

"Thanks for cockblocking me, Rufus," I say, and Logan finally draws his eyes away

from me and down toward his cat.

Rufus meows even more insistently. "He's hungry. Suppose I should feed him. And you?"

"Am I your personal pet now?"

Logan smirks, hooking a finger down the dip of my V-neck. "I don't know. Are you?"

And with a sparkling gleam in his eyes, he gives me a quick peck on the lips and scurries inside to feed Rufus.

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I race inside. Who the fuck was that person on the patio? Any game I had with Wade a few seconds ago is gone, replaced by a burning feeling from head to toe. A pleasurable burning feeling, but still.

I don't do stuff like that. I don't make flirty small talk. I don't play handsies. I don't kiss my best friend! I've never been that guy. Until about two minutes ago, that is.

I turn the tap to run some cold water over my hands, but nothing comes out. Oh, that's right. Wade hasn't had a chance to turn the water back on. Okay, okay. I fan my face with one hand as I prepare the kibble with the other.

Rufus starts munching away as soon as the bowl hits the ground. I straighten and look out the window, watching as Wade makes his way back from the well. He's in the same clothes he was in before, jeans and a red flannel shirt unbuttoned over a black T-shirt, but he looks different somehow. He looks up and catches me staring at him. He smiles, and even that seems different.

I spin around. "Okay, I need to get a grip. It was just a kiss. It doesn't change anything," I mutter under my breath, finishing my mini pep talk just before Wade steps into the house.

"I'll, uh..." He points toward the hall. "Go check if the tap is good."

"Okay. Um..."

He stops in place. "Yes?"

I scratch my arm awkwardly, caught in a weird space between losing my nerve while desperately trying to recapture some of the courage I had only a few short minutes ago. A surge of adrenaline shoots through me as I push off the counter. "Do you need a hand with that? I mean, I can't in good conscience allow you to risk your life alone."

The corner of his mouth tips up. "No. Only a terrible person would do that."

"Exactly. And I'm not terrible."

"No." He licks his lips and shoots me a look across the kitchen that sends my already thudding heart racing even more. "You most definitely are not."

I grab his hand and lead him down the hall, remembering in the nick of time he can't run or move quickly, so I suppress my impulse to just drag him into my bedroom. We get there in decent time, though.

He smirks. "This isn't the bathroom."

"That's right. Consider this your safety orientation." I lead him to the bed and wave a hand in front of my body. "This is your safety... Now orient yourself."

He lets out a loud, unguarded laugh. "You're..." He inhales, his eyes sparkling. "Incredible."

I give his belt buckle a rough yank. "If I were you, I'd reserve judgment on that until..."

Our eyes meet. I lift a brow. Seductively. I hope. He's not running away, so I think I might be pulling it off, but then his lips straighten into a thin line, and he says flatly, "No."

"No?"

"First, we should talk."

I tap his belt buckle a couple of times in a last-ditch effort to keep the train to Blowjobsville on track before I lose my remaining nerve completely, possibly forever. He gently lifts my hand off him and steers me toward the bed.

"Okay, fine. Let's talk," I say, sitting down, trying not to sound too dejected.

It takes him a little longer to ease down and get settled. He folds one leg on the bed, keeps the other straight, and turns to me, staring into my eyes for a few long beats.

"What is it?" I ask self-consciously.

Don't tell me I've totally misread everything and completely messed things up. My heart is in my throat when he finally answers. "Nothing. I'm just getting used to the fact that I've kissed you."

"Was it...okay?"

"I wouldn't say okay."

"You wouldn't?"

He leans in, smiling. "I'd say more like the kiss I've been waiting my whole life for."

"Oh, thank fuck." A wave of relief washes over me. "I was worried there for a moment."

"You have nothing to worry about." He plays with a loose thread on my bedspread.

"I've never seen this side of you."

"Neither have I."

He cocks his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not usually like this. Or, ever, really." I look into his eyes. "It's you, Wade. You've always made me feel seen. You're the only person who chose to be friends with me and not my brothers when we were younger. You've always accepted me and all my idiosyncrasies. You make me feel it's okay to be, well, me."

He breathes in sharply, and a muscle in his jaw pulses. "If all that's true, then why did you knock me back at graduation?"

"I didn't mean to. It came out wrong."

"Saying 'we shouldn't' is pretty clear, Logan."

"I got cut off," I explain. "I meant to say we shouldn't kiss there, in front of everyone. I did want to kiss you, but I wanted the moment to be...special."

"Seriously?"

I nod, biting into my lip. "Seriously."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Clearly because I'm a grade-A idiot."

"I whole-heartedly agree with that assessment."

That breaks some of the tension that's built up in the room. He throws his head back and says, "Fuuuuuuck. All this time."

"All this time, what?"

He tilts his head forward and shrugs. "I don't know. Haven't you ever wondered if there could be something more between us?"

"Of course I have. I just..."

"What?" he presses.

I push to my feet and start pacing. "I just didn't think it was possible that a guy like you would be interested in a guy like me."

Wade tries to get up too quickly and grimaces, cursing as he rubs his leg and straightens. I move toward him to save him coming to me. He cups my cheek. "Don't ever say that again." His voice is deep, commanding. "You are the best person I know, Logan Parker-Gillis."

"Thank you. I think you're pretty—" I get interrupted by a sharp, hacking cough. My eyes shift to the doorway. "Shit. Rufus."

I run over to him, watching, horrified, as he coughs and gags, finally arching his back and dislodging a small, furry mass onto the floor. It's not the first furball he's had, and the receptionist at the vet clinic said if it happens again, I should take him in.

Patting Rufus, I turn to Logan. "I need to get him checked out. This has happened before."

"Of course. I'll come with you."

"You don't have to."

"Maybe not." He smiles, and even though it's similar to the smile I've seen a million times before, there's something about it that sends a warm current through my bones.

"But I want to."

I scoop Rufus up in my arms, and Wade and I take him to the vet together.

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"I'm glad Rufus is okay," I say over breakfast the next morning.

"Me, too." Logan finishes munching, then says, "I felt a little silly taking him in about a furball, but I'm glad I did."

"You did the right thing." Looks like Rufus might have a respiratory infection based on the chest X-rays the vet took. They did a blood test as well, and we'll know more in a couple of days when the results come back, but in the meantime, he was prescribed a broad-spectrum antibiotic, and we're keeping a close eye on his food and liquid intake to make sure he stays fed and hydrated. "Even if it means I got cockblocked by your cat yesterday. Twice."

Logan grins. "Well, today's a new day."

I grin back. "It certainly is."

Yesterday's developments were unexpected, overdue, and very welcome. By the time we got back from the vet, it was late, and we were both tired, so nothing else happened. Logan fussed over Rufus, while I fussed over him, making him a grilled cheese sandwich. It didn't feel like the right time to continue our conversation from earlier.

I wasn't able to fall asleep for a long time, so I stared at the ceiling and let my thoughts drift from topic to topic in the random, chaotic way my mind operates.

About the accident.

About whether I'll ever be able to move again like I used to.

About how good a life without pain would feel, and if I'm ever lucky enough to experience that again, I won't take it for granted, not even for a second.

About Hattie and the kids, and how Jax could be acting out because his dad is away, the same way I did when I was a kid.

About Logan and me and how we're the two biggest lunkheads in the world.

If we'd just had a conversation all those years ago, who knows what would have happened?

In all likelihood, I would have still enlisted, and he would've probably stayed and gone to community college, but would we be together? Long-distance sucks, but if there's anyone who could make it work, it'd be us.

We never had the chance to find out. But could we? Now?

And that led me straight to the biggest question mark in my life—what the fuck do I do next?

I have no money, no job, no education, no place to live—I can't crash at Logan's forever—and no plan on how to address any of it. I. Am. Screwed.

All I know for sure is that I don't want to mess things up with Logan. I care about him too much to risk hurting him. It wouldn't be fair to start something with him until I have my shit figured out, and I am a looong way from doing that.

Then I remembered the look in his eye when he grabbed my belt buckle, his eyebrow raised, his intention perfectly clear. He wanted me. Like I wanted him. And then my

cock got hard, and I jerked off, fantasizing about bending Logan over the kitchen counter, the very place where he just fixed our cereal, and stuffing his, what I'm sure is pretty, pink hole with my cock. Had a terrific night's sleep after that.

"What are your plans for the day?" Logan asks, scooping up our bowls once we've finished eating and taking them to the sink.

He's in his sexy corporate outfit again—this time it's a sharp, slim-cut charcoal-gray suit that hugs his frame just right. From the dining nook, I've got a clear line of vision to the sexy curve of his peachy ass. His light-blue shirt complements the gray, and he rolls his sleeves up and flings his skinny burgundy tie over his shoulder to avoid it getting wet as he begins washing up.

"I was thinking of going to the diner to make a start on some of the stuff that needs fixing," I reply, trying to quash the erection forming in my jeans. "Oh, that reminds me, Hattie invited us for dinner. When are you free?"

Logan turns to face me, drying his hands on a dish towel. "Let me check my overflowing social calendar... Oh, look. Turns out I'm free any night apart from Sunday, because that's dinner with my folks, and book club the first Tuesday of every month."

"So you're free this Friday?"

He grins. "I am."

"And you want to come?"

He knows Hattie and the kids, and even though he seemed relaxed with the guys at the center, I still want to make sure this isn't overwhelming for him.

"I'd love to. Actually, wait. I have an idea."

He shares what he's come up with, and I smile. "Cool. I think Hattie will like that." He turns around again, and my gaze drops to that delectable ass. "I'll speak to her about it today."

"I've got a bone to pick with you, mister."

Thankfully, Hattie's words are drowned out by Sofie and Jax barreling toward me. "Uncle Waaade!"

"Careful. No jumping," Hattie calls out from behind them, and just as they're about to launch themselves at me, they stop. I carefully lower onto my knee and bring them in for hugs, one on each arm. "Hey, kiddos. I missed you both so much."

"We missed you, too, Uncle Wade," Sofie replies.

I close my eyes for a moment, breathing in their familiar kid scent of shampoo and vanilla. I didn't want to wait until Friday to see them, so I texted Hattie after breakfast to see if I could drop in and say hi to them before school.

"Did you bring us a present?" Jax asks, grinning up at me with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Jax, honey, we don't ask people for gifts, we're just happy to see them."

His smile vanishes, and he turns to Hattie. "Shut up!"

"Hey," I snarl, making both him and Sofie flinch. I point my finger at Jax, and he gulps. "That's no way to speak to your mother."

Looking remorseful, he turns to her and says, "Sorry, Mom."

"Inside, please," she says, and once they're gone, she heaves out a deep sigh. "Just one finger, one sentence from you, and I get an apology on the spot. What's your secret?"

"Don't take it personally," I say, getting back to my feet. "I was a shit when Dad was away. It would take one of Dad's military buddies coming over and giving me the finger-growl combo to get me into line."

Hattie sags against the porch railing. "I thought I had a few more years until hormones turned them against me."

"Boys can start early."

"Boys are the worst." She jabs me sharply in the chest. "And so are grown-up boys."

"Ow. What did I do?"

"The money that mysteriously found its way into my cash register."

"Oh, that. It's a...Christmas miracle?"

Her eyes narrow. "It's April."

"Take it," I plead. "Don't make me give you the finger-growl combo."

"I'd like to see you try." Her expression softens. "Thank you. I'll pay you back."

"Absolutely not."

She throws her hands up in the air. "Ugh. Boys!"

I grin, before turning serious. "It's fine, really. And don't worry about Jax. I'll have a proper chat with him soon. Oh, and how does Friday night dinner sound?"

She manages a smile even though she looks drained. "That'll be great. I'll cook up some?—"

"No need. When I told Logan about it, he insisted you have the night off. He wants to cook you a meal. If that's okay?"

Her smile grows, crinkling the soft skin around her eyes. "That would be wonderful. Tell him I'd love that." She looks over her shoulder. There's no sign of the kids. "So, have you guys had a chance to talk? Or have you been too busy giving him an adult version of your finger-growl combo?"

I drop my gaze but the flush on my neck must give me away, causing my sister-in-law to cackle at me. "Okay. That answers that question. Anything you want to share?"

"Maybe. I'll tell you later at the diner."

"The diner?"

"Yeah." I look up, fold my arms across my chest, and declare with a proud nod, "You're looking at your new handyman."

I spend the next few days fixing stuff around Benny's, and in return, Hattie keeps me well-fed and manages to pry every last detail about Logan out of me. It's obvious she's gunning for me and Logan to make it, but she also understands my situation.

How can I even think about starting a relationship when I have no clue what my future beyond the next few days holds?

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"I'm so happy to see you," I say to Hattie as I take the casserole out of the oven and set it on the trivet to rest for a few minutes. "It's been way too long." Hattie is someone else I've known for ages and feel comfortable with.

"It has. And thank you for tonight. After cooking all day, I appreciate a night off."

"I bet. And it's my pleasure. More wine?"

She giggles. "Sure. Why not?"

I texted Wade earlier today to get him to suggest to Hattie that we pick her and the kids up. That way she can relax and enjoy a couple of drinks. The woman works hard, and she deserves a break.

I refill her glass with Chardonnay. "Oh, before I forget." I grab a cube of ice from the freezer and drop it into the glass.

She lets out another giggle. "This is so fancy. I feel like I'm at a day spa."

I smile even though it's kind of sad that this is her idea of getting spoiled. I make a mental note to speak to Wade about taking the kids off her hands and gifting her a visit to an actual day spa.

Sofie is sitting in the dining nook doing her homework, optional according to Hattie, but something Sofie never skips on Friday nights, and Wade took Jax outside to have a private chat with him about the way he's been treating Hattie.

"How's the diner going?" I ask, pouring myself an iced tea.

"Slow. It's been great having Wade around to spruce the place up, but..." She catches my gaze then quickly looks away.

"But what?"

"Well, ever since that fancy-ass cafeteria opened at the military rehab center, it's basically wiped out our trade."

I wince, feeling terrible, even though that happened well before I joined.

Even if I had been around back then, I doubt I'd have been able to do anything about it.

It's privately owned, and it does a lot of good—I know for a fact the center privately sponsors veterans, offering them access to specific programs at no cost—but it also makes occasional dick moves, too.

In addition to the cafe, it's built lodging for visiting families and friends, effectively killing off a large chunk of the Thickehead Motel's clientele.

"Yeah. That sucks," I say, hating how pathetic my response is, so I distract myself by arranging the plates on the counter and getting the cutlery ready.

Hattie takes a swig of wine, then rests it on the counter, running her fingers up and down the stem of the glass. "So, you and Wade?"

I stop counting out forks. "What about me and Wade?" I know full well what she's getting at. According to Wade, it's Hattie's number one favorite topic. He's been copping a grilling the past few days while helping out at the diner.

"I know where he's at with things, but what about you?"

"That's a good question."

She grins and takes another sip. "That's why I asked."

I turn to face her, placing the forks on the counter. "I'm...treading lightly."

"Good idea. I did the same with Charlie."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot you guys were friends before taking the plunge." I start dishing out the casserole onto the plates. "Any advice?"

"Just my golden rule." She tips her glass toward me. "Talk, talk, and talk some more."

I chuckle. "We are."

She mutters something that sounds like "Should've done it years ago," and even though I hear it, I let it slide because she's absolutely right. We should have.

I don't necessarily know what it would have changed, though. Would Wade still have gone away? There's no way I would have stood in the way of his dream of a military career. It's what he's wanted to do his whole life.

Would we have done the long-distance thing? Could we have made it work? Are we actually meant to be together, or is this all just some fantasy I'm holding on to that will turn to shit the moment we give it a proper shot, potentially ruining our friendship and everything that we have?

With casserole heaped onto every plate, I blow out a heavy breath and let go of all thoughts about the past and the future and instead focus on what's happening right

now.

Starting with... "Dinner's ready!" I call out.

"Did you have a nice time?" I ask Wade, plunging my hands into the warm soapy water. We've dropped Hattie and the kids back at her place, and Wade's perched at the breakfast bar while I wash up.

"I did. Thanks again for doing everything. I feel bad you won't even let me help clean up a little." I shoot him a look. He raises his hands. "But I get it."

I smile. "I know you do."

"What did you say to Jax?" I ask. "He was like a different kid after your chat."

He strode back into the kitchen and threw himself onto Hattie, telling her how much he loved her and that he was going to try and be good from now on.

"I just said that it's important to treat everyone with kindness and respect, especially his mom. And then I reminded him that his father will hear about everything when he gets back, and that in the meantime, while I'm here, he'll have to deal with me if he steps out of line."

"Ah, so you went with good ol' fear."

He flashes a grin. "I did."

"I'm sure Hattie appreciates the backup. You know, I was thinking, maybe we can offer to babysit the kids sometime so that Hattie can go to a day spa and have some time for herself?"

"We can definitely take the kids," Wade agrees with a nod. "Not sure if she has funds for a day spa."

"We have one at the center."

"You do?" Wade's eyes bulge. "Oh, wait. Of course you do. That place has everything."

"I'll see what I can do about getting her a free pass."

"Have I told you how incredible you are?"

"Not today, no. And frankly, I'm starting to get a little down about it."

He chuckles as he lifts himself off the stool and rounds the corner, then he slides his arms around my waist and presses his hard body into me. "Well, you are," he whispers into my ear, and I lean back. His cock thickens against my ass cheek. "Did Hattie interrogate you about us?"

I place the wine glass I've been washing onto the drainboard, not caring it's still sudsy—literally a world first for me—and spin around. "She did," I say, staring into his pine-green eyes. "Said we need to communicate."

"She's right. We should."

My eyes fall to his lips. "We should."

Before I know it, we're kissing. It's urgent, hungry, desperate. The need he's stirred up in me since returning, and since our kiss a few nights ago, has left my body blazing. I'm not usually a sex-driven person, but these last few days, I've been busting out a load daily.

Mindful of Wade's restricted mobility, I step around him and walk backward, our mouths connected the whole time. His hands have found their way under my shirt, and it tickles in a good way as his fingers skim across my abs.

I nudge him so that he leans against the counter, then I drop to my knees and slide my fingers over the latch over his belt buckle. Once I get it undone, I peer up to find Wade's eyes darting around, like he's expecting someone to waltz in.

"Who are you looking for?" I ask.

"Rufus."

With a chuckle, I reply, "He's curled himself up in a jacket in the mudroom and is fast asleep." Turns out he has a moderate respiratory infection. The antibiotics are making him lethargic, but he should be back to his usual self in another week or so. "He won't cockblock us again. Promise."

Wade's hand lands on my chin, and he gently tilts my head up so that our eyes meet. "Are you sure about this?"

"I am. I want you."

He breathes out through his nose. "I want this, too. Believe me. I just don't want to mess anything up."

I slide his belt free from the belt loops and drop it onto the floor. "We won't."

He fixes me with an unwavering stare for what feels like forever and eventually nods. "Okay. Let's do this."

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Logan peels off my pants and underwear and helps me step out of them, conscious of my physical limitations.

"You comfortable?" he asks, curling his fingers along my rigid cock and looking up at me, letting out an adorable series of blinks.

I'm leaning against the counter and am steady on my feet, so this is about as comfortable as I can be. "I am."

"Good."

And with that, my best friend opens his mouth and takes me in. The sight of my cock disappearing into him makes my knees wobble, and I grip the bench tighter to not lose my balance. "Holy fucking shit."

For some reason, I always thought Logan would be a quiet sex person. Don't know where that idea came from, but it turns out, I'm wrong. Very wrong. The sounds of Logan's slurps fill the entire house as he slobbers messily all over my cock, riding it up and down, using his mouth, his tongue, his fingers to get me off. And that's in addition to the moaning. Fuck, his moaning. It's almost pornographic...and so fucking hot.

Logan stops using his mouth and treats me to a double-handed handjob, working his palms back and forth over my saliva-slicked cock. Goodbye, Hattie, hello, indescribable pleasure.

"Fuck," I hiss, charging my hands through his hair. "Feels so good."

He looks up at me, grinning, as he rubs his palms together with my dick the only thing separating them. Pleasure rolls through my entire body.

"You like?"

"More than like. I love it," I grit out, silently urging myself not to come too soon. I don't want this to be over yet. There's a bit of spit running down his chin. I scoop it away and stare into his eyes. "Can I fuck you?"

He smiles, and it's the sexiest, dirtiest smile I've ever seen in my life. I can't get enough of this new confident, sexual side of Logan. He stands up. "Thought you'd never ask. How can we make that happen?"

Hmm. Good question. I haven't been with anyone since the accident, so I haven't had to figure out the logistics of fucking with a limited range of motion. And now I'm hard and horny, my brain isn't all that useful.

"I have an idea," Logan says, saving me from coming up empty-handed. He takes my hand in his and leads me into the living room. "Don't move," he says, racing down the hallway. When he returns, he flings a bottle of lube and some condoms over the couch. "Miss me?" he murmurs, pressing his lips against mine.

"Like you wouldn't believe," I growl.

He giggles and takes a few steps back. With his eyes locked on mine, he takes off his clothes, first his long-sleeved heather-gray T-shirt, then his jeans, then his socks, then his square-cut black trunks.

My eyes roam over his naked body. It's even better than I imagined it would be. A lean frame with defined muscles, each line visible but not overly bulky, toned chest and arms, a faint outline of abs. His skin is smooth and pale, but not sickly so, more

like translucent. A faint trail leads to a neatly trimmed patch just above his cock.

But his ass? Still don't have a clear view of that yet.

As if reading my thoughts, he says, "What do you think of this? His voice is so sultry, his energy so sexual, it makes me fall even more in love with him than I already am. With a suggestive wink, he folds himself over the back of the couch and sticks his ass out into the air.

"I think I'm going to have to make that ass mine," I mutter, approaching him with a hard-on that's so rock-hard it's almost painful.

When I reach Logan, my cock is perfectly at the level of his pink hole. I swipe my cock against his ass cheeks as I rub my thumb up and down his smooth taint. He passes me the bottle of lube over his shoulder. "Don't use too much. I want the burn."

I manage not to pass out and, instead, revel in this dirty side of my best friend, pour some lube over my fingers, then begin teasing his entrance. He pushes back, cooing and moaning, hungry for more.

"Patience," I say. "Good things come to those who wait."

He shoots an unimpressed look over his shoulder. "I've been waiting far too long."

"Yeah. We both have."

Our eyes lock, and an intense feeling of desire mixed with excitement and a dash of nerves washes over me. I can't believe this is really happening.

He's right, though. We've waited so long for this moment, and now that it's finally here, why go slow? Why not plunge straight into it?

So that's exactly what I do. After warming him up with one finger, I slide a condom over my shaft and grease it up good. He wants a burn, fine. I'll make him feel this for days.

Holding on to his hips, I bring my swollen head to his hole. "Ready?"

"I am. I want you to fuck me, Wade."

My name spilling out of his mouth ignites me, and I surge forward, my cock sliding into his warm, tight channel. I only go about halfway in before pulling out and going again. I want him to feel it, but I don't want to hurt him.

Every time, I reach a little farther. "So good," he groans as I stuff nearly all my meat into him. "Give it all to me."

With my next thrust, that's what I do. "You like that?"

He lets out an almighty scream. A deep rumble emanates from my chest. I've sunk all the way into my best friend, and I've got him screaming with pleasure on my dick. This isn't good, or great, or even amazing... It's fucking euphoric.

We fuck over the couch until my leg starts to go numb, then switch to a fluffy white rug near the fireplace. He's on his back, and I'm on top. The couch was fun, but staring into his beautiful eyes is so much better.

Logan starts jerking himself off, his moans only getting louder and more intense. I mentally map the distance between us and his closest neighbors because something tells me half the mountain is going to hear him come.

"Getting close," he mumbles, stroking himself faster as I ramp up my thrusts. My hip is killing me, but I ignore it, determined to keep going until I make him explode. I

smack his hand away and take hold of his dick. It's a lot like him, a compact little rocket, and it fits so snugly in my palm.

I jerk him off as I continue plowing into him.

"Oh, fuck. Fuck. Fuck! FUUUUUUCK!"

I slow my thrusts and speed up my hand movements as Logan loses it, his whole body rocking, his cock erupting with wild streaks of goo that splash up to my beard and all over the place, like a blender without the lid on.

"Fuck," he cries out, panting loudly as he runs a hand through his curls. He looks up at me, and his eyes widen. "Oh, shit. I got some on your beard."

He reaches up and picks the glob of cum off my beard. I grab his wrist and bring his hand to my mouth, wanting to sample him. "Mmm." I lick his fingers. "You taste good."

He giggles adorably, his cheeks turning pink. "Well, now it's my turn."

I ease out of him, and he wriggles around, peels the condom off, and resumes where he left off, going to town on my cock like his life depends on it. I grip the sides of his face, my arms swinging with the momentum he's working up.

It doesn't take long for me to reach the edge. "Come in my mouth," he orders before engulfing me again.

"I'm almost there."

He goes even faster and does something with his tongue on the underside of my shaft that drives me wild.

"I'm coming!" I cry out.

My balls tighten and my vision blurs as I struggle to stay upright, my orgasm torpedoing into me at a million miles an hour. Slurping up my release, Logan makes such hot sounds I swear it gives my orgasm a second wind, as I sputter and shake and do my best not to topple over.

When I'm finally done, I collapse beside him, trying to catch my breath while ignoring the fireball of pain raging in my hip. "That was..."

"Incredible?" he finishes for me.

I find his hand and lace my fingers through his. "Yeah," I say, staring up at the ceiling. "Incredible."

As my breathing returns to normal, I start to worry. Logan and I have one of the rarest things in the world—a years-long friendship that's still fresh and exciting while also familiar and comfortable at the same time. I really hope we haven't just fucked things up.

I don't just mean having sex. What if we're on different pages when it comes to what we want? I'm in love with Logan, and despite the sorry state of my life, I want to be with him. But what if that's not what he wants?

What if he's happy with a friends-with-benefits arrangement? Could I live with that? What if I try to and screw things up because my feelings won't go away?

What if everything blows up in our faces and we lose it all?

I spend the following week helping out at the diner, hanging out with Sofie and Jax after school, and spending my evenings buried deep in Logan's tight ass.

Except for Sunday, his weekly dinner with his folks.

He invited me along, saying they'd love to see me, but I made plans with Hattie instead.

It's not that I don't want to see them, but his mom is a cozy mystery author. She can be a little intense with her questioning, and Logan and I are still in the very early stages of figuring things out.

"Thanks again for dinner," I say as Logan scoops up our plates and takes them to the sink.

"My pleasure. Thanks for fixing that jammy cupboard door today. It's been bugging me for ages."

"It was nothing." I sit down in my usual spot at the counter as Logan fills the sink with warm water. I like this domesticity, and I like that we can balance sweet moments like this with the feral, primal way we fuck. It's like we're adding new elements to the mix, and it's not disrupting what we have together. Thank god.

Hattie's still on my case to keep talking to Logan and tell him what I'm feeling. So, with a deep breath, I open my mouth. "I've been doing some thinking."

"Oh, yeah. What about?"

"The future. My future." I clear my throat. "Our future." He places the sudsy plate by the side of the sink and turns to face me. "Uh, the plate," I point out, since I know how much he hates suds.

He looks down at it, splashes some more sudsy water on it, and shrugs. "Fuck the plate. Tell me what you've been thinking." He dries his hands and pulls out a stool

then sits next to me.

"Well, I want to stay in Thickehead. I love Hattie and the kids, and they need me, especially while Charlie's away. I want to be here for them." I reach down and flick Logan's leg. "And I want to be here with you."

His lips twitch. "You do?"

"Of course I do. We've been fucking every night."

"Oh, so you just want me for my body? Got it."

He swats my chest, and I laugh. "No. Of course not. I love you, Logan, and I know I'm a complete mess, and you could find someone a thousand times better?—"

My words are cut off with a sharp kiss. With his lips pressed against mine, he fists my shirt and says, "There is no one better than you, Wade. I love you, too."

"I—I'm going to do the work," I say, pulling back and staring into his eyes.

"The work?"

"Yeah. You know. Get a job. Find a place to live. Become an actual adult instead of a fuckup excuse of a manchild."

He tweaks my nipple through my shirt. "Every time you say stupid shit like that, you get one of those."

I rub my pec because he's got some seriously strong fingers. "What if I like it?"

"Then I'll revoke your access to my ass."

"Okay, okay. I'll stop saying stupid shit. Promise."

He grins and runs his fingers through my hair near my ear. "Good. Because I want you to know I love you for who you are, Wade. You're a good person who's been through a rough time. You'll figure everything out. I believe in you."

I take a second to process what he's saying. I'm my own worst critic, and my self-talk over this past year has been harsh, to say the least. Tears well in my eyes. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

"So...does this mean we're together?"

"I'd love that. If that's what you want?"

His entire face lights up, his blue eyes sparkling like the ocean on a summer's day. "It is." He takes my hand in his. "More than anything. And whatever you need, no matter how long it takes you to get on your feet, I want you to know I'm here for you. Okay?"

"Thank you." A single tear slides down my cheek. "Actually, there is one thing I've been meaning to ask you."

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I smile to myself as I enter the common room, my heart overflowing with happiness. Yes, there's the fact that Wade and I finally got our shit sorted, talked, and are officially boyfriends—and quite possibly having the hottest sex known to humankind every night of the week.

But it's also this, seeing him here, hanging out with Tex and the others. I'm so glad he asked me a few nights ago if he could come to the next Drop-in Tuesday. "Of course," I told him. "You're welcome anytime, and I'm sure the guys would love it if you did."

I was right. Wade, Tex, and the others are chatting away over a game of pool, and I know they'll look after Wade and give him what he needs to heal and get his life back on track.

I spot Tex approaching and give him a wave. "Hi. How are you?"

"I'm good," he replies with a slightly larger than usual smile. "You seem extra happy lately, mister." His eyes drift over to Wade. "Please remember you're my best friend's son when you answer this question, but is there something going on between you and Wade?"

"Yeah. There is. We're together."

Tex is the first person I've told face-to-face. My parents and my brothers were all stoked, but that was all communicated via texts and messaging. It's nice to speak the words. It makes it more real somehow.

And even though it's still so new and fresh and there are a lot of details to figure out, my brain isn't overloaded or overwhelmed. I'm strangely calm. There's a feeling of rightness to it, to us, that overrides everything else. I'm trusting the universe that everything will fall into place in due course.

"I'm happy for you. Wade's a good guy."

"He is."

Tex turns to face me. "Listen. He's mentioned he's been helping out at Hattie's diner and that she's in dire need of more customers."

"Yeah. When the cafeteria opened here, it swallowed up a lot of their clientele."

"Hmm." Tex rubs his chin. "Leave it with me."

"Leave what with you?"

"Never mind. I should get back to the guys. I'll see you later."

"Yeah. See ya," I say, watching as he rejoins the guys. I have a meeting to attend, so I'll ask Wade what that was about later.

"Oh, hey, today at the center, did Tex mention anything about Hattie?"

Wade stops pounding me. "Seriously, you're asking me this while I'm balls-deep inside you?"

I wince, grateful we're fucking doggy-style so he can't see my face. "Sorry. Bad timing. It just popped into my head." I look over my shoulder and give a sly grin. "Or maybe you're getting lazy and resting on your laurels." His eyes widen, but I keep

teasing. "Stop relying on that nine-inch dick, buddy."

"Oh. I'll show you lazy."

He yanks my hair and starts fucking me aggressively. "You like that?"

I arch my back and groan. "Fuck, yeah."

He continues thrusting into me, and as much as I'm enjoying getting my hole stretched out, I'm jolted back to reality. "Wait. Your hip."

"It's fine," he grits out, slapping my ass and tightening his grip on my hair. "I've got a lesson to teach you."

"Are you sure?" He slaps my butt again. "I'll take that as a yes and shut up."

"Good."

The first week we had sex, I was so caught up in what we were doing, I totally forgot about his hip. But after we sat down and talked about it—look, Mom, we're adulting!—he fessed up and told me he can only handle about ten minutes of fucking before it starts hurting him.

Ever since then, I've always set a trusty timer to make sure we never exceed his limit and check in with him more often during. So far, it's proven fruitless. I think his leg could literally be on fire, and he'd still insist he was fine and that we should keep going.

I reach over and grab the timer from the edge of the bed.

1:31

1:30

1:29

I start jerking myself off, meeting each of his thrusts by pushing back a little, hoping it gives him as much pleasure as he gives me.

To say I've never been this wild before is an understatement. But even though Wade brings out this new, adventurous, fun side of me, it still feels like I'm being myself. I'm not putting on an act or becoming someone else, I'm just accessing a part of me that had never been unlocked.

Until him.

We both get off with fourteen seconds to spare. I make sure he's comfortable on the bed, scanning his face for any signs of pain or discomfort. Once I'm confident he's okay, I slip into the bathroom, clean myself up, and grab a washcloth to do the same to him.

His dick is softening but still plump in my hands as I carefully wipe away all the lube. We both got tested last week, and once we got the all clear, we ditched the condoms.

"To answer your question from before," Wade says, stroking my face.

I finish cleaning him off and look up. "I asked a question?"

He chuckles. "About Tex. Hattie."

"Oh, right."

"He did mention her, actually. And we've come up with a plan."

I leave the washcloth on the floor and climb into bed and snuggle next to him. "What sort of plan?"

"You'll see." He circles his finger over my shoulder. "Come down to the diner after work tomorrow and find out."

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There are two things I've realized as I've been fixing things around the diner these past few weeks.

One, the more I look, the more I find other things that need attention—broken floor tiles, the strange noise coming from the exhaust fans in the kitchen, the old plumbing, the parking lot that needs resurfacing. I could go on, the list is endless.

And two, most of those issues require more than just one set of hands.

That's where Tex, Lance, Cliff, Mitch, and Bronson come in. I was telling them about the sorry state of the diner, as well as the lack of clients, when Tex offered, and the others unanimously agreed, to help out. So that's what we've spent the day doing. We closed the diner for a day and started with the easy fixes that we can do quickly and that don't require parts being ordered in, and we're working our way up.

"Whoa. What's going on here?" Logan asks, loosening his tie as he steps into the diner. He's fresh from work and in the sexy corporate clothes I love ripping off him. "And why is there a Closed sign on the door?"

"Impromptu working bee," I answer, tipping my head toward Tex. "All his idea."

Logan smiles. "He's such a good guy."

"He is." I nod, proudly admiring our paint job—we went for a vintage American vibe with soft teal, cream, and cherry red. "They all are."

"How did Hattie take it?" Logan asks.

"I knew that if I asked, she'd likely be too proud to accept the help. So I didn't ask. She's kept us well-fed all day, and the guys have made it abundantly clear to her that since she's a military spouse, she's family, so there's no way they couldn't help her."

Logan beams as he stares into my eyes, looping his arms around my shoulders. "I'm so proud of you."

"Oh, yeah." I lower my voice to a husky whisper so none of the guys overhear. "Do I get a reward?"

His eyes glimmer. "You do. Name it."

"Okay." I lean in until my lips are a breath away from his ear. "Tonight, we ditch the timer."

He shakes his head, chuckling. "Fine. But if your face is in pain, and not the good, sexy kind of pain, we're stopping."

"Deal."

"Deal."

"I'm so excited for you," Logan says, clutching my hand tightly.

We've just submitted the necessary applications for me to start a vocational training program at the center in the fall. I could have asked Logan to hand the paperwork in for me, but I wanted to come in and do it myself. This is a major step forward, and I feel it's the right path.

"I still can't believe the center is willing to cover all the costs," I say as we make our way to Logan's office.

"They do great things sometimes," he replies.

"And you have no idea who the owner is?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. The official owner is an LLC, but the actual owner of the LLC remains a mystery."

"Any ideas?"

"None. I've done some digging, spoken to staff, even asked Tex about it. No one actually knows who owns the place. Wild, huh?"

"Totally. About as wild as me starting school again."

"Ooh." He claps his hands together excitedly as we reach his office. "That means we get to do some back-to-school shopping."

I chuckle. "I don't think that'll be necessary."

"We could drive down to LA, take the kids, make a day of it."

"You want to drive two hours just for school supplies?"

"Come on. It'll be fun."

"We'll see. We still have some time left before we need to make concrete plans."

"Okay. But I'll keep pushing."

I give him a kiss goodbye. "Oh, I have no doubt you will."

"You off to the diner?"

"Yep. Replacement motor for the exhaust fans arrived yesterday. Tex and Lance are giving me a hand installing it."

"I really am so proud of you."

"Stop saying that, or I'll get a big head."

He snorts. "Any bigger, and I'll be permanently walking like a penguin. Alright, go. Say hi to Hattie for me."

"I will. I love you."

He sits down and looks so sexy at his desk I make a silent vow to fuck him in here one day. "I love you, too."

As I drive the short distance to the diner, I can't help but think how much my life is changing.

Helping Hattie out with the diner and being involved with the kids is making me feel like I'm part of a family again.

Enrolling in a business administration course gives me hope that I can have a decent career. I'd love to end up working at the center. If I can't serve my country, I'd like to do something that helps the brave men and women who have.

When I'm hanging out with Tex and the gang, I feel like I truly belong. I don't know if I'll ever truly believe I'm a real vet like they all are, but I've stopped beating myself up as much about something I can't change.

But the best thing of all would have to be my relationship with Logan. All my fears that we'd ruin things, or that we weren't on the same page, were alleviated by taking Hattie's advice and just talking.

I'm so glad we have. He's the best person I know, and I'm going to do everything I can to be a man worthy of his love.

For the first time since the accident, I'm actually looking forward to the future.

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SIX MONTHS LATER...

Logan

The diner is packed with people, almost every booth and barstool taken. "Glad we got in just before the lunch rush," I say to Wade and the kids as we shuffle into a booth by the front window.

Ever since Tex started spreading the word about this place, and Wade and the guys finished their renovation work, it's become Thickehead's hottest hotspot.

"I'm happy to see it doing well," Wade says, sliding menus to Sofie and Jax. "It's how I remember it."

Three waitresses are working today, but not Hattie. She's got the day off and is currently enjoying her monthly free day spa pass, being pampered with a facial and hot stone massage at the center.

We place our order with one of the waitresses, and I lean back, smiling as Wade tells the kids about all the cool places he and I used to explore in the mountains. As they listen with rapt attention, my mind wanders.

It's amazing how much has changed these past six months. When Wade showed up on my doorstep, he was a shell of his former self. I hoped that getting him to visit the center and meet the guys there might help him find his way. I could have never hoped for how transformative it's been.

He started his course in business administration last month. He loves it, and his new dream is to one day work at the center, surrounded by and supporting the men and women he respects so much.

I really am so proud of him. He's getting back on his feet, forging ahead with a new career and stepping in to help Hattie with the diner and the kids.

I'm still the meticulous, ultra-organized, routine-loving guy I've always been. But I have changed in one big way. Being with Wade has made my self-confidence skyrocket. I am who I am, and being with a partner who embraces every part of me, quirks and all, has helped me not just accept myself but to really lean in and celebrate all of the one-of-a-kind traits that make me, me.

Not to mention, I love being able to unleash my beast mode and know that he won't judge me for it. If anything, he finds it really hot when I get all dirty.

The food arrives, and we start eating. Jax is listing his favorite dinosaurs in order when I spot a monster-truck-sized black SUV pulling into the parking lot. A few seconds later, the door opens.

"Holy sh...er, sugar," I say, clapping my hand over my mouth.

"What is it?" Wade asks.

I make a move to get up. "My brother's just arrived."

"What?" He turns to look out the window. "Which one?"

"I'll be right back."

I hurry out of the diner and approach the car.

"Kynan?" I check, since I'm still not entirely sure which of my brothers it is.

They both have massive sleeve tattoos running down their muscular arms, but since he's wearing a T-shirt and not a tank top, I can't see if he's the brother with the red flower tattoo just below his shoulder.

Doesn't help that he's wearing oversized black shades, I suspect in an attempt to not get recognized now that he's one of the biggest social media stars on the planet.

"Nice guess, bro." He lifts his glasses, resting them on his head, and pulls me in for a hug. "It's good to see you."

"Good to see you, too," I say. "What are you doing here?"

His already normally intense eyes narrow even more. "I'm running away."

"From what?"

He opens the back seat of the car, and I peer inside. "Holy shit." I jump back and glare at him. "You kidnapped a baby?"

"I did not kidnap a baby," he says, brushing past me to unbuckle the baby and gently lift him out of the car. He's tiny, and as Kynan holds him, I see the look in Ky's eyes. A look that's full of love.

"Ashton," he says in a low voice, pressing his lips to the baby's forehead. "I'd like you to meet your Uncle Logan."

My jaw drops. "Uncle?"

Kynan glances at me. "Crazy, right?"

I take my nephew in my arms for the first time, marveling at his chubby cheeks, expressive eyes, and soft pudgy arms. Then I turn to Kynan and say, "You've got some explaining to do, mister."

We go inside. I snag a high chair for Ashton as Ky hugs Wade and slides in beside the kids.

"Okay, spill," I say, once he's ordered himself a milkshake and baby Ash is happily observing everything in the diner.

"It's a long story."

"We've got time."

"Okay, well, see..." He fills us in on how he found out he was a father.

"And how do you feel about becoming a dad?" Wade asks once he's done.

Ky exhales. "It's a lot. Don't get me wrong, I'm over the moon." His eyes drift to his son. He sticks out his finger, and Ashton grabs it, letting out a contagious little laugh. Ky's entire face softens. I've never seen him look at anyone like that. "There's a problem, though. I'm being profiled."

"Like by the FBI?" I ask.

"No," he replies with a chuckle. "By a reporter for a story. His name is Sawyer Bannister."

He pulls out his phone and passes it to me. I stare at the image of an attractive older guy doing the typical, shirtless, standing in front of a mirror at a gym pose then hand Wade the phone so he can see.

"So, what's the problem?" I ask Kynan, as Wade passes him his phone back.

He runs his hand through his mane of dark-blond hair that falls to his shoulders. "I can't let Sawyer find out about Ashton."

"Why not?" Wade asks.

Ky huffs out a breath. "BBA."

I groan. "Really?"

"I know some people think BBA is a silly, frivolous thing, but we're more than just a collective of content creators. Those guys are like my brothers." I clear my throat, and Ky shakes his head. "You know what I mean. And GDL, that's my baby." Ashton makes an excited coo sound. "My other baby."

Wade and I exchange a look, neither of us are super up to speed with social media. All I know—based on Ky correcting me a million times—is that people on social media prefer to be called content creators and not influencers. And BBA, the collective Ky is part of, is a whole new stratosphere of content creators I can't even begin to wrap my brain around. All six of them have gone from being virtual unknowns to mega viral superstars over the course of the past year. It's wild.

"There's something else," Kynan says, his knee bouncing nervously.

I'm almost afraid to ask. "What?"

He exhales slowly through his nose. "Sawyer and I have been... Well... We've kind of, sorted, fu—" He glances over at Sofie and Jax who blink up politely at him. "Er, fumbled around."

A surprised cough catches in Wade's throat. "But you're straight."

Kynan scrubs his hand down the side of his face and looks at both of us. "Am I, though?"