

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

INHALING SMOKE

Tia Fielding

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

INHALING SMOKE

By Tia Fielding

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

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INHALING SMOKE

By Tia Fielding

Photo Description

A shirtless young man with tattooed arms, stretched ears and a lip piercing holds a toddler. The baby is looking down at something; it almost looks like they're drawing together.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They did not think I could do this, when a phone call woke me and my boyfriend, telling me my best friend who I had donated sperm to had died in a terrible accident, and it was me or foster care for the baby. They did not think I could raise this baby. Being a tattooed, pierced, young, gay tattoo artist. But I WILL prove them wrong. I will be amazing. \with the help of my super supportive boyfriend I will get through this.

P.S. I would love a HEA story, not PWP.

XXX,

Jessica ;p

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: profession-tattoo artist, established couples, men with children, tearjerker, HEA

Content Warnings: death of a secondary character

Word Count: 13,647

Foreword

The way this story came to be was a bit odd, even for me. I had a series of books planned in my head, and I was writing what I thought was the first novel in the same universe. There was a side character called Micah in that story, and he'd barely been seen thus far. I knew a few bits of him, knew who his love interest would end up being in his book, but nothing else.

Then I suddenly ended up finding this perfect prompt by Jessica (thank you!), and something clicked in my head. "That's the love interest! And he has a baby?!" The rest is 13k words of history. ;)

If this story feels like a glimpse of something bigger, that's because it is. This is Austin's POV of what happens when the baby comes along. The real, whole story will be told in Micah's POV at some point whenever I get to writing it.

INHALING SMOKE

By Tia Fielding

Austin sat on the window seat at Fiery Squid Tattoo and sketched. It was just a basic job, another tribal with a dreamcatcher-like design in the middle. Most tattoo artists he knew would scoff at that kind of thing, but Austin wasn't picky. It wasn't a case of money over artist's integrity, but Austin's belief that everyone should get the tattoo they wanted, not the tattoo others thought better for them.

The street outside was buzzing. It was summertime in Boston, and all the small shops on Newbury Street were bustling with people, locals and tourists alike. Because the studio was below street level, Austin couldn't see much more than people's legs from the knee down and sometimes a not-so-nice upskirt view of a petite woman walking past. Had it been a guy in a kilt...

Grinning, Austin adjusted his position to get the last of the afternoon sunlight. The sun shone on his spot from just past midday until around one forty-five at this time of year. He lifted his gaze from his sketchpad when Soda, his oddball fellow artist, walked by on his way to see out his latest customer.

"Call me when it's healed and we'll schedule a time for the coloring," Soda reminded the forty-something woman who now sported a bandaged area on her back. "And take the dressing off when you get home. Remember what I said about sunlight!" he called after the client, and Austin grinned.

"Think she'll take proper care of the ink?"

"I think so, and I gave her the instructions on paper, too." Soda came to sit with Austin.

"You have more for the day?"

"Just Tegan from upstairs. We'll continue her back as long as she can sit comfortably."

Tegan co-owned a pet store on the street level with her girlfriend Audrey and their friend Ben. About two months ago Audrey had dragged her "sicker half," as Tegan called herself, down to the studio for some ink. Tegan had had scoliosis while growing up and still had some issues from the surgeries she'd

had a long time ago. Her spine was straight now, but she wanted to commemorate the “wicked groovy thing” it had been with some ink.

Audrey had been the one making her face her fear of additional physical pain, and she'd been there holding Tegan's hand through the first session. They'd agreed to make a design based on the old X-rays Tegan had of her spine at its worst. Tegan had pain from sitting still for extended time, so they had to continue in increments whenever Soda had time for her. She said it was important to pay respect to her spine for making her grow as a person, even if it took the rest of her days to complete the tattoo.

Austin could understand the sentiment. He had several commemorative tattoos of places and people. In some ways, most of his tattoos were there to remind him of phases of life or things he loved or, in some cases, hated.

“Hy will be coming home tomorrow. She'll probably have a fit if you don't clean up your station,” Austin stated casually.

“I know. I know.” Soda leaned back and lifted his freckled face toward the sun. “Let me rest for a moment first.”

“Oh, I won't care, you're not in my view, but you are in hers, and it's her studio.”

Soda opened one eye and glared at Austin, then went back to his basking.

Hy was their boss, the owner of Fiery Squid. She was one of the best female tattoo artists in the world, and traveled all over to educate and take part in conventions. Having been blessed with a name like Hyacinth, she'd shortened it to Hy pretty early on and would kick anyone using her full name in the knee. Austin knew; he'd once tried when he'd been upset with her and limped for two days.

“I just have this one to do in about an hour, and I'll be off. Micah should come by once he's done with his stuff at school.”

“Ooh, will he have time to do stuff for us?” Soda perked up and grinned at Austin.

“You'll have to ask him, not me. I've no clue where he will be at the end of the day. All I know is that he's finishing some huge piece for a show and that's it.” Austin continued to draw the few last lines, and Soda went back to enjoying the sun.

The peace and quiet ended soon with footsteps and chatter sounding from the stairs leading down to their front door.

“Walk-ins. Awesome.” Soda sighed, put on his game face, and got up in time to greet a group of twenty-something tourists who were “just looking”.

Austin's boyfriend of just over a year, Micah, was studying for his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Tufts. Micah, who sometimes seemed almost naïve in his innocence, was a wunderkind if Austin had ever met one. His way of drawing and painting things he saw was unique and beautiful.

They were lucky that Hy had asked who had drawn the art for the ink on Austin's left leg. She'd been spellbound over the intricate detail of the piece—something very personal for both Austin and Micah—and asked if Micah wanted to draw some unique pieces for them.

These days they had clients who came in for Micah's work. Naturally it had to be tattooed by Austin, Soda, or, if she was in Boston, Hy, but it was still Micah's art, and he liked to be present when they were putting it on a client's skin.

There was a part of the wall with the tattoo artists' artwork reserved for Micah. Every time his work was taken off the wall and given to the newly inked customer to frame or whatever, Micah would come up with something else and fill the space until they had someone wanting another piece of his on their skin forever.

Austin loved his boyfriend more than he had ever thought he could love someone. That was pretty much the only reason why he wasn't terribly jealous of Micah's vision and skill. Austin himself, on the other hand, was just a regular artsy kid from a small town near Albany, New York.

He'd been a troublesome, wild teenager. With his best friend, Katie, they'd been a menace. Katie had known early on she wasn't interested in sex. Now they knew the word for it; she was asexual. She hated dating and disliked guys hitting on her for her looks, and she rarely found anyone romantically interesting.

Austin, on the other hand, had known he was different from most of the boys he knew since he was six.

Together they figured that it was easiest to just play at being a couple by the time people around them started dating. So they “dated” all through high school, and frankly, if you didn't count Micah, the platonic thing he'd had with Katie was still the best relationship of his life.

Although he did enjoy the sex with Micah a lot...

“Honey?”

Austin snapped out of his thoughts and looked up to see the object of his fantasies—and his reality—standing in front of him, looking curious and knowing.

“Hey, Foxy.” Austin grinned at Micah. “Guess what I was just thinking...”

Micah blushed and ducked his head, making some of his blond hair escape from the hasty ponytail he'd tied together with what looked like a ripped piece of paint-spattered cloth.

Austin left his sketchpad on the seat and got up, enfolding Micah in a hug. Micah let out a contented little sound, almost a snuffle, and burrowed into Austin's chest.

“Awww... they're so cute!”

“Come on, girls, don't stare!”

“But they *are*!”

The group was still there, and Austin and Micah were garnering attention. Micah tensed against Austin.

“Hush now, Foxy. Everything's fine,” Austin murmured into his ear and shot a look over Micah's head towards the people.

One of them, a tall jock-type guy, caught the look and nodded slightly. He put a hand on one of the girls' shoulder and squeezed lightly. It took about ten seconds for the whole group to ignore Austin and Micah, and Austin had to admit he was pretty impressed. He smiled briefly at the jock, before concentrating on his boyfriend.

“You're early. Did you finish the painting?” he asked, hugging Micah even closer for just a moment before pulling him down to sit on the window seat.

As always, their legs seemed to entwine, and then they corrected their position by sitting face to face, Micah's long legs on both sides of Austin. They were in public, so sitting like they sometimes did at home with Micah's ankles crossed behind Austin's back was out of the question, but Austin still heard a half-suppressed “Aww!” from one of the girls.

“Yeah, I flew through what I had left. I guess I got to the studio in the right mindset this time.” The smile on Micah's lips was blinding; it lit up his face and Austin's chest.

"Congrats, darling. I know it was a rough road to get it done." He leaned in to kiss Micah gently.

"Thank you," Micah said in a tone that was full of sincerity. Not that there was a different mode to Micah as a person. All he could be was real and sincere, and sometimes Austin feared people might try to take advantage of it somehow.

"Proud of you," Austin whispered, and Micah ducked his head again.

"Okay, lovebirds," Soda said loudly and made them both jump. "Time for me to clean. Austin needs to finish the sketch, and Micah, would you mind...?" Soda nodded towards the wall, making his tight, messy curls bounce.

The shop had cleared from the tourists, and Micah looked around, obviously happy to see the place empty.

"Sure. I can sketch a bit." Then, just like Austin had known he would, he asked, "Anyone coming in?"

"Tegan when she has time, and a girl in a bit for this." Austin showed him the sketch. "Nobody else unless we get more stragglers."

"Oh..." Micah seemed to ponder that for a while. "Can I—"

"Hey Micah, you can go to Hy's space if you want!" Soda called as he walked towards the back.

Austin hid a grin. It was nice how Soda didn't make a big deal about Micah's shyness and instead made sure he would be comfortable while working.

"Sure thing!" Micah called to the back, beamed another heart-stopping smile at Austin, and kissed him soundly. "I'll be back there."

"Okay, Foxy."

They untangled themselves, and Micah picked up his messenger bag from the floor where he'd dropped it after coming in. Austin watched as his lover walked to the back where Hy's workstation was situated. It had several elaborately painted screens hiding it from view, and it would provide Micah with all the privacy he'd need.

Soda's spot was in the middle and pretty much in the open for anyone to take a look at how he worked, unless the client wanted more privacy or the ink was going somewhere more intimate.

Austin worked in the front in a similar setting. When he got to his zone, very few things could drag him out of it, so he didn't mind being out in the open.

They all settled to their tasks, and Austin was setting up his station when the door opened and his client walked in. The girl, Rhonda, was a new regular. She'd had her first tattoo done by Austin when she'd turned eighteen about a year ago. Now she had a few more, and she saved diligently between sessions to get more ink added on her body.

Rhonda agreed to the sketch, and Austin made a stencil while she chatted with Soda. They were about halfway done with the actual tattooing when Austin's cell rang in the back. He didn't get calls often, but the people who called him most often all had their own ringtones.

This one was Katie's signature tune, and she never called him during the workday without a good reason.

"Babe? Can you answer for me?" Austin called towards the back, knowing Micah was closest to the phone and familiar with Katie by now.

"Sure!" Micah called back.

"You have a boyfriend?" Rhonda's eyes widened in surprise.

"Uh, yeah, Micah." Austin blinked at her. He'd had no idea why she didn't already know this.

"The cute blond guy?"

Austin chuckled. "That would be him."

The aforementioned cutie burst out from behind the screens with a grin on his face, brandishing the cell phone. His expression told Austin the news was good, but he still felt his heart beat faster.

He raised a brow at Rhonda who smiled and nodded, so Austin put his machine down and pulled off one black glove. He'd just have to replace it once the call was done.

Micah could hardly contain his enthusiasm as he shook the cell at Austin. "Come on!"

Austin took the phone and heard Rhonda giggle in her chair.

"Katie?"

“Austin! River walked!” she squealed into his ear and almost made him drop the phone.

“Oh my God! That’s awesome!”

River had taken his time to learn, he’d been crawling like crazy for months now and standing against support for almost as long, but walking had taken time.

“Sixteen months, Austin! He’s sixteen months and now he’ll be able to get everywhere and ohmygod what the hell will I do?!”

Austin realized the startled burst of laughter came from his own mouth when Micah looked at him with similar awe on his face.

“Okay... okay...” Austin raised his hand, knowing Katie would be able to hear the familiar gesture in his voice somehow. “So Nugget can walk. Big deal. Kids learn to walk all the time!”

“He’s already too fast when he crawls, but now he’ll be able to reach everywhere even faster than before. What if—?”

“No what ifs, Katie. We’ll figure it out. You can even come over for the weekend if you have it off.” Austin said, then realized he hadn’t asked Micah first. When he looked up at his boyfriend, Micah was smiling at him indulgently, not upset in the least.

“I’ll... Okay. I’ll figure out my schedule and let you know. If we can make it, can you get us from the train station?”

“Sure, we’ll figure something out. Borrow Ben’s car if mine won’t start or something.” Without looking, Austin knew Micah was blushing where he stood, rocking gently back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“Okay. Well, I’ll text you or something.”

“Bye, love to Nugget.”

“From me too!” Micah said quickly.

“Hear that?” Austin smiled.

“I did. Bye!” Katie sounded much calmer now.

Austin ended the call and handed the phone back to Micah. “Thanks, Foxy.”

“I’ll take it back...” Micah fidgeted toward where he’d been working.

Because he couldn’t resist, Austin quickly grabbed the hem of Micah’s T-shirt and pulled him closer. Despite being in the shop with a client right there,

the action was too familiar for Micah to do anything but lean down and accept the kiss Austin wanted to give. Then Micah blushed and stumbled away as quickly as possible.

"He's fucking adorable." Rhonda's tone was dreamy.

"All mine. Back off," Austin said lightly and replaced both of his gloves, if only to keep an even amount of them left in their box on his workbench.

He got back to his zone and resumed working on Rhonda's "dreamcatcher-thing" as she called the design.

"So, a friend's kid started to walk early?" she asked after a while.

"Yeah, Katie's my best friend since... forever, really. Lives in Albany with our kid, River."

"Wait, what?" Rhonda sounded confused. "You have a kid?"

"Well, sort of, I guess. She wanted a baby. I could help her out and be the best Uncle A ever..." Austin added shading to the curve of the tattoo, tilted his head, wiped the excess ink off with his thumb, and then glanced at Rhonda's stunned face.

"But you're...?"

"Gay? Yes." He grinned. "We didn't actually have sex to make the kid. There are other ways to do that, you know?"

She snorted and shook her head at him. "Doofus. I do have a set of younger twin brothers who are IVF kids."

"I guess it's not weird for me. Katie's like... I mean before Micah, she was the closest thing to possibly staying with someone forever I'd had. We are totally platonic, Katie and me, always have been. But she's my best girl, you know?"

"And Micah is your best guy." Rhonda stated, her expression softening knowingly.

"Oh yes..." Austin smiled.

The conversation stopped there, most likely because she could read him by now and knew he wasn't a chatty person. This was also deeply personal information, or would've been to most, but Austin had never been shy or felt like he had anything to hide.

They were young, still. He was only twenty-five to Micah and Katie's twenty-four. Before he met Micah, his family had mainly consisted of Katie and Nugget, who was yet to be born. There was his mom, of course, but she lived in Pittsburgh now, having moved there to be with her sister. Austin's mom had always been a single parent and knew all about how to manage alone with the kids, or in their case, kid, because Austin was an only child. Her sister, however, had recently divorced and was at a loss on how to cope with five under fifteen-year-old kids alone. Austin knew his mom would've liked to be closer to River and Katie, but she'd admitted defeat after the third teary phone call from Austin's aunt.

Austin's mom was great. She'd always been supportive and loved Katie and then River. Even before they'd told her River was Austin's son, she'd loved the little boy by proxy. She understood that, technically, she wasn't a grandmother in the way most grandmas would be, because Austin wasn't River's dad, but his uncle instead. That didn't mean she wasn't spoiling the kid left and right. Austin knew Katie would call his mom soon to tell her the good and terrifying news of River's mobility.

Once he was done with Rhonda's tattoo, Austin cleaned it with controlled, efficient movements. Then he wrapped her shoulder and gave her the usual spiel about the aftercare, although she knew it already and was very conscious of making sure her tattoos healed properly. She paid and went on her merry way, and Austin tidied up his workspace like he always did.

"Austin!" Micah's tone was enthusiastic, and he almost startled Austin.

"What?" He looked up at Micah, who was already fidgeting, waiting to get his full attention.

"I had this awesome idea for River."

"Alright, tell me more?" Austin sat in the client's chair and gestured Micah closer.

They were both tall but not very bulky, so they could comfortably sit in the same chair, Micah on Austin's lap.

"You know, now that River walks I can paint him some shoes."

"Yeah, you can," Austin agreed. It was Micah's way of showing people he loved them; he bought canvas shoes and personalized them for his loved ones.

"How about we get a pair or two for River and I paint them, and then give them to him when they come over?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Foxy. We could go to a shoe store and find a pair right now. That way we can have them ready if they come over for the weekend."

"I think we should buy two pairs, with one slightly bigger and paint them both. Kids' feet grow really fast."

"Sure, we can do that." Austin smiled and listened to his easily excitable, shy, artistic, and sometimes awkward boyfriend rattle off the locations of several shoe stores on their way home where they could find the perfect pair for the kid whom they both loved more than Austin had thought possible.

The windows were open in the bedroom and pretty much everywhere else in the house they'd rented a few months ago. Micah had been living in a cramped apartment with two of his friends, Caleb and Hannah.

They all got along really well and were from the same secluded community in Virginia. Micah disliked it when Austin called it a cult, so he tried not to. Caleb and Hannah were a couple, and that wasn't really an ideal living situation with only one bedroom and a large living room in the apartment. Micah tried not to complain about the couch, because they couldn't afford to get a new one for him to sleep on at the moment, but Austin knew his boyfriend's back was killing him some mornings.

So when Austin felt like he and Micah were in it for the long haul, they had decided that a house would be great. They'd lucked out. They now rented a semi-detached home in Roxbury, in a part of the neighborhood that was pretty nice.

The owners of the house, a middle-aged couple who had their house converted into two apartments after their children moved out, were nice and didn't mind the gay. They'd wondered about the Thompsons, but then Mrs. Thompson had told them their daughter was bisexual and had dated both genders growing up. This was one of the things Austin only knew because Micah was friendly enough to win over the neighbors on both sides, especially the female ones.

Despite his sometimes-debilitating shyness, Micah managed to make impressions with his large, innocent blue eyes and his gangly body, and his constant absent-mindedness, especially when he got to painting in their backyard.

He'd been doing that all day, and when Austin came home, he'd found his lover napping in the shadow of the back porch. Like they did pretty much every day, they made something to eat for dinner before hanging out in the living room.

If they were watching movies, they'd sit with Micah between Austin's legs and leaning back on his chest. If they had something to discuss, they'd be face to face, like they often did in the Fiery Squid in Austin's spot.

When inspiration struck, they'd each lean on a corner of the couch and sketch in their notepads, with their legs tangled together in the middle.

All in all, they touched each other a lot. Austin had taught Micah how to touch another person and in return Micah had taught him how to love.

In some ways, Austin hadn't known love, despite his experiences with Katie. From the start, he'd never really seen romantic love between two adults, because his dad had been out of the picture by the time he was three. His mom never remarried and didn't really like dating, but instead concentrated on her job, her friends, and then later, volunteer work.

With Katie, it was never romantic. Her parents, the only happily married couple Austin really knew growing up, were pretty much anti-PDA, and he couldn't remember them ever touching each other in front of the kids, not even in passing.

All Austin knew about touching other people came from previous more or less failed relationships and hook ups. Those, however, were more than Micah had ever experienced. In some ways Austin could appreciate the fact that he had done the promiscuous thing for a while. He had more to give to Micah physically than if he hadn't, and Micah taught him about the more spiritual side of love in return.

So by the time Austin found himself head over heels with the blond artist that frequented the pet shop above his workplace, he wasn't sure what to do with the budding emotions. Luckily Micah knew, partially instinctively, how to act.

Micah's upbringing was very different from Austin's. Where he'd grown up, people followed a preacher who was the head of their community. They were tactile, hardworking people with a fear of God instilled in them by the preacher.

Lucky for Micah—and Austin—the community, called Lydia, encouraged their young adults to search for their own way once they turned twenty-one. That was exactly what Micah, Caleb, and Hannah had done, and the rest was history.

Micah had about a year or two left in his studies, Caleb worked on construction and did some carpentry for his bosses, and Hannah was a nanny for a great family in a nice neighborhood. None of them missed home enough to want to go back, Micah had told Austin. They all felt like the restrictions and rules of Lydia were too much for them. They were not meant to live under the rule of the preacher.

So now, Austin hovered between sleep and wakefulness, trying not to jostle the bed because Micah had finally fallen asleep half an hour ago.

The heat was oppressive, and their AC worked half of the time at best. When it worked, it made the house freezing cold, and when it didn't, they were sweaty and cranky. Mr. Thompson had promised to get the AC fixed in the whole house because theirs was acting out too. They just hadn't gotten to it yet and now, in the middle of the heat wave, the repairman they preferred was busy as hell because people needed him more than usual.

Austin must've fallen asleep, he thought, when he was jerked out of the almost-dream by his phone buzzing on the nightstand.

He picked up the phone and saw the number wasn't familiar, but the area code suggested Albany. Weird. It was just past three in the morning.

"Hello?" Austin said into the phone, his voice sounding hesitant even to himself.

"Austin Moore?" A female voice asked, and something about the formality with which she said his name made Austin's skin crawl.

"Yes, this is Austin Moore."

"Right, good. This is Officer Rivera from the Albany police department in New York. I'm sorry to call this late, but—"

"What's happened?" Austin managed to get the words out, and he felt Micah turn to him before a heavy arm draped across his middle and squeezed him for support.

"You're the emergency contact for a Katie Reyes and the next of kin to her baby boy, River. I'm really sorry to have to do this over the phone, but there's been an accident."

A soft humming started in Austin's ears, and it turned into a roaring waterfall, then something even more horrible: a near silence that felt like the static of a TV.

Micah pried the phone from his fingers, and Austin looked at him in confusion. He could see Micah speaking, but couldn't hear a word over the empty static in his head.

Eventually, Micah put the phone away and knelt on the bed next to Austin. He placed his hands on Austin's cheeks and leaned in close to kiss him gently on the lips. When he pulled back, Austin could see the sorrow in his eyes, and something about that felt so wrong in the core of who he was and who Micah was to him that his ears popped and he could hear again.

"Honey, are you with me?" Micah asked, probably for the second time.

"Y-yeah, yeah. I'm here. Can you...?"

"There's been a fire, Austin. In the building where Katie and River live."

"A-a fire?" Austin swallowed hard, trying to concentrate on staring into Micah's eyes when all he really wanted to do was to run and not listen.

"Yes. They were trapped, and by the time the firemen got there, Katie was unconscious. They got to River in time, honey. River will be just fine." Micah tried to soothe him.

"What about... what about Katie?" Austin knew before he asked, but he needed to hear the words.

"I'm sorry, Austin. She didn't make it. She died half an hour ago in the hospital."

Austin broke down, then. His mind refused to do anything but break down and check out, and he went willingly, the sorrow pushing everything else onto a back burner.

He wasn't sure how long he cried, but eventually he slept. When he woke up, the exhaustion he felt was deep inside him, inside his heart, and he could barely stumble out of the bed without falling over under the weight of his grief.

"Honey? Come get some coffee. We need to get going in an hour or so," Micah said from the kitchen.

"What?" Austin managed, his mind struggling to make sense of things.

"We have a plane to catch, Austin. We need to go get River."

He must've looked at Micah in a funny way, because the love of his life slid off from the stool he'd been sitting on and padded to him. Micah hugged him close and held him for a while, until Austin's brain caught up with everything.

"I'm his next of kin."

"Yes, you are, honey. I know we never thought this would happen, but I called the officer again a while ago, and she said it's either River's other parent, his grandparents, or the foster system."

"No. Absolutely not," Austin said vehemently.

There was nothing wrong with Katie's parents, but they were getting older now, and couldn't raise a rambunctious little boy. He wouldn't even think of foster care, not after all the stories he'd heard.

"I know. So I told her we'd be in Albany as soon as we can and to make sure Katie's parents were with River until we got there."

"I need to..." Austin pulled from the hug and looked down at himself, then at the coffeemaker and frowned.

"Go shower. Then come have coffee. I've already packed and gotten all the paperwork from the safe. We'll make the flight if you move, now." Micah smiled at him, kissed his tear-sticky cheek, and pushed him toward the bathroom.

"Okay..." And so he moved, went through the familiar motions in a surreal situation, and thanked the universe for giving him Micah.

They made it to the hospital in Albany around two in the afternoon. Austin, still in a daze, clutched the folder of legal documents in one hand and Micah's fingers with the other. Micah had kept him afloat so far, and Austin knew he'd continue doing so, even with all that was going on.

Micah did all the talking, and eventually they were at the pediatric ward. Logically, Austin knew River was fine, but he was dreading the moment he'd lay his eyes on the baby. He wasn't sure why it scared him, whether it was a fear of seeing they'd lied to him and there were injuries, or if the fear came from seeing Katie in their son. Katie, who would never be with them again. Austin trembled as Micah spoke to the nurse, and barely registered the steps behind him.

"Excuse me, are you Austin Moore?" someone asked.

He turned around to see a Hispanic woman in a police uniform. The name tag read Rivera and something about that rang a bell, but all Austin could do was blink at her.

“Officer Rivera,” he said after a few beats of silence.

“Right, but you know that because you read my tag.” She smiled at him warmly, with sadness in her dark brown eyes. “We did speak on the phone last night, but your fiancé took over at some point.”

Austin wondered about the word “fiancé” briefly, but didn’t ask. He was sure there was an explanation to that. Then a familiar hand pressed against the small of his back, and Micah’s scent enveloped him with comfort.

“Officer Rivera.” Micah’s tone was polite, slightly cautious, but friendly. “I’m Micah Morris.”

The two of them shook hands while Austin watched.

“I’m sure you two want to go see River, so I won’t keep you any longer. I’d like to speak with you both, though, to let you know what happened and such, once you have a moment. Here’s my number, so if you would call...” She handed a card to Micah, and Austin stepped toward the door to River’s room.

He wasn’t sure how he ended up on the other side of that door, but when time moved for him again, he was standing by the baby’s bed and looking down at his sleeping son.

“Oh, Austin...” Katie’s mom Eva whispered, tears streaming down her face as she came to give him a brief hug. It was like she sensed he couldn’t quite grasp the reality yet and couldn’t deal with anything more than quick physical contact for comfort.

“I’m so sorry, son.” Gregory said, as if what had happened was somehow his fault.

Austin waved a hand at them, not quite dismissing but without any words to convey the emotions.

Micah came into the small room then, and froze momentarily when he saw the couple on the other side of River’s bed.

“You must be Micah,” Katie’s mom said, and Austin registered them shaking hands and continuing to speak while he stood there staring at the angelic little person.

Maybe the chatter woke him up, or maybe he'd just napped enough, but suddenly River twitched a little, then slowly blinked a few times before attaching his clear gaze to Austin.

"Hi, Nugget," Austin whispered and reached his arms toward the boy.

Something clicked in that moment, and suddenly Austin had a lapful of snuggly sixteen-month-old baby pressing his face into Austin's neck. River had never been shy with Austin, no matter how long it was since they'd last seen each other. Micah looked at them from across the room and smiled in an almost serene way.

"I think we'll go home for a nap," Eva said, and Austin looked at her properly for the first time.

She looked exhausted, and so did Gregory. They had Katie when they were older, nearly forty, and now they were both in their early sixties. They were about to retire, and they'd looked forward to traveling more now that they'd have time. Right now, neither of them looked like they wanted to do anything but sleep for a very long time.

"We'll take care of River. Don't worry," Austin promised.

"Do you have all the papers you'll need?" Gregory asked, stepping closer. He stroked River's hair that was almost exactly the same color as Austin's.

"Yeah, I made sure we have it all," Micah said quietly, giving them all space.

The look of shock on Micah's face when Eva hugged him would've been priceless in any other situation.

Now none of them were quite themselves, they all felt the oppressive weight of their grief and it drowned everything else. Eva hugged Austin and River too, and then she and Gregory left for the day.

Austin maneuvered himself and his son on top of the bed, and River curled up against his chest.

"Should we call Katie's lawyer?" Micah asked as he pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down.

Austin took one of River's little hands and gestured for Micah to reach over. The three of them held hands while Austin thought what the smartest thing to do would be.

"I suppose so. I don't have one, but given that he's River's lawyer too, I guess we can count on him, you know?"

They made the call and found out her former lawyer had moved to New York and Katie had replaced him with another one called Gina Sandler. Miss Sandler got to the hospital by five, just in time to hear what River's doctor had to say.

"I'm Doctor Jesse," the young-looking blond doctor said and shook everyone's hand in turn, even River's.

The boy was clearly already enamored of the cheerful doctor, and Austin felt thankful for that. At least he wouldn't have bad memories of his brief hospital stay.

"We were told that River is fine and good to go as soon as you check him out." Micah stated before Austin could organize his thoughts enough.

"Oh yes, this little guy had some oxygen when they brought him in last night, but that was pretty much it. I heard from Officer Rivera that his room wasn't actually affected by anything but some smoke, and the smoke inhalation on his part was minimal and certainly non-threatening."

Austin registered the "on his part" and knew instantly that was what had happened to Katie. They'd been trapped, and...

Micah took River from Austin's arms and helped the doctor with the checkup while Austin's mind reeled, and he tried to control his expressions as well as he could.

"Alrighty then," the doc said and smiled at them. "If you have somewhere to go for the night, I will go fix the discharge papers for you and you'll be on your way in no time."

"We have a room for them at a family friendly hotel," Miss Sandler piped up, and Austin looked at her questioningly. "I guessed you wouldn't want to stay with Katie's parents and you don't have family in town, so I took the liberty of making the reservations for you. It will all be paid from what Katie called her 'disaster-fund,'" she explained.

"Oh, well that's okay, then." Austin nodded and started to look around for River's things.

There wasn't much to pack, since the boy had been literally torn from his bed by the firefighters and rushed into the hospital in his light summer pajamas

with a funky retro pattern on them. Eva and Gregory had brought some stuff over from their place, so they dressed River in a toddler-sized hoodie.

“We need to get him more clothes,” Micah said once they were done and waiting for someone to come in with the paperwork.

Micah was standing by the window, lightly bouncing a tired-looking River in his arms, while Miss Sandler—“Oh just call me Gina!”—sat in a chair. Austin tried not to pace.

He was by the door when it suddenly opened and a nurse they hadn't seen yet stepped in with a clipboard in her hands. The woman took one look at Austin, and he could tell he was being judged.

“Right, then,” she said and stepped around him without greeting him. “I have discharge papers for River Reyes, here.”

It was curious how the room seemed to fill with something akin to tension. Micah turned around with River in his arms and looked at the middle-aged woman, neither of them saying anything. The nurse brandished the clipboard towards Micah, and when he didn't make a move to take it, she turned and looked at Gina.

“Oh...” the nurse said, before thrusting the thing at the lawyer.

“How about you try once more with that?” Gina smiled at the older woman with what Austin could only describe as a pissed off Cheshire Cat look.

For a few seconds the nurse stood there, frozen to the spot before slowly raising her gaze back to Austin. She had the grace to blush, and Austin sighed straight at her before holding out a hand.

“Is it the ink? Piercings? Stretched ears? The gayness? Because the last one doesn't show, but my lawyer and my boyfriend here can vouch for that if you'd like confirmation.” He couldn't help it. He tried, he really did, but... “You know I could think a few things about you based on appearance, too. Make assumptions and all that...” He signed his name with a flourish and handed the papers back to the now slightly pissed off looking woman.

“Austin, play nice,” Micah said quietly and smiled a little, even though Austin knew he'd disappointed and perhaps embarrassed his partner.

“Sorry. It's just been an incredibly hard twelve hours or so, and I want to get out of here without being judged.”

"I understand," the nurse said and gave them all a tight little smile. Then she excused herself without an apology and fled the room. Not that Austin blamed her, not really.

"Let's just go," he sighed the words at Micah and Gina.

River held his hands toward Austin when Micah stepped closer, and Austin gladly accepted the warm weight of the baby.

"We'll be just fine," Micah whispered to them, kissing both of them on the cheek.

"I hope so," Austin managed to say. He really, really hoped so.

It had been an interesting two days, learning to live with a baby full time while juggling paperwork and other not so fun things Gina threw at them and figuring out what they wanted to do with the stuff in Katie and River's apartment. Austin had wanted to go there, to see it for himself for whatever reason; he didn't quite know why. Micah had put his foot down, and because he rarely did, Austin had listened to him.

Instead, Gina had gone with Gregory, and Micah had gone along because he'd thought one of them needed to be there.

Austin stayed back with River and Eva at the Reyes' house. It wasn't awkward at all. River was doing well and played with some wooden building blocks on the floor while Austin and Eva drank coffee and tried to chat a little.

"I don't know how I'd do this without Micah," Austin said at some point, the words coming out weirdly without the conscious thought of wanting to say them.

Eva looked at him and smiled. "I know. I feel the same about Gregory. I guess that's the whole thing with being with your other half. You can rely on them being there, and without them you're incomplete."

"I would still do this gladly, River is my son, and that was the agreement I had with Katie..."

"We'd never try and take him, you know that, right? We know you're capable, we know *you*, Austin. Katie loved you without hesitation, no matter how unsuitable you two ended up being romantically." She meant, naturally, their sexualities.

“Yeah... I don’t think I’ve ever loved anyone more than I do Micah, River, and Katie.” To Austin’s surprise, those names were in order, too. He knew it would probably change, that River would become number one eventually, but for now they were learning to know one another on a day-to-day basis instead of “about once a month” as it had been before. Even then, Katie had been there at all times, because the adults wanted to spend time together as well.

“She loved Micah, too. She never thought he wouldn’t be perfect for you, you know?” Eva glanced at him as she bent to take a painted wooden piggy from River and examined it as the treasure it was for the baby.

“This is a very fine piggy, go show it to Daddy,” she encouraged.

River turned around and wobbled his way around the coffee table to Austin. It hit him then for real. He was Daddy now. Not Austin or Uncle Austin. He picked up the boy with the pink wood clutched in his hand and tried to keep his tears back for the baby’s sake.

“What do you have there, Nugget?” The words came out a bit breathless, and he hid his face in River’s hair while taking the pig into his much, much larger hand and looked it over with eyes blurred with tears.

He avoided looking at Eva, knowing that she’d caught his expression and would no doubt be crying by now.

When the other adults came back, they looked harried in different ways. It was obvious they’d all been crying.

“We took River’s clothes and some other things to the dry cleaner’s. They can sort it all out.” Gina waved a hand and sat down next to Austin and River.

“The fire”—Gregory cleared his throat—“the fire hadn’t gotten into all of the apartment, but the smoke and water damage was pretty devastating in the living room. Even though River’s room was fine, everything had the smell of smoke stuck to it and...” He looked shaken and so very tired.

“Officer Rivera knew of some service that can handle getting the smoke off things that can’t be washed, so we packed stuff and took it over to them,” Gina said in a monotone voice so unlike the perky tone they’d come to know in the past few days, it was disturbing. “Fire restorers, I think, they were called.”

Micah edged closer to the couch and came to sit on Austin’s other side. River immediately thrust the piggy to Micah, who smiled and accepted it, kissing the boy’s cheek, then Austin’s. Micah practically radiated protectiveness and love, and Austin soaked it in for a moment.

“We’ll send you the stuff Micah said you’d want to keep for River, and the rest can stay in storage here when we get it all back. The things that can’t be salvaged... the building manager was pretty understanding and will take care of it for us.” Gregory gestured toward the stairs. “I need a nap.”

Eva told them to help themselves to whatever they needed and followed her husband to the bedroom. Austin couldn’t blame her for wanting to take care of the man; after all, he’d never seen Gregory look so old and somehow, small.

The morning of the funeral was cloudy, like the sky was waiting to be crying soon, too. Katie hadn’t been religious, so they gathered at the Reyes’ home, and Gregory and Austin fetched the urn of Katie’s ashes from the funeral directors.

They had Katie’s favorite flowers—yellow roses—everywhere in the house. Photos of her, River, and Austin were on every surface that wasn’t covered in some sort of food. Nobody wore anything special, just their best jeans and shirts; there were no black suits in sight. Instead, according to Katie’s wishes that they’d found in Gina’s files, everyone wore a brightly colored top.

River wore his bright yellow SpongeBob shirt with red shorts and his favorite shoes, the canvas ones Micah had painted for him way before the fire.

There weren’t too many people around—not because they hadn’t wanted to come, but because those were Katie’s wishes, too. She’d wanted people to remember her the next time they went out drinking with friends, or held a loved one’s hand. She’d also left a wish for people not to buy her flowers, but instead, put the money in a special bank account for River’s college fund.

So there they were, sitting on borrowed chairs in the backyard or in the living room, all the people Katie held dearest. There were aunts and uncles and a few close cousins. The one grandparent she had left, Eva’s mother, Grandma Molly, was there, as were some friends who had been close to her from college or work.

All in all, it couldn’t have been more than twenty-five people, but more than double that had sent messages to the family, telling them that they would remember Katie and put their “flower money” into River’s fund.

Around midday, Austin found himself sitting in the backyard under a tree that had his and Katie’s initials carved on the bark. They’d been eleven and twelve when they’d done that, and even then, there was no heart around the letters. They’d just known.

“Dada!” River called from the middle of the backyard, pointing at Austin with his chubby little hand.

Austin smiled and waved at the boy, seeing several of the guests look at their exchange with smiles on their faces. There, in this group of people, there was no prejudice. They all knew he was River's father and Katie's first choice to raise the child if she wasn't able to.

Austin wasn't looking forward to the prejudice he was sure they'd encounter out there in the real world when they got back to Boston and had to start their lives over. But for his son, for his “surprise family” like Micah had called them, he'd overcome anything.

The first week or so back in Boston was hard. River was adjusting, but so were Micah and Austin. Luckily their AC was fixed now, and Mrs. Thompson had offered them help in any way they needed.

“The new addition to the family, as adorable as he is, can throw you for a loop, especially if anything surprising happens,” she'd told them and patted Austin's shoulder.

Her premonition, or hunch, or just knowledge about babies and parenting, came true around day nine of their new life.

River cried in the morning, and Austin thought it was just regular crying, and they continued on with their routines. Micah had gone out to his studio space to finish another painting first thing in the morning. By the time he got back for lunch and to check up on River, Austin's nerves were shot to pieces.

“He stops for a moment, but then he starts again and it's not crying anymore, now he wails, Micah.” Austin looked at his partner, feeling more helpless than he ever had before.

“Can I have him?” Micah held out his arms to take the crying baby from Austin. “Go walk around the block, honey,” he told Austin, and all but pushed him out the door.

It made sense to remove Austin from the situation for a moment, but he still felt wound up beyond belief and so, so helpless. For the first time he knew what Katie had meant about feeling like the worst parent ever for not being able to take away the pain from River when he'd had colic when he was two and a half months old.

By the time Austin was back, he felt less tense, and miracle of miracles, River wasn't screaming. He practically ran up the steps and let himself into the house as quietly as he could, because River would only be quiet if he was asleep.

He found Micah on his back on the couch, with River tucked safely between his side and the cushions. River's thick baby blanket was tightly wrapped around the boy, almost like a swaddle.

"Oh God..." Austin huffed out a breath of relief and sat on the edge of the coffee table.

"I think I figured it out," Micah said very quietly, speaking in the funny, stiff way people do when they're trying not to move at all while talking.

"Oh?" Austin took his hand and threaded their fingers together.

"Ear infection. If you want, you can call a doctor, but I think we can handle this on our own because he doesn't have a fever."

Austin stared at Micah like he was the fucking second coming. "How...?"

"He grabbed his ear a few times. And he has a bit of a cold, right?" Micah smiled. "We had a lot of children in Lydia at all times, and there were always kids with ear infections."

Of course. Micah's past in the not-a-cult was the reason why he'd never even batted an eye when a while after they started dating, Austin had told him he was going to be a father-of-sorts soon. If there was something Micah was good and familiar with, it was children.

"What do we do?"

"Once he wakes up, we make sure he gets enough fluids, give him some Tylenol, maybe wet a towel with warm water and try to keep it pressed to his ear. He should be fine in a couple of days. If he gets worse, we call the doctor. Unless you want to do it now?"

"No, I trust you," Austin said, and Micah's expression turned into something that told Austin he had just given his partner the world.

"Okay. So why don't you go and figure out the lunch situation, maybe some banana and peanut butter smoothies for me and Nugget here?" Micah batted his long lashes at Austin who chuckled quietly.

"Fine, fine..." He let go of Micah's hand, leaned over to kiss him gently. "But you're also having a sandwich. And I'll cut some grapes into smaller pieces for him if he wants them."

They did all they could at home, but whenever the Tylenol wore out, River was in pain again. The next afternoon, they decided that taking him to the doctor's was mandatory.

"Mrs. Thompson told me to go to this place," Micah came to the hall where Austin was trying to get shoes on River, who wasn't cooperating at all.

"Who is it?"

"Their old family doctor, or his clinic. They used the clinic when their own kids were small, and now the guy's daughter has taken over. Apparently they're top notch and very family oriented, all in all," Micah spoke while picking up River's Teletubby stuffed toy—the purple one, obviously—and distracted the baby with it until Austin could get the shoes on him.

"Alright, let's go, then. The cab's here."

"We really need to buy a car," Micah said, and Austin knew he was right.

"We do, yes. Maybe when Katie's insurance money comes through? Since we need the car mainly for River's needs anyway?" Austin picked up River, and they left the house, Micah clutching Tinky Winky in one hand and the clinic's card in the other.

The clinic wasn't far, luckily, because River was starting to get that pained expression that preceded a mini-meltdown. The cabbie was understanding, and he got a nice tip for his good choice of routes.

They rushed inside the homey-looking Victorian house that had at some point been converted into a doctor's office.

"Hi, I'm Shannon, how can I help you?" A young woman sitting behind the desk asked as soon as they stepped inside.

"Ear infection that hasn't gone away in a few days. He's getting worse now," Austin said quickly, showing how frazzled he was, but he couldn't help it.

"Okay, we only have one person before you, and Dr. Papadopoulos will gladly take a look." She smiled at them all, then gave them a clipboard and a pen. "Could one of you fill this in for us?"

Micah took the papers, and they went to sit in a waiting area, which looked like it had once been a fancy parlor. Austin wished he had time to properly look at it, but there was none. River was tugging at his ear and making hiccupy noises, sounding completely miserable.

“Erm, it asks for parents or guardians. Can I put myself here?” Micah asked, frowning at the paper. “I mean, how legally correct does this have to be for them?”

“I’ve no clue. Want to go ask the girl?” Austin fought the urge to bounce River on his knee, because it seemed to be the go-to gesture to amuse the kid when needed. Sadly it wouldn’t work here, not with the pain.

Micah got up and rounded the corner to the hall. He came back immediately.

“She’s not there. No idea where she went.”

“Okay, well leave it empty until we can ask?”

Suddenly, a man who looked to be in his late twenties stepped into the room from a door in the back Austin hadn’t noticed before. He wore scrubs and a name tag that read Nurse Eric, and smiled at them, and River, before walking closer.

“Having trouble with the info sheet?” he asked, pointing at the clipboard in Micah’s hand.

“Yeah, actually we were.” Austin smiled back at the guy.

“We’re looking at the section with the parents’ information. We were wondering if that needs to be legal information or should we leave it empty until we have something in place for River?” Micah asked, looking nervous and shy suddenly. Something about the nurse seemed to trigger that side of him.

The man looked at them, seemingly confused, so Austin jumped in.

“See, we’re a brand new family unit, and although River here is my son, Micah hasn’t adopted him yet, so he’s not his son legally yet.”

The nurse seemed to pick up on their relationship, looking from Austin to Micah and back, and then glancing at River with a weird expression on his face.

“Oh,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “Well, I’m pretty sure it’s fine to put you there as the other parent, if you two are it.” Something in the words or maybe how they were said seemed to make Micah sink into himself a little.

It ticked Austin off. Nobody should make Micah feel bad for wanting to be River’s second parent. He balanced River in his lap and reached his other hand to Micah who took it instinctively, despite standing next to them instead of sitting down. The nurse tried to hide a sneer in a pretty unsuccessful way.

"Yes, we're 'it'. Since his mother, who was my best friend since I was his age, died some weeks ago." Austin hoped his tone and expression conveyed what he felt.

Micah squeezed his fingers as if to calm him down despite having retreated into his shell a little.

For a few seconds the nurse looked cowed, but then he straightened his back and was about to say something undoubtedly unpleasant, when the receptionist whirled around the corner.

"Eric! Can you check the supplies in the kid's examination room?" she asked, seeming a bit breathless.

"Sure." Eric the Murse left the room without saying a thing to Austin's family.

"Are you done with that?" Shannon—Austin remembered her name suddenly—asked them after Eric vanished somewhere to do his job.

Austin asked her the parental unit question, and they put Micah down as an emergency contact and the second parent, pending.

"So, River Dorian Reyes." She looked at the clipboard and smiled at River. "What a lovely name you have!"

"Thanks, the credit goes to his mom," Austin said, smiling, until the fact that Katie was gone forever hit him and he froze.

Micah, who had sat at some point, reached a hand around Austin. "We lost her recently," Micah said and smiled sadly at poor Shannon who, unlike the nurse, looked shocked and sad at the same time.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured, and with the lack of anything else to add, she took the clipboard and walked away.

Losing someone in their mid-twenties seemed especially disturbing to a lot of people, even more so when leaving behind a kid River's age. Not that Austin blamed them, at all.

It turned out that Doctor Mary Papadopoulos was a young woman who was obviously not as Greek as her last name was, and the small diamond on her ring finger told them why that was, exactly. She was also very nice, kind, and calm, and River took a liking to her immediately.

"Is it normal to feel like the worst parent in the history of parents when you can't help your child when they're obviously in pain?" Micah blurted out the question while she was taking a peek into River's ears.

Austin held River on his lap and, hopefully, still too, while the doctor worked.

She smiled. "Oh yes. Everyone feels like that at some point, but especially new parents. You didn't even have the infant time to draw from, that's huge."

"It's like suddenly having a new baby who isn't really a baby after all." Austin nodded.

"Some of the most nervous parents are those who adopt toddlers, you know. At least here in my clinic."

She looked at the three of them and smiled. "At least, you have a good relationship and all knew each other before the tragedy happened." They'd filled her in with why exactly they had River in the first place.

"Yeah, I mean it was never planned to be this way, but obviously Katie knew I could do it," Austin said, then glanced at Micah. "She knew *we* could do it."

Micah flashed him a huge smile, and again Austin wondered where he'd be without his partner.

They got antibiotics for River, and promised to call back in a few days for an update. They liked the doctor a lot, and were welcomed back anytime they needed. Finally, Dr. Mary gave them her emergency number as well.

"I don't give this to everyone, just those who I can see needing it in a panic situation. You guys are new at this daddy thing," she said, and brushed River's hair behind his ear, making him hide his face into Micah's neck. "It was sprung on you and you weren't prepared. So I get it, and I want to be there for you."

"Thank you, it matters a lot to us both," Austin told her and meant every word.

The antibiotics did their trick, and a couple of days later River was back to his usual babbly self and Austin could call the clinic to let them know.

The trip to the clinic wasn't a magical cure for the occasional feelings of ineptitude and chaos that followed them around for the next several weeks. It shouldn't have been a surprise when they found themselves collapsing into bed after long days of working and taking care of River, but somehow, in the beginning, it was.

Gradually, they formed a routine that worked. Because they were still a new family, they didn't want to place River in daycare and preferred to keep him with whoever could have him during the day.

If it was Micah's day, it meant he painted at home and watched River at the same time. Usually after lunchtime, Mrs. Thompson would come and ask if he needed help watching the boy. Mrs. Thompson took a liking to River and began to treat him like one of her own grandkids. She was never intrusive, just offered help and gave her time gladly, being an additional support network for Austin's family. Her husband still worked, but she was retired and had time on her hands—in her own words, more than she knew what to do with.

If Micah was at his studio or at school, Austin would take River with him to the Fiery Squid. They had gotten a playard for him, and it took up most of the previously empty floor space in the front. That way River could play and be easily reached if and when he needed something. His little spot of Squid was between the windows and Austin's workspace, which made Austin's work a lot more fun in some ways, and more difficult in others.

Almost all the clients loved River and his easygoing nature. They would chat with him and play with him while waiting, and they were always happy to ooh and aah at his artwork—toddler-friendly art supplies courtesy of Auntie Hy.

Deep down, Austin knew that it wouldn't always be easy, not with no mom and two dads, not with life in general, but so far things looked pretty awesome for his son. The early days of River waking up sobbing in the middle of the night for no apparent reason had stopped, and Micah firmly believed it had been the only way River's baby psyche could handle the loss of his mother.

Austin and Micah had decided to incorporate things they knew Katie would've liked into River's routines. They read to the boy every night and would have done it even without Katie's influence, and they limited his TV time to a minimum. They also encouraged River's creativity in every way they could come up with, and set some rules and agreed to hold on to them while River grew up.

They continued to nurture River's individuality, and even watched some older Disney movies with the boy because Katie had loved those. They did fast forward the scary bits, naturally, but there was still enough for them all to enjoy. Sometimes Micah was the one who got lost in one of the movies, mostly because they were completely new for him. He'd never seen any of them as a child, so Austin enjoyed teaching both Micah and River all about Dumbo, The

Little Mermaid, and other classics, not that River had the capability to sit down and watch for more than a few minutes yet anyway. Micah kept telling Austin they had time and it was the thought that counted and all that, but sometimes Austin wondered if he needed to come up with more ways to keep Katie's memory alive. He trusted that he would figure it out by the time River was old enough to understand more.

The one thing Austin had managed to overlook for a couple of months in the newness and mild panic of the situation was intimacy. Before River they had a pretty awesome sex life, and they'd made love most nights and sometimes during the day if they were both home. It was as natural as breathing for them, especially now that Micah had gotten to a point where he craved Austin's touch without any shame or hesitation. He was still pretty timid about asking for sex if he wanted it, though, and in a way that was what alerted Austin to something being wrong.

"You're acting weird," Austin stated one Saturday morning when they had their breakfast and were cleaning the kitchen together while River sat in the living room, watching Teletubbies from an old VHS Mrs. Thompson had given them along with the player. "Why are you acting weird?"

Instead of answering, Micah blushed and ducked his head, finding cover behind his hair. That was a sign that Austin could read better than any words.

"Oh..." It all made sense now. The funny looks and the lingering touches that Austin had thought were just Micah needing more physical contact now that River took most of Austin's attention.

"I know you've been... distracted... and..." Micah said after a moment of silence.

"No, no..." Austin wrapped his arms around Micah's slender body and pulled him close. "Now that I've realized it, it's all I can think about." He noticed how his voice turned husky and his body suddenly reacted to the closeness of Micah's body against his.

Micah swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing with the motion, and just like that, getting to bite and lick the long, graceful neck was all Austin could think about.

The doorbell ringing was the only thing keeping him from attacking Micah right there in the kitchen while their son was babbling at the TV in the next room.

Micah, still blushing, tore himself away from Austin and went to open the door.

"Oh, Mrs. Thompson!" Austin could hear Micah say.

"Good morning, Micah," she said cheerily, then went quiet and continued after a few beats. "I think I came here just at the right time!" There were brisk steps as she walked further into the house and to the kitchen.

The grin on her face as she took in Austin's flustered complexion was wickedly knowing, something he would've loved not to have seen on the face of a woman her age. Ever.

"Mrs. Thomp—" Austin started, then corrected himself before she could "—Marie."

"I came over to ask if you two would let me take River to the park and maybe to visit my grandkids. I thought you might need some alone time for a change." The grin was back and Austin fidgeted internally.

Micah had vanished mysteriously, and Austin didn't blame him even a little.

He decided it was best to concentrate on River. "Oh... well I think it would be a great idea for him to get to play with other kids again."

"That's settled, then!" Marie clapped her hands delightedly, and in less than ten minutes, River was packed and ready to go. "I'll return him by bedtime and make sure he has dinner so all you have to do is give him a bath and a snack and put him to bed."

The whirlwind that was Marie Thompson blew away with River in tow, and suddenly Austin and Micah were alone together for the first time since they'd brought River home three months ago.

They stood there in the hallway, staring at each other.

"We have roughly six hours to do grown up stuff." He looked at Micah. "Any ideas?"

At first Micah blushed, but then he began to unbutton his shirt. Before Austin knew it, Micah was walking toward the back of the house, stripping the rest of his few bits of clothing off and dropping them wherever they fell.

Austin stared after his suddenly playful lover. The sight of Micah's bare ass vanishing around the corner towards the bedroom finally jolted Austin into action. He grinned, pulled off his T-shirt, and ran after Micah, already opening the button of his jean shorts.

When he got to the bedroom, Micah was lying on his back in the middle of their bed, looking much more shy than any gorgeous man naked in bed who was about to have sex should.

"You have no idea how much I want you..." Austin's voice sounded husky again.

Micah looked pointedly at Austin's cock that was already rock hard. "I know."

Austin tried to hold back, to not jump into bed and on top of Micah like an animal, but he didn't quite manage. He was on the bed with Micah before he realized he had moved, and Micah welcomed him with open arms.

"Six hours?" Micah smiled, looking excited and hopeful. "Not that I wanted to get rid of Nugget, but..."

"Less talking, more making out."

That was where they started. Touching seemed like a sudden burst of luxury, and they kissed and touched, leisurely, until they couldn't stand it anymore.

"Austin..." Micah whined, probably wanting Austin to take over like he normally would.

Austin shook his head. "No, this is your show. At least for round one."

Luckily Micah seemed too turned on to worry about anything or get self-conscious. He flipped Austin on his back and straddled him smoothly, then grabbed Austin's hand and seemed to think for a moment. Then, flushing slightly, he pressed Austin's hand against his cock. Biting his lower lip, Micah wrapped his long fingers around Austin's cock and looked up.

"Together," Micah whispered.

Austin moaned softly at Micah's grip on his dick. "Okay, whatever you want, Foxy."

Austin loved art, but nothing was more beautiful for him than Micah in the throes of ecstasy. He knew it was still difficult for Micah to let go completely, but now it had been too long for him to be able to think anything at all. Instead, he gave himself to the pleasure and undulated his body on top of Austin's while somehow still being able to pleasure Austin at the same time.

Micah's long-limbed body, still completely tattoo free, moved with instinct guiding everything. Even knowing him so well by now, Austin still felt

spellbound watching Micah. There was such innocence in Micah, such grace and something almost poetic; it made Austin wonder how he'd ever gotten this lucky.

"C-close," Micah breathed, threw back his head and let out a funny little almost-howl, coming all over Austin's hand.

The way Micah's fingers squeezed Austin's cock a bit firmer as he came was enough to throw Austin off the edge and into the abyss he hadn't realized he'd been missing, both physically and mentally.

Micah slumped on top of him and they breathed together, waiting for the first round rush to leave them and for their heartbeats to slow down again.

Eventually Micah lifted his head and smiled at Austin. "Hi."

"Hi, Foxy." Austin kissed him.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you? And River."

"I think you tell me every day, without words." Austin ran his palms up and down Micah's back. "I love you too, and so does River."

Micah ducked his head again, looking so pleased it made Austin's heart stutter. He realized he should give Micah more credit and remember to tell him how important he was in Austin and River's life. No time like the present.

"I could've done this without you, maybe," Austin started, and Micah tensed slightly. "But I would never have wanted to, and without you my son wouldn't have two parents who love him and want to make sure he has everything he could ever need. Don't you ever think you're not important, or that I don't cherish you, because I do. So, so much."

Big tears rolled down Micah's cheeks, and Austin grabbed him, rolling them over again. "When we're all good and ready, I want us to get married," he said quietly, looking into Micah's eyes. "We're still learning how to be a family, but eventually it will come naturally, and then I'll pop the question. Or you can, if you want."

Micah smiled through his tears and nodded. "Okay."

They kissed again and again, starting round two without realizing it.

A while later Austin fumbled for the lube and made sure Micah was ready before entering him slowly. He'd been the first one to do this with Micah, and he prided himself on making it as close to perfect as he could each time.

"Love you," Austin murmured, rocking his hips, finding the right angle. He didn't give a damn about saying the words while making love, because if that wasn't the time, then when was it?

"Harder," Micah said, surprising Austin a little, because usually they went slow and gentle, taking their time. "I think I want it harder and faster," Micah implored, sounding slightly insecure.

"Whatever you need, Foxy." And so Austin moved faster, harder, making sure he pegged Micah's sweet spot as often as possible. He enjoyed it, no matter how they did it, because it was Micah in his arms and nobody else. To let Micah find what he liked whenever he was ready for it was a perk, something Austin would never take lightly.

"Let go," Micah whispered, jerking himself quickly, waiting for Austin to come first this time.

When he did, Micah followed him soon after, his body milking Austin for all he was worth until he had to pull out because he was so tender.

An hour later they were showering. There had been a round three in the shower, and they were taking their time to wash each other, feeling lazy as hell.

"Do you miss River already, too?" Micah watched Austin rinsing his hair.

"Uh-huh," Austin admitted, surfacing from under the spray.

"So let's take a little nap and then go see if they're back?"

"Sure." Austin smiled, and Micah flashed him a happy, relaxed smile.

They dried off and changed the sheets before climbing back under the covers. Micah rested against Austin's chest like so often before, and they both sighed contently, relaxing gradually in the gentle hum of the AC.

It took five minutes for Micah to shift restlessly for the first time. Austin opened his eyes, wondering if he'd imagined it. No, he felt it again soon after.

"You want to get dressed and go see if they're back?" Austin asked when Micah fidgeted again.

"Can we?" Micah asked in a whisper.

"Sure. He's our son. Of course we can."

It was almost funny how fast Micah was out of bed and pulling on clean clothes. Austin looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and Micah waved at him impatiently.

"I don't care if she sees us in different clothes. It's not like she didn't do this because she wanted to give us time to do this exact thing!" Micah babbled and began to pull a comb through his blond, slightly curly hair.

"Then throw me some underwear." Micah did, and they were out of the door in five more minutes.

Before they had time to ring the Thompsons' doorbell, a car door closed near the sidewalk and Marie looked at them knowingly.

"Missed us already?"

Micah nodded and went to the car, fishing River out of the car seat Marie had for her grandkids and now for River too.

"Dada!" River squealed when Micah turned with the boy in his arms and River could see Austin.

"Hey, Nugget. Did you have fun?" Austin smiled at his son. He accepted sticky fingers against his cheeks and a very wet kiss aimed in the general direction of his lips.

"You three are just the cutest," Marie said as she came around with River's bag.

Austin looked at the two most important people in his life and smiled at her. "I don't know about me, but they sure are."

The End

Author Bio

Tia Fielding is a thirty-something Scandinavian. She is a self-proclaimed queer person, lover of everything pretty, witty people, words, cats, sarcasm, autumn, and caffeine. (Lots of caffeine.)

Tia started writing stories early in life, almost as soon as she learned how to write. Her early stories about horses and ghosts have now turned into romantic tales about people in love, but her early enthusiasm and imagination still runs wild. After losing the thread of her writing in her teens, Tia rediscovered the joy of writing stories through fan fiction, which kick-started her publishing career. Tia is not ashamed of her past of borrowing other people's characters, but has found creating her own much more satisfying.

In 2013 one of Tia's novels, Falling Into Place, was recognized by the industry's Rainbow Awards in the Best LGBT Erotic Romance (Bobby Michaels Award) category.

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