

**Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014**



**LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY**

**BONUS  
VOLUME 2**

## Table of Contents

<b>Love's Landscapes</b> .....	5
<b>Checking Him Out</b> by Debbie McGowan (contemporary, 2 alpha males, grief, homophobia, references to past murder/violent assault involving knives; mention of suicide) .....	8
Acknowledgements .....	11
Checking Him Out .....	12
Chapter One.....	13
Chapter Two.....	18
Chapter Three .....	23
Chapter Four.....	27
Chapter Five .....	31
Chapter Six .....	37
Chapter Seven .....	47
Chapter Eight.....	53
Chapter Nine.....	59
Chapter Ten .....	66
Chapter Eleven .....	73
Chapter Twelve .....	80
Chapter Thirteen.....	89
Chapter Fourteen .....	96
Chapter Fifteen .....	103
Chapter Sixteen .....	109
Chapter Seventeen.....	121
Chapter Eighteen .....	131
Chapter Nineteen.....	138
Chapter Twenty .....	145
Chapter Twenty-One .....	151
Chapter Twenty-Two .....	156
Chapter Twenty-Three .....	162
Chapter Twenty-Four .....	170
Epilogue.....	180
Author Bio.....	185

<b>Missing Piece</b> by Riina Y.T. (contemporary, friends to lovers, slow burn/UST, angst, infidelity/cheating of secondary character) .....	186
Dedication .....	188
Missing Piece .....	189
Chapter One.....	190
Chapter Two.....	200
Chapter Three.....	213
Chapter Four.....	217
Chapter Five .....	223
Chapter Six.....	232
Chapter Seven .....	236
Chapter Eight.....	242
Chapter Nine.....	249
Chapter Ten .....	254
Chapter Eleven .....	261
Chapter Twelve .....	266
Chapter Thirteen.....	272
Chapter Fourteen.....	280
Chapter Fifteen.....	284
Chapter Sixteen .....	287
Chapter Seventeen.....	297
Chapter Eighteen.....	306
Chapter Nineteen.....	313
Chapter Twenty .....	320
Chapter Twenty-One .....	327
Chapter Twenty-Two .....	341
Author Bio.....	359
<b>Of Gods and Monsters: Menoetius</b> by Wulf F Godgluck (contemporary, dark, BDSM, hurt/comfort, dubious consent, past child abuse and rape) .....	360
Acknowledgements .....	362
About the Title .....	363
Of Gods and Monsters: Menoetius .....	364
Prologue.....	365
Chapter One.....	367

Chapter Two .....	387
Chapter Three .....	401
Chapter Four .....	412
Chapter Five .....	431
Chapter Six .....	444
Chapter Seven .....	447
Chapter Eight.....	465
Chapter Nine.....	478
Chapter Ten .....	496
Chapter Eleven .....	516
Chapter Twelve .....	519
Chapter Thirteen.....	522
Chapter Fourteen .....	525
Chapter Fifteen .....	539
Chapter Sixteen .....	555
Chapter Seventeen.....	558
Epilogue.....	565
Author's Note .....	567
Author Bio.....	568
<b>Want more?</b> .....	569

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Bonus Volume 2

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Bonus Volume 2.

### Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

### Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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# Checking Him Out

Debbie  
McGowan



# CHECKING HIM OUT

By Debbie McGowan

## Photo Description

Photo shows a ruggedly handsome, olive-skinned guy in his early to midthirties, with thick, short dark hair, deep dark eyes, broad angular features and heavy stubble on his lip and chin. He's wearing a suit jacket over an open-necked hoodie, dark hair visible on the bared V of his chest. His eyes are narrowed and looking straight into the camera; his index finger is pressed to his thick ruddy lips in mischievous, sultry warning.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*When I met the love of my new life (his words not mine... ass), I was simply waiting in the checkout line. I might have been caught up in a conversation with my best friend/wife of X amount of years about something, I can't remember at the moment. So anyway, we were distracted and didn't notice that the line had moved. So after maybe 30 seconds, or a minute at the most (I'm pretty sure it wasn't that long), Mr. Impatient, with an accent like that character on The Originals (not that I watch that show at my age), got our attention in the rudest way in my opinion, or in my wife's heart-of-a-ho opinion, the kindest way possible for our insensitive asses. I'm pretty sure his accent, mixed with his damn charm, got him out of more trouble than it should. We had a rough start, but we had quiet moments when we weren't all over each other or fighting, in and out of bed. Anyway, I would love a story about our first year.*

*P.S. I want a story with interesting secondary characters interacting with the main characters. I want it to be known that the marriage is a \*lavender marriage—no one is being fooled here. I want humor mixed in with hot-damn, slightly overwhelming sex. Alpha males with a bad case of the giggles at inappropriate moments. No BDSM please. One other request is that I wish the main characters to be in the age range of late twenties to early thirties.*

*\*A lavender marriage is a "beard" marriage of convenience.*

*Sincerely,*

*T*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** 2 alpha males, grief, homophobia, in the closet, lavender marriage, tearjerker, humorous

**Content Warnings:** references to past murder/violent assault involving knives; mention of suicide

**Word Count:** 60,143

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### Acknowledgements

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K.C. Faelan, who fit/fitted in beta-reading and educated me along the way;

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Rick Bettencourt, for all things Boston, and for not mocking/sharing an, um, eye for detail.

Thank you also to the M/M Romance Group in general, and the mods in particular, for your support, patience and humor. You are truly wonderful.

Finally, a huge thanks to Taya, for this brilliant and inspiring prompt, and your ongoing encouragement. I hope I have done it justice.

# **CHECKING HIM OUT**

**By Debbie McGowan**

## Chapter One

I probably wouldn't have noticed, but the guy was wearing sweatpants with nothing underneath. First the attempt to shove his way behind me, then the hot palm on my shoulder. Elise stopped talking, and all of a sudden I had no idea what she'd been saying.

"Hey, would you mind?" That was Captain Impatient, his crotch now level with my ass, pressing into me, because there's really not enough space in a checkout aisle for two big guys to pass by untouched, though it wasn't the physical contact that threw me.

Captain Impatient.

He was my height, maybe a little shorter, so around six one, and my build—yeah, I work out, a lot. And he was looking right past me, like he was so sure I'd let him go ahead, even though I could take him, in more ways than one. He had a strong, kind of musky scent going on—guess he worked out a lot too, and that's where he'd been. A guy who's got any sense of pride gets a shower first, but not this guy. Probably couldn't wait long enough. His hand was still on my shoulder, the distinctive smell of residual sweat and the metal of weights snaking its way up into my nostrils, the heat coming off his chest radiating right across my back. I could almost taste him. And I could feel him, getting hard inside his sweats...

Elise was about to reply, but I shot him a glance over my shoulder.

We'd been in the store a long time, and I was getting tetchy. Flattered by his reaction, but tetchy nonetheless.

The moment passed. He ground his way back to his place in the line, smiled, far from apologetically, and followed up with, "Sorry. It's just I figured as I only had this, and you're, well..."

His accent. He was British—English, in fact, with a hint of something else, and the words poured off his tongue like maple syrup trickling off hot pancakes. They slid over my skin, pooled around me, stuck my feet to the floor. I was still staring at him. Damn.

I turned back to Elise to find her slamming the last of the groceries onto the belt. She had on her thunderstorm face, the one where her eyes flash with danger and darkness falls, thick and heavy. Maybe not today, and maybe not

tomorrow either, but at some point the thunderclap would come, and then the torrential downpour.

Oh boy, was I in trouble.

She left the case of beer in the cart, because there was nowhere else for it to go, and because it was mine. She was making a point of that. She attempted to reconvene the conversation, but I was only aware of her mouth moving. I couldn't hear the words over the blood pumping in my ears. I had my back to him, as he took a call on his cell. I heard that, loud and clear.

"The store on Memorial," he said to person unknown. "Yeah, that's the one. See you in five." A pause. "You too. Bye. Bye."

Pause and confirmation.

*Love you.*

*You too.*

That's what it'd be, right? Why should I care? I'm a married man. *Happily* married man, so they tell me. Maybe I didn't agree with the happy part so much, but I sure as hell wasn't interested in this guy.

"Chrissakes, Sol," Elise hissed.

I snapped myself out of it.

There was space on the belt now, and I effortlessly hoisted the beer, turning as I did so, and caught a brief glimpse of him. Dark hair, short and kind of wavy, square jaw, thick ruddy lips. White sleeveless tee, taut against his chest, picking out, enhancing, defining. A dark tattoo graced his left upper arm, though I couldn't tell what it was. He was counting out the exact money for his purchase—a two-pound tub of vanilla cream protein shake mix. I looked again at our cartload of groceries, and maybe felt a little mean making him wait. He glanced up, met my gaze. Smiled again.

"You getting this?" Elise asked and opened her purse anyway.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," I said. I moved forward and handed over my card. Sexy guy moved forward too, hot on my tail, and I really do mean on my tail. I wondered if he had personal space issues, as in he was claiming mine. The teller handed my card back. I followed Elise and the cart out to the car.

"You didn't answer my question," she reminded me. I was wondering how much grief I'd get for admitting I had no idea what she'd asked. She saw that I

was clueless and sighed so loudly it could have lifted the groceries out of the cart for her. Instead that was left to me. She decided to help me out, with the question, not the groceries. On that score she stood, arms folded, inspecting her nails, watching me heave the multitude of bags into the trunk.

“Rory’s party?”

“Right?” I searched my brain for the scattered remnants of what we’d been talking about. It came back to me. Her new boss was having a rooftop garden party, and as husband of the newest junior partner I was expected to attend. I hated those kinds of things—work socials, grocery shopping, anniversary dinners—but that’s what I’d signed up for.

“When was it, again?” I asked.

“A week from Thursday. Eight thirty.”

I scanned my mental calendar, hoping to find a clash. No joy. I relented with a shrug and we got in the car, drove home in silence and wordlessly stowed the groceries. Elise went to shower. I filled up the coffeemaker, switched it on, but grabbed a beer instead. I was restless, still thinking about him, building him a life story. I’d have said he was single, were it not for the phone conversation. He seemed kind of... available. Interested. Interesting? I guessed he had a physical job, maybe in security, or something, though people made that assumption about me, wrongly. It was crazy. I mean, I’d just met the guy. Not even that much. I’d likely never see him again, and it wasn’t as if I was short on options. I considered calling to Elise, to say I was going for a quick workout, see who was still around, but it was getting late and I changed my mind. I turned on the TV, flicked through a few channels. The running shower made for an interesting soundscape to the muted moving slideshow. I took a big gulp of beer and flopped back onto the sofa, immediately rescued from my reluctant R and R by a knock at the door. I automatically checked the time. Nearly ten. I went to answer anyway.

“Hi.”

Captain Impatient.

“Hi,” I said. He smiled, extending an arm.

“You left this.”

I fought to unlock my eyes from his and looked down. My wallet was in his hand.

“Ah. Um, thanks,” I uttered inarticulately.

I reached out to take the wallet, my eyes straying down past it. He was no longer in sweatpants. Stonewashed jeans, tan boots. Clean boots. For some reason that irked me. I followed the blue jeans back up, glancing over the smooth black tee. My gaze met his once more, a glistening silvery blue in the glow of light from the apartment, like molten metal. He was still smiling, his mouth a little crooked, tipped up to the left. Infuriatingly, I found myself smiling back. After what seemed an age, my fingers made contact with the wallet. He relinquished his grip on it, though he still had a hold on me, like we were tethered together and neither of us could break away. Finally he nodded and turned to leave.

“Thanks again,” I called after him. He raised a hand in acknowledgement. I slowly closed the door, aware of his retreating form, aware of the scent of his cologne on the wallet I was holding. A thought occurred to me.

“Hey! How’d you know where to find me?”

He turned back, raising both hands now in a dismissive shrug.

“Driver’s license?”

Duh.

He rounded the corner and disappeared from view. I closed the door, returned to the sofa, carrying my wallet as if it were the most precious gift ever given to me. Elise appeared before me in a short silky floral robe, rubbing her wet hair with a towel.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“The guy from the store.” I waved the wallet at her. She looked at me blankly.

“What guy from the store?”

“With the protein shake?”

She nodded once, clearly no clue who I was talking about. “Did you check he didn’t take anything?”

“Seriously?”

Oh yeah, she was serious. It wasn’t as if I liked him. In fact he’d royally pissed me off, but really, who finds a wallet, loots it, then goes to the effort of returning it? But Elise was unrelenting. I sighed and opened my wallet, trying

not to react when I saw what was inside—apart from everything that should be, that is.

“All present and correct,” I reported. Elise wandered away, still rubbing her hair.

“I’m going to turn in,” she called back.

“OK, hon,” I replied.

I waited for our bedroom door to close, quickly typed his number into my cell and disposed of the evidence.

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Two

I woke up the next morning, hard and horny, with the fading memory of an imagined chance meeting at the gym, unimpressed that the anonymous guy of my dreams and fantasies now came complete with a face and identity—no prizes for guessing who. I rolled onto my side and stared at Elise's back. Her alarm was about to go off. Hell, I was about to go off. I could've stayed, got my satisfaction right there in the bed. Instead, I bolted for the bathroom and got in the shower before the temperature stabilized so I could deal with it myself. By the time I emerged, soft and no longer horny, Elise was standing in the doorway, arms folded. I muttered a "good morning" as I passed her. The door closed on me. Now she was pissed too.

I guess I should tell you something about Elise's and my relationship. Give or take a couple of months we were the same age—coming up to thirty-one—and met at college, where she was your all-American girl, studying law—a career girl, you might say, not that her parents agreed with her plans. They made no secret of their hopes to see her "settled down" with a couple of kids, and we hadn't the heart to tell them it just wasn't in the cards.

As for me, I'm from the UK, Britain, England, wherever you want to call it, from a little town in the middle of nowhere. Americans generally think "Britain" is one green and pleasant land, filled with "quaint" little towns of whitewashed cottages, in the middle of which stands London, home of the Queen and the red pillar box. Well, there's a whole gamut of places between those extremes of sprawling metropolis and rural idyll, but where I come from... yeah, we had the whitewashed cottages and village green going on.

I arrived in the US during my third year of university, as an engineering design undergraduate, and I wasn't intending to stay more than six months. As far as the folks back home were concerned, it was the usual fairytale. English boy goes to America to study, meets the girl of his dreams, all sweet cherry pie and sparkly white, super-straight smile. They get engaged, get married, rent a fabulous apartment in the city, find fabulous high-powered jobs, yada, yada, yada.

It was nothing of the sort.

For a time we considered moving back to England, but that's long since passed. Elise would have needed to retrain in English law, plus... well, I didn't really want to pick up where I left off. Specifically, I didn't want my mother

thinking we could just carry on as if the argument never happened. Because that's the kind of woman my mother is. If she doesn't like something, she expects it to change for her—perish the thought that anyone tell her to amend *her* opinions, and she is *very* opinionated. So I delayed telling her, even though I knew all through high school, even though she nearly caught James and me fooling around. It's one of the few bonuses of heterosexism—that parents let same sex friends enter their child's bedroom sanctuary with no thought to anything untoward taking place.

James and I had quite a few “sleepovers” during the seven wonderful months of our relationship. I use the terms “wonderful” and “relationship” relatively—when you're sixteen and it's your first, it has a certain magic, but it's really not that great. True, my memory likes to play up the romance a little. In my head, James and I hold hands at the movies, cuddle together while we wait for the bus, whisper “I love you.” In reality, we mostly ignored each other outside of my single bed, where we'd suck each other off, in the dark, under the covers and as quickly as possible. The night my mother *almost* caught us, she walked straight into the room and flicked on the light. We hoped all she saw was a lumpy mass under the duvet, as we'd heard the door open and stayed deathly still, holding our breath, *praying* she wouldn't pull back the covers. We heard the light switch click again, and I bravely stuck my head out, peering into the gloom, cum all over my hands, because her timing was impeccable. I clambered out of bed, went to grab something from the laundry hamper to clean myself. It was missing. So long, sleepovers. So long, James.

University was better though. Away from home at last, I finally got to be myself. No steady relationships during that first year, but there were a few of us who'd hang out together, and pair up on occasion. We were all in the same boat. We'd fumbled our way through adolescence, arriving in higher education with virtually no experience, compared to our straight fellow students. There was only Donny who'd lost his virginity before uni, and he was a total idiot.

“Top or bottom?” he asked me one night, knowing how drunk I was, and also that I didn't have the first clue what he was talking about. When I failed to reply, he elaborated, “Do you like to fuck, or be fucked?”

I don't recall my response to that. Whatever, by next sunrise I'd done both and concluded that I was more of a “top.” Donny had evidently forgotten his first time and wasn't exactly gentle. Lucky he only had a small dick, or I'd probably be dead now. *Undergrad impaled on penis*. Way to go! So anyway, that was the grand Losing Of My Virginity—a night with Donny Dickless and

his amazing talking testicles. I kid you not, those boys squeaked and creaked like a pair of old men at a bus stop. Weird.

Second year...

I'm tempted to skip this part, as it was the lousiest year of my life. Long story short, the student exchange worked both ways, and with the influx of "Yanks" came Calvin. Tall, blond, skinny, blue-eyed beauty that he was, if you cut him open you'd find a housebrick where his heart should be. I think, maybe, for me at least, it was love at first sight. He walked into our student accommodation block, and I felt the earth move—not Calvin's doing, but a tremor. We find earthquakes terribly unBritish, and this little guy shook up a mighty magnitude 1.2—kind of average for our side of the Atlantic, but not quite enough to rattle the cups off their saucers (we don't *all* own these, by the way).

I frowned at Calvin. "Did you feel that too?"

"Uh huh," he replied, dropped his holdall in the middle of the floor and wandered off in search of the bathroom, scratching his ass. When he returned, he looked me up and down.

"You're gay," he stated.

It was my turn to go, "Uh huh." No idea why I owned up, just like that. I must have somehow picked up on the subtle vibe being thrown off by his rolled-up sleeves, deck shoes and the dozen LGBT buttons adorning his jacket.

"Cool. Me too," he said.

No shit, Sherlock!

And then he kissed me.

I'm going to cut straight to the end here, because that relationship sucked. I should've realized he was a player. The buttons, the whole "out and proud" routine? Cal was a walking-talking advert for himself. A one-man sex show. Anytime, anyplace, any-fucking-where. And like I said, I thought I was in love right from the get-go. By the time he was returning home to the US, I'd enrolled in the exchange for my third year, not to be near him, but I figured if Cal was getting laid so much...

Oh, I should mention that in the middle of all this he dumped me and I went home for a few weeks. Heartbroken, I came out to my mother. She actually swooned for real.

“Gay, like Freddie Mercury?” she asked, fanning her face with a copy of *The Guardian*. I nodded dumbly. “But he died of that AIDS, Solomon, darling.”

*That AIDS?* Do you mean the bad AIDS, Mother?

I said nothing.

“And Rock Hudson. He died of the AIDS too.”

Honest to God.

I said, “That was a long time ago, Mum. And they were famous.” As if being famous were a requirement.

She said, “Well, you’ll just have to find yourself a girlfriend.”

Erm, hello? I’m gay.

“Yes,” she continued, making a rapid and complete recovery, “Lizzie was asking after you only the other day. She always liked you.”

How stupid of me to not see this coming. The argument that followed was a total farce, with her refusing to accept that I could possibly be gay, and me trying to persuade her that I was by further incriminating myself with confessions of all my first year adventures, and even that time she came to get the laundry and nearly caught James and me.

“Which time?” says she.

“I...”

“I always assumed you were playing tents.”

Always? *Always*? Shit!

“Playing tents? Mum, we were sixteen years old.” There was only one sort of “playing tents” we were doing.

So, add to denial this total invasion of privacy, and that pretty much sums up the only conversation we ever had about it.

Back to the student exchange—yeah, OK, I lied. I signed up, among other things, to be near Cal. Luckily (for me, not for him) he’d failed the UK component of his course and got kicked out of college.

Which brings me back to Elise.

She knew I was gay. She’d always known, and so was she, except she was so far back in the closet she had a residency visa for Narnia. She remained the

only American woman I knew who didn't call her female acquaintances "girlfriends," because, more often than not, that's exactly what they were. We were fast friends at college, we remained so, and she was a wonderful, beautiful woman. I loved her. She loved me. We did sex OK too, which was how we came up with the marriage of convenience idea. I wanted to stay stateside. She was going to be a successful lawyer. And, God forgive me, I didn't want people to know I'm gay. It all came back to Donny, and Cal.

And James.

Ironically, other than "the beard," my sex life was going the same way as Donny's and Cal's. I'd never asked the question Donny asked of me. Most of the guys who happened to walk my way were happy to be the "passive recipient," though I wished sometimes they would turn the tables. And for all my desperation and frustration, I tried to be gentle, do it properly, get it right. I hoped I was a generous and considerate lover.

As for James—well, you know that quaint little English hometown of ours? With its picturesque village green, fourteenth century chapel, sheep grazing on hills, watched over by black and white dogs, bare-beam pubs serving real cask ales and steak and kidney pies, church fetes, May Day parades... and knife-wielding lowlife cowards running in packs, playing Hunt the Homo.

Rest in peace, James Coolican. My first, and only, boyfriend.

So far...

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Three

Never say never, eh? That's one thing us Brits are famous for—that stiff upper lip of ours. Well, I don't know about upper lips, but Captain Impatient certainly had something going on in the stiffness department, and he'd got my attention.

I was sitting in my office, on the seventh floor of the Magda Building, the view from my window a stunning vista... or not, unless 1970s beige stucco is your thing. Have you ever studied the external wall of a Best Western? I mean *really* studied? I have. Sometimes I wondered if the hotel's windows were actually two-way mirrors installed the wrong way round, or if the people who stayed there had a fetish for being voyeured. The guy in the second room from the end, for instance, had been staying a while, and he'd usually just got out of bed as I arrived at the office, which was a pretty nice way to start the day in my opinion. And the thing was, he'd made eye contact with me across the void a couple of times, so I knew he could see me, yet there he was, standing proud and supremely erect that fine spring morning. A full body stretch, a couple of strokes along the full length of his cock, and then he moved away from the window. A rap at my office door instantly declared a ceasefire on the twitching in my pants.

"Come," I called, suppressing a childish smile at my own inadvertent innuendo. The door opened slowly, and George backed into the room, muttering something in her nervy, girly way at someone outside. I got up and poured two cups of coffee. George closed the door and spun to face me.

"Oh!" she said, surprised to find me right in front of her.

"Morning, George," I greeted, passing her one of the cups.

"Hi there, Sol." She accepted my offering with a gracious nod and took up residence in the chair on the other side of the desk to my own. "How are you this morning?" she asked.

"Fine, thanks. You?"

"I'm great, thank you for asking."

George was my boss, and not at all what you'd imagine. She was in her late fifties, a grandma, widowed young, and the best designer in the firm, no competition. Her full name was Georgette Mary Ann Cooper, of southern stock,

from somewhere deep down in Texas, with the drawl to match, and she could shoot out a light from fifty yards, given the right firearm and a finger or two of whisky. Add to this that she was a good foot shorter than I, and deferred to most everyone else, well, she was a walking, talking contradiction.

Talking being the operative word.

There was a call I wanted to make, after all.

Still, I tried to listen intently to her report back on the meeting with the board about our current projects. What did we do? Design office chairs. Exciting, huh? They were George's designs, reimagined by a team of six. My job was to liaise with the prototype guys, which was pretty cool, as we were in the days of the 3D printer, and it was slow but kind of like magic. Key in the details, press the big green "go" (not quite), and it would eventually spit out a basic solid model, or the simulated multiple parts, depending on the design. Anyway, I won't bore you with all the ins and outs of the job, other than to say that's why George was there that morning, getting between me and my call. Hm, maybe we were compatible after all.

So, she was chattering away, pausing every now and then to take a speedy slurp from her coffee cup, and I really was trying to listen, but my mind kept wandering back to the checkout line the night before, the feeling of him up against my ass, his hand on my shoulder, his scent...

George stopped talking. Staring out the window, she said, "That guy's waving at me and he's butt-naked."

Carefully swiveling in my chair I glanced over, making more of a deal than I needed to of seeking out the window in question. "So he is," I said.

"Isn't that against the law?" George asked. I assumed she meant his nudity rather than his greeting. It likely was, but it wasn't stopping her from taking in the thick fullness of his morning glory. Man, that guy was hung. I dragged my gaze back and studied George's face. I laughed. She blushed. "I think you should go tell the hotel manager," she advised.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." She folded the drawings back into their protective wallet and got up. "After you've spoken with Merv."

I nodded, and said, "Sure thing, boss," wondering all the while what I was to speak to Merv about. He was the guy who programmed the 3D printer.

I'd have got up to see George to the door, but I was sporting a hard-on like the trunk of a redwood, so I stayed where I was, watching her totter her way across my office. It's not that big a space—big enough for a desk and a couple of chairs, with pacing room—yet it seemed to take her an age to reach the door. She gripped the handle, turned back and gave me one of those smiles that tells you you're about to hear something you won't like from someone who doesn't want to say it, like the friend elected to inform you that your boyfriend's cheating on you.

"It's none of my business," she started tentatively, sighed and changed direction. "Though I guess it is, since it impacts on Magda." She gave me that smile again and shrugged. "Some of our investors wouldn't take too kindly to the company you keep after hours."

"What company's that, George?" I asked, knowing exactly where she was going with this.

"All I'm saying is, you should take advantage of your Magda benefits. The gym in the basement has all the latest equipment."

As I'd thought. See, the gym I belonged to was, in a previous existence, something of a hook-up joint. It remained a gay-friendly establishment, which was, of course, why I joined that particular gym and forked out unnecessary dollars on a monthly basis, when I could've been using the company gym for free.

Halfway out, halfway in, George peered back at me, the smile gone, in its place an expression of regret. "Maybe you could be a little more discreet, is all."

Her parting words. The door closed on the reminder of the other reason why Elise and I had decided to marry. I reclined my chair and studied the strip light running over my desk, aware of the pressure of my phone against my hip, my enthusiasm for making that call all but gone. I got up, grabbed my jacket, and left.

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Room 702. From the outside I'd counted the windows up and across, so I was almost certain this was the right one. It was hot and I was starting to sweat. I took off my jacket, slung it over my shoulder and approached the door. I knocked twice.

No one home. That was easy. Easy and disappointing.

I turned away, heading back for the elevator. It would have made more sense to just mention it to the girl on reception—"The guy second right on the seventh floor waved hi at my boss this morning... with his dick." Funny as it sounded in my head, I didn't think the kid at the desk would find it quite so amusing. And what if they called the cops? No. It was better to do this in person. I was only trying to protect his dignity. Wasn't I?

I called the elevator, watched the numbers flicker through to seven, a muted ding sounding its arrival. The doors opened. A guy stepped out, passing me by without a second glance. Not him. My delay almost cost me my ride, and I squeezed through the rapidly diminishing gap. Back to ground. Doors open. Ah. This was my guy. He got in. I didn't get out.

"Hey," he said, nodding—with the head on his shoulders for once.

"Hey," I replied. His expression told me he knew who I was. I must have been giving off the same signal. He pressed the button for the seventh floor. I watched him gazing across the small square expanse we were sharing, his eyes fixed on the control panel, a slight smirk on his lips. From my office he'd looked kind of OK. Up close he was more than OK. I'd say he was in his early twenties, and tall and slim, with short brown hair, matching soul patch, long, straight nose and nut-brown eyes. They turned on me now. He was sexy as hell, and we were going up, up, but...

Any other time but this. Any other goddamn time. What the hell was wrong with me?

The elevator stopped, did that *thunk* again. He got out, heading toward 702. I held the doors.

"Listen," I said. He stopped walking and glanced back. The words escaped me. "I, err..."

He looked amused.

"Just, err, wrap up warm, OK?" So lame! "There's snow on the way." I released the doors and watched him walk away.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Four

I was right about one thing at least. The snowstorm hit as I pumped thirty-five pounds of rubber and iron with my right bicep, watching the sudden flurry swirling past the tiny window set ten feet up in the black wall. I changed arms and continued pumping, no idea how many reps I'd done, my mind not on the job. Story of my day.

The gym was quiet—a couple of guys thumping out a steady rhythm on the treadmills and an older guy chest-pressing on the bench. I don't recall a visit to the gym when he wasn't there somewhere. He was still living in the clone days, a huge handlebar moustache covering the entirety of his top lip, thick black crew-cut hair, both courtesy of Just for Men. He was in good shape and kind of good-looking, if you're into older guys, which I wasn't. I knew that a lot of the gym regulars were into guys a little younger than themselves, me included. Don't get me wrong—they still had to be legal, but I'd come to realize that as we age our tastes don't change, and to my mind the most physically attractive guys tended to be in their early to midtwenties, which meant my rebuttal of Best Western 702 made even less sense. He was exactly the type I went for—young, anonymous, temporary resident of the city—it couldn't have been more perfect.

See, here's the thing with a marriage of convenience. No two ways about it, I loved Elise, and she loved me. We were both painfully aware of the sacrifices we were making, for our careers, for our families, and we went into it willingly. On our wedding night, she confirmed what she'd said from the beginning. She didn't want to know what I was up to, or who with, so long as it had no bearing on “us.” I was OK with that, because even though we lived just outside of Boston, MA, and gay marriage was made legal before we moved there, it didn't mean a thing in my line of work. There might have been more women going into engineering, but it remained a straight industry. Whether it involved the physical work of construction or the office job of design that I did, gay engineers were a rare breed. Or should I say *out* gay engineers. There were no doubt plenty of us, but it was a no-go, and on our wedding night, Elise had used the very same phrase George had used that morning. *Be discreet.*

My attention was snapped back to what I was doing by Tony's blotting out of the light as he passed me by, loaded fifty pounds onto a dumbbell and took up residence on the last vacant bench.

“How you doing, Sol?” he asked. No eye contact. The Velcro fastener of his wrist brace made a satisfying rasping rip as he pulled it free, tugged to tighten it, and stuck it back in place.

“Yeah, not so bad. You?”

“I’m good.” Tony flexed and shrugged his hefty shoulders. He was what my dad would call “a big lad”—about six four and an easy three hundred pounds, some of it muscle, some of it not. He was a decent guy, a Canadian, which he took a lot of flak for. And like most of the gym’s members, he was out, which was what George had been referring to. My patronage sent the message loud and clear. Funny how it’d taken almost eight years for anyone to notice.

My left arm gave out, and I returned the weights to the rack. I’d been in an hour already, hoping to distract myself from thinking about... him. By that point, I’d realized it was inevitable. I was going to call him sometime. I wasn’t really sure why I hadn’t already, other than his phone conversation in the store and the implication of the pause and confirmation. Like I said, why should I care if he was in a relationship? My permit was “sex only.” It made no difference if he was involved with someone else or not.

Allegedly.

And then there was the rest of it. He wasn’t my type. He was my age, if not a little older, the same physique, similar height. Were it not for his coloring being the opposite of mine, we could’ve been brothers. Now that was a freaking weird thought. No, he looked nothing like me. His hair was almost jet-black, whereas mine was what the folks back home call mousy-brown. It’s dead straight and I keep it short and gelled, or it falls in my face. And where he was olive-skinned, I’m very fair. I used to spend a small fortune on sunbeds, until I saw the damage it was doing, like time-lapse footage, no wrinkles one day, the complexion of a seventy year old the next. The alternative was the bottled variety, so I settled on my natural skin tones, got used to being a pale Limey. I wouldn’t have said I was comfortable in my skin, though—it’s a tough claim to make when you’re living a lie.

By the time I left the gym that night the snow had stopped, leaving a thin white blanket covering the city. After living there eight years, I should’ve been used to the Boston weather, but it always felt out of sync. It was March, and back in England the daffodils would be a sea of nodding yellow heads, the nights would be lighter, and warmer. Spring would definitely be on its way. March in Boston, the nights were still freezing, and if it rained, the city would

often end up covered in ice that would slowly melt during days that were either a lot warmer than I was used to, or even colder than the east coast of England in winter (and it could get really, bloody cold). I wondered if I'd ever get used to spending half the year sweltering, the other half freezing my ass off. The summer I found stifling—I hated the constant drone of air conditioning, and the humidity was unbearable. I think the seasons arrive a month later in that part of the US than they do in the UK, and while it's still a temperate climate, it's just that little bit more extreme than back home.

Home.

I hadn't thought of it that way in a long time. The truth was, though it pained me to admit it, I was missing it. Not all of it. I was having something of a problem putting my finger on what exactly I was homesick for. Certainly not my parents, and not the small-minded town in which I grew up. I had fun at university, but it was transient, and I'd had no aspirations to study beyond graduation. I wasn't into the club scene, and I was still in touch with my friends online. In short, there was nothing to miss. The culture of Boston, with its curious Irish infusion, wasn't that far removed from the big cities back... in the UK. I enjoyed my job, I liked my life, and I loved my wife.

I was still running down all the possible reasons for the sudden onset of the homesick blues as I returned to an empty apartment and headed for the shower. And that was when it hit me—when I reached out to turn on the tap, uh, I mean faucet. Yep. That was it, right there. Divided by a common language, as they say. Having a conversation could be so exhausting, the constant self-editing, translating on the fly. I *rode* the *elevator* up to our *apartment*. We went to the *store* for *groceries*, and sometimes I forgot my *cell*, left it on the *banquette*. There again, was my yearning for the sounds of home simply a well-concocted excuse for calling that number I'd stored on my *mobile* the previous day?

After my shower, I pulled on a pair of sweats and a tee, grabbed a beer and tried to decide on something to eat. It was past nine, and I couldn't recall Elise saying she was working late. I needed her to be home, to stop me doing something I'd regret. I picked up my phone, tapping it against my teeth. The ball was in my court. All I had to do was call up that number. No big deal. I unlocked the screen, scrolled through my contacts, down to "C"—well what else was I supposed to save his number under? I still had no idea what the guy's real name was. I wasn't sure finding out was the wisest move.

I stared at the screen a long time after it turned dark, trying to find a reason to call, a reason not to, hence my inaction. I got another beer, called out for

pizza, and opened my laptop. My phone vibrated. I jumped and checked the screen, disappointed to see Elise's name displayed. Why would it be him? He didn't have my number. I had his.

"Hey, hon," I answered casually.

"Hey. I forgot to say I was going out with Jennifer tonight."

"OK, no problem."

A moment's pause followed. I got the impression Elise expected me to say something else.

After a few seconds more, she said, "There's a steak in the refrigerator."

"I've got pizza on the way," I explained, then, as an afterthought, "What time will you be home?"

"I've had a couple glasses of wine, so I'll stay here. See you tomorrow night?"

"Sure."

Elise hung up. So much for saving my ass. I was out of excuses. I pulled up his number again and hit "call."

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Five

If there's one "Americanism" I really like, it's the one that was most fitting right at that moment.

*Son of a bitch.*

Twenty-four hours of plucking up the courage to call and I get an out of service message. I went to bed, feeling angry, mostly at myself for making such a huge deal out of it. But then it made no sense. I mean, why? Why had he left a fake number in my wallet? What was the point? Unless he was playing games. Yeah, that would be about right. The guy clearly got off on winding people up, pushing into checkout lines, rubbing up against strangers. And there it was again. I was hard. More than that, I was aching for release. All the guys I'd known and not one had got me worked up like that. Sex for one is lonely, but it does the job, which was as well, given that it was the second time that day I found myself jacking off to the fantasy of jamming my cock into his supercilious mouth, laughing as he gagged with my hands on the back of his head, my fingers combing through that thick wavy brown-black hair, the salty scent of him filling my nose, my mouth, oh God, what the fuck...

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Best Western 702's curtains were closed when I got to my office the next morning, and when they opened it looked like he'd followed my advice about wrapping up warm, more's the pity. I'd blown my chances there. Ha! I wish! To think, the previous morning the toughest decision I had to make was the best of two. Yeah, life sucked right at that moment, or didn't, as the case may be, and George was out for the day, so no discussions or distractions to look forward to. For all of thirty seconds I contemplated heading down to the design workshop, decided I couldn't face it and set up the coffeemaker. It gurgled comfortingly.

Some American dream this was.

While the coffee dripped, I logged on to my computer and called up Jennifer's online profile. She was a paralegal at Kelly and Associates, the firm Elise had started working for three months previously. I'd met Jennifer at the firm's Christmas bash, so I knew what she looked like, and I knew she was bisexual. And single. She'd advertised herself quite freely at that party, making sure everyone was very clear on that. It seemed, therefore, a good idea to find out a little more about her, know my competition, as it were.

See, for as much as Elise knew as well as I did that our marriage was a sham, we were still supposedly making a go of it. Or maybe I was the one making a go of it while she was laughing behind my back. And it was she who'd set the rules. All the sex I wanted, so long as it was of the "no strings" variety. A license for non-stop fun, you might think. Because that's all guys ever think about, right?

Wrong. So wrong.

I wouldn't have classed myself as romantic, though I did love Elise. I loved her very much once, and would have been insane with jealousy if she'd been spending all her time with someone else. Right at that moment? I think I was more annoyed than jealous. Kind of relieved, too.

The coffeemaker stuttered to a stop. I poured a cup and took it over to my window, glancing across to room 702. Not so naked guy was doing the same—standing in his window, cup in his hand. He gave me an arms-wide shrug. *Yeah, buddy, I hear ya.* I'd messed up, and I wasn't humble enough to go over there and admit that to him, not even for a lay. I shrugged back and turned away, taking in my gloomy office. No photos on my desk, no executive toys, just a phone and the tools of my trade—notepad, pen, tablet, stylus and computer. I didn't like clutter. It got in the way of clear thinking. Clutter. Like all the shit in my head. I sat down, picked up the pen, absently sketching as I mulled over... nothing. I didn't have time for this. We had four projects in progress, with tight turnarounds, and there I was, doodling like a bored schoolboy.

The phone rang and jolted me out of my misery. I momentarily considered letting it go to voicemail, but picked up. "Sol Brooks," I greeted drearily.

"Mr. Brooks, this is the reception desk."

I waited. When she said nothing further, I prompted, "Yes?"

"There's a gentleman by the name of Mr. Ashton here to see you. He says you're expecting him. Shall I send him up?"

Grant Ashton was my counterpart at ATD Solutions, an industrial interior design firm on the other side of town. To my knowledge none of the projects we were working on was for ATD, but I've been known to be wrong.

"Sure," I said. I hung up and opened the projects folder on my computer, scanning over the documents within. There was nothing close enough to completion to have gone out in a mailshot, which gave rise to another thought. The last time we'd had a problem with one of our products and George had

been out of town, it fell to me, as senior engineer, to deal with it. It was sensible to conclude, therefore, that Ashton was here to complain, and in George's absence, I was going to have to carry the can.

A sensible conclusion, but a wrong one. For when I opened the door, who should walk in... drums, please! Captain Impatient!

"Mr. Brooks," he said with a very serious, businesslike nod, though his clothing was casual—deep-blue jeans, and a black leather jacket over a white open-necked shirt. Utterly thrown by his presence, I slammed the door and rounded on him. He offered me a congenial smile and held out his hand—that same hand he had laid on my shoulder two days ago.

"Adam Ashton," he said.

I delayed on the handshake, not intentionally to snub him, simply because I was kind of struggling to catch my breath, never mind shake the guy's hand. I'd been expecting *Grant* Ashton, from ATD. Instead, I'd got *Adam* Ashton. I wasn't complaining. Far from it. As his arm started to drop, I quickly lifted my own and we shook. Like nuclear fusion. I held on with every bit of willpower I possessed, trying to contain the eruption within. I released his hand.

"Coffee?" I offered.

"That'd be great, thanks."

I strode across to the filter, not that it took more than two strides, but I felt it was important to make my mark. This was *my* office.

"What, err..."

"I thought I..."

We both started talking at the same time. I gestured for him to continue.

"It suddenly dawned on me last night, at the gym..."

Did he need to say where he'd been? Of course he did, like I'd needed to stride across my own office!

"...that number I gave you? That's my old phone."

"Right?" I poured the coffee, acting as if it were news to me that the number was a dud.

"I wasn't sure if you'd tried to call."

I nodded once to indicate I'd understood, not to confirm I'd tried to call. "Do you take sugar?"

"No, thanks." He took the cup from me and sipped, letting out one of those little post-sip sighs we all do. "So did you?"

"Huh?"

"Try to call."

"Oh." Straight to the point. That's my Captain Impatient.

*My Captain Impatient?*

"Yeah," I admitted. "I only got round to it last night, after my workout."

I wondered if that sounded as stupid to him as it did to me. Why were we posturing like this? Actually, that was a little unfair to him. He was on my turf, and it was the third time he'd taken the initiative, so I could understand why he might feel the need to assert a certain level of dominance. And to be equally fair to myself, any hot-blooded male in my position would respond in kind, by which I mean to protect their territory and their position, as opposed to the erection threatening to shove its way through the front of my pants. Adam was perched on the corner of my desk, his legs crossed at the ankle, nursing the coffee cup in one of those big, hot hands of his. He adjusted his position, and I couldn't help but glance down. Yeah, he was having the same problem as me, except he didn't seem to think it was a problem. I looked up again, and he gave me a lopsided smile.

"How long have you been in Boston?" he asked.

"Eight years. Before that I was in Philly for two years. You?"

"Eighteen months. It's a great city."

"Yeah," I agreed. "The weather's fucking awful."

Aw, don't judge me. I'm British, and I was feeling... I don't know. Kind of giddy.

"Tell me about it," he said. He glugged the coffee thoughtfully, his eyes delving deep into mine. He sipped, I sipped, we stared. What the hell was this? A contest? Great. I was high school champion, he didn't stand a chance.

Wrong again.

He disarmed me with another smile. I broke away, somehow made it across the room to my chair, but remained on my feet. Adam set his cup on the desk, pushed off and followed me, stepping into my space. He reached past me, tugged the cord to shut the blinds, his scent enveloping me, knocking my legs

from under me, or maybe that was his hand on my chest. I thought he was going to push me down into my chair, and then what? Unzip his pants? Not that I would have minded, but it was a bit fast, even for him.

Instead he said, "There's a man in a window across the street. He's watching you."

I laughed in relief, and embarrassment.

"Ah, yeah," I sighed, like it was a small and unwanted hassle. "At least he isn't naked this time."

"You and he..."

I sensed the tension in his voice.

"No," I confirmed. I felt Adam relax. Wow. That was something. Guess we both had it pretty bad. "I did go to see him yesterday with that in mind, but I went off the idea."

I didn't know why I'd told him that, or how I was talking, or if I was making any sense. Adam's palm was still on my chest, and it should've felt inappropriate, invasive, but it didn't. I put my hand over his, my intention to lift it away, free myself of the grip he had on me, and I did succeed in removing it from my chest, but found I couldn't let go of him. Not even for a second. He rotated his lower arm so that we were palm against palm, brushing his thumb across the back of my hand, both of us watching it happen. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I met his intense gaze.

"You OK?" he asked. Those eyes of molten metal were warm with concern.

"Yeah, just..." I didn't have an end to that sentence, other than the truth, which was freaking me out.

"You're married," he observed. I nodded to confirm. "To a guy?"

"No." Maybe he thought Elise was just a friend.

"But you are into guys."

I nodded again.

He glanced over my desk, I guess searching for the usual spousal portrait. He started to laugh, released my hand, and I suddenly felt lost, alone. He moved away, picked up my notepad.

"I'm no psychologist," he said, "but surely a parachute has got to mean something?"

It meant something, all right. I was falling fast. He picked up the pen and scribbled on the pad.

"I'd better go," he said. He took my hand again and gently kissed the back of it, like we were embarking on a courtship of days gone by. I felt the hairs all up my arm stand on end, my skin tingle, a ring of fire in the shape of his soft, warm lips leaving their invisible impression. He released me.

"I need to get to work. That's my current number." He tilted his head in the direction of the pad. "Call me? We can maybe go for a drink later."

He finished the rest of his coffee, dumped his empty cup on my desk and left. When I finally recovered, I opened the blinds and saw Best Western 702 step away from his window. I hoped I was backing the right horse.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Six

There was no doubt in my mind that Adam was interested, which should have made the decision to call him an easy one. Still I delayed. The thing was, I could see we were already way past being just a one-off, beyond even being a meaningless fling. For the first time since Elise and I got together, I was facing the prospect of a relationship, because no one as good-looking and impatient as Adam went to those lengths to secure a one-night stand. Or maybe he just liked the thrill of the chase. Whichever, I was dancing through a mine field that could blow Elise's and my marriage to smithereens, taking the rest of our carefully constructed lives with it.

And a big part of me thought, *What the hell!* In all honesty, right at that moment the prospect of spending just a couple of hours with him was worth risking everything. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. I wanted him more than I had ever wanted anything or anyone, including Calvin, and maybe even James.

To cover my tracks, I went for a quick workout on my way home, meaning I could claim that the shower and shave were for that reason. However, it was Thursday—a night I rarely went to the gym, for historical reasons. In the past it had been my night out with the guys, so why was I being so cagey? After all, wasn't I going for a night out with the guys?

OK, *a* guy.

I got home to find a pink Post-It stuck to the fridge.

*Catching a movie with the girls.*

*See you at 11. x*

Well, that kind of made things easier for now, though I couldn't help but wonder which girls Elise meant, and whether singular might be more accurate in her case also.

I showered quickly but shaved slowly and dowsed myself in my best cologne. I probably left most of it on the dozen or so shirts I put on and took off again, before finally settling on one I wanted to wear. The truth kind of hit me then. I had a date with Adam. I tried to ignore the sensation of my heart fluttering in my chest, locked up the apartment and headed out into the chilly evening.

We were meeting at a bar near Emerson, which suited me fine, as it was a train ride away, so the chances of bumping into anyone I knew were slim. I took the T to Boylston Street and walked to the bar in question, surprised to find that it wasn't a gay bar, perhaps somewhat less surprised to find my date had yet to arrive. I ordered a Bud and opted for sitting at the counter. The place was quiet, a few students huddled in dark corners, ghastly white faces illuminated by cell phones. Speaking of which, there was mine now.

"Hello?" I answered, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Hey, sorry."

Didn't I know this was coming?

"I'm running late."

"OK." I was seriously hacked off, but I kept my voice flat. "You want to cancel?"

"Not at all. Something came up, but I'll get there soon as."

He rang off.

Were it not for the fact that I'd just traipsed halfway across the city to meet him, I'd have walked right out of there and got straight back on the train home. OK, slight overexaggeration. It was a twenty minute journey, tops, but I was torn between avoiding the humiliation of being stood up, and an embarrassingly desperate requirement to see him again. Was there a pattern emerging? Pisses me off, turns me on. Could I honestly live like that? I was wound tight as a spring. I wanted to see Adam so much it was almost a need. I drank my beer, ordered another. Half an hour passed. I considered heading off to see if Best Western 702 was still checked in. Hell, I was so horny I could probably have made room for big Tony at the gym. Yeah, horny. And lonely. I downed my second beer, ordered a third.

I was on my fifth when Adam finally showed his face. I'd been through annoyed, impatient, worried, morose—now I was back to plain old angry, with some very interesting ideas on how to get it out of my system.

"Hey." His tone was apologetic. He mimed drinking from a bottle by way of asking if I wanted another. I shrugged my consent. Why not? I wasn't going anywhere, not now. I watched him order our beers. He was wearing snug-fitting black jeans over black boots, a gray wool shirt and white tee. And he was freshly showered. His cologne wafted my way—a mix of sandalwood and musk. It might have been his own musk.

He passed me a beer, his fingers deliberately brushing against my hand in the process. I tried to cover the startling effect it had on me with a dismissive raise of the eyebrows.

"You're lucky," I said. "I was about to give up on you."

"I appreciate you waiting. You don't strike me as the patient type."

Excuse me? This from the guy who couldn't wait his turn at the checkout?

"I presume there's a good reason you left me standing around for an hour?" I sounded indignant, and childish. He didn't seem to notice.

"A reason, yeah. Not a good one." He glanced around the bar room. It was getting busy. "Have you eaten?"

I shook my head. I wasn't hungry, which I put down to the beer. Gassy beer, nothing more.

"There's a steakhouse not far from here. What do you think?"

"Sure," I agreed. I could use a little more protein in my diet, and a lot more Adam in my evening.

We finished our beers in silence. He obviously had something on his mind. He was frowning and that increasingly familiar smirk was absent. When we left the bar, I decided to do the decent thing.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked.

"No, but I think I need to." He was still frowning, his hands in his pockets, eyes trained on the pavement a few steps ahead of us. "We just found one of the college kids dead."

"Whoa." Now I understood what he meant about it not being a good reason. "What happened?"

"Not sure, but it looks like suicide. It wasn't even my rotation tonight. I just happened to be passing..." He shook his head. "Anyway, I stayed with his roommate until the police and ambulance crew were done. We moved him to a different dorm."

"Look, if you want to give tonight a miss—"

"No, it's fine. I need the distraction." He gave me a watery smile and looked away again. We walked on in silence. I tried to think of something to talk about.

"So you work there?" I asked. *Well that wasn't much of a distraction, was it? Idiot.*

"At Emerson? Yeah, I do."

"Security?" I guessed.

"No. I teach in the Arts faculty. Performing Arts, to be exact."

"You're an art teacher?" I was genuinely surprised.

"Not as macho as engineering, huh?" he said, a little of that spark coming back to his eyes as he glanced my way.

We reached the steakhouse, continuing our conversation while we waited to be seated.

"You know I'm a design engineer, right?"

"Yeah. I figured as much, from your... equipment."

"The stylus and tablet?"

There was that smile again, and just like that my world stopped spinning. The waiter gave it a jump start, showed us to a table, and Adam gestured for me to lead the way, which was very gentlemanly of him. I tried not to get riled by that, or by the hand on my hip gently guiding me forward. Admittedly, that part didn't irritate me quite so much. It already felt right, kind of like we'd been doing it forever, yet not, as it still felt new. The waiter led us to a table at the back of the restaurant and took our drinks order. Adam opted for a beer; I went with a mineral water—too much alcohol and fizz already. I was feeling very relaxed, and a little bit intoxicated.

The restaurant was intimate, with subdued lighting and quiet background music, the tables set a sensible distance apart—cozy, but not crowded. The waiter returned with our drinks and we ordered food. Adam chose New York sirloin, medium rare; I was tempted to do the same, but settled on the rib-eye, also medium rare.

After the waiter had gone, we sat in silence. I had questions I needed to ask, in particular how Adam found out where I worked. I also wanted to know more about his job, how old he was, whether he was single, planning to return to the UK anytime soon—in other words I wanted to know everything about him.

"Tell me..." I began.

"Where..."

We did it again, started speaking at the same time. On this occasion, he let me go first.

“My work address?”

“Your ID card.”

I kept my ID card in a concealed pocket behind the dollar bills, my driver's license in the front.

“You went through my wallet?”

Ah, that crooked smile, melting me in an instant. I picked up my glass and sipped steadily. He folded his arms, leaning toward me.

“Bite me,” he said.

I choked on my mineral water. That just made him laugh. After a minute or so of me coughing my guts up, I finally regained control, then nearly lost it again when he reached across the table and slid his hand under mine. I did a quick scan of the vicinity. His head tilted in curiosity.

“You're not out?”

“Err, kind of, kind of not.”

“Why's that? Work?”

“Mostly. And family, and Elise's work.” And a stupid promise I made myself long, long ago.

“Elise is your wife?”

I nodded. “The woman I was with at the store.”

“You were with someone?”

“Yeah.”

He looked bamboozled. I laughed.

“She's just made junior partner at Kelly and Associates.”

“Wow! That's impressive.” He examined me for a moment. “I'm guessing you're what? Thirty?”

“Coming up to thirty-one. How about you?”

“Thirty-two next birthday.” He retracted his hand. I missed the contact immediately, and was grateful it was only a temporary withdrawal. He removed

the wool shirt, hooked it over the back of the chair, sat down and took my hand again.

“Is this OK?” he asked. I nodded and smiled.

It was a million times better than OK. I'd never felt so comfortable in someone else's company, like we were on exactly the same wavelength. I could tell he had as many questions to ask me as I had to ask him, but neither of us was in any rush. How was that even possible, three days after we bumped into each other, and not in ideal circumstances by any stretch?

“In the store,” he said edgily. I must have looked puzzled, because he added, “On Monday?”

“Yeah. I knew when you meant. I was just thinking about it too.”

“I wanted to explain.” His eyes crinkled with embarrassment. “Apologize and explain. I don't generally accost people in supermarkets.”

“You tried to push in.”

“And you blocked me with your arse.”

I loved that he'd said “arse” instead of “ass,” but no way was I letting up yet.

“Like I said, you tried to push in.”

“That wasn't why I wanted to apologize, but if it bothers you that much, I'm sorry.”

“Say it.”

He shrugged and laughed in disbelief. “I'm sorry I tried to push in. Better?”

“Yeah.” I attempted some more of the mineral water. Our steaks arrived, and he had to release my hand for the plates to be set down. The waiter checked we had everything we needed. I know I did. We both shuffled our chairs a little further under the table, soon discovering there wasn't enough legroom for two six-foot-plus guys. With much knee bumping, we negotiated a space sharing strategy that involved sitting slightly to the side, our legs interlocked so that we each had one of our knees between the other's. The contact sent an electric pulse racing right through me. I shifted on my chair in an attempt to subtly adjust for the sudden expansion in my pants, saw Adam do the same, and we both started to giggle at how ridiculous this was.

The giggling continued intermittently for the duration of the meal, triggered first by my asking Adam if he was single at the same time as he'd shoveled a

significant chunk of steak into his mouth. He put his fork down and chewed frantically, making *mm mm* noises and gesturing with his hand to indicate he would answer just as soon as he could. It seemed to take an age, and all the while I was watching him I giggled like a drunken teenager. To be honest, I felt like a drunken teenager. Finally, he swallowed hard and swigged some beer to wash it down.

“What was the question?” he asked seriously. I shook my head dolefully, and we were both off again. He waited until we’d settled back to our meals before he answered me with a simple, “No.”

Ah, shit.

I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t the answer I was hoping for. It was a devastating blow to find out he was taken, which was ridiculous. It was no different to me being married. In fact, him being in a relationship was safer all round. Safer, but not enough. I focused on sawing at my tender steak and crammed some in my mouth so I didn’t say something I’d regret later.

“Or, at least, I was until tonight.”

I put down my fork and examined him. “You’re pretty damn sure of yourself.”

He nodded. “I’m pretty damn sure how I feel about you.”

I had nothing to say to that.

“Face it. I’m the love of your life.”

“I’m married.”

“To a woman.”

“And?”

“You’ve got a lavender marriage.”

“Oh, how quaint!”

“If it’s not for show then why are you here?”

That was a good question. Most of the guys I’d hooked up with didn’t ask—probably didn’t care, and why would they? Sex only. No strings. That’s what I kept telling myself. Adam was watching me, and smirking.

“Are you telling me you’re in love with your wife?”

“I’m not telling you anything. We don’t even know each other.”

He nodded, loaded another too big piece of steak into that luscious mouth of his. "True," he munched. He swallowed thoughtfully and looked me directly in the eye. "But it feels like we do, or is that just me?"

I smiled. "No. It's not just you." A muscle in my leg twitched. That sometimes happens after I've been hitting the leg press too hard. Adam felt the sharp jerk of my knee between his thighs and gave me a questioning look.

"Sorry. Post-workout thing."

He reached under the table and massaged my lower thigh in exactly the right place, instantly easing the cramp. I sighed. He chuckled at me. He was nearly done with his steak. I glanced at my plate to find I was too, which was crazy. I couldn't recall eating any more than a couple of mouthfuls. I crunched my way through a few hand-cut fries and cleared my palate with some water.

"You're right, by the way. About Elise and me."

"Hey, you don't need to tell me anything."

"I want to." I wanted to tell him *everything*. For now, I stuck to the more salient aspects. "Long story short, it suited us both. I wanted to stay in the US, and getting married was the easiest means to achieve that. Elise needed someone who wasn't going to get in the way of her career. She's gay too, not that she's ever said as much."

"Do you screw each other?"

I waited in anticipation of feeling affronted by the bluntness of his question. Strangely I wasn't. "Yeah."

"So you're bi?"

"Nope. I've got a very creative imagination." I grinned. He laughed in response.

"You know, if you ever want to tell me the long version..."

"Let's get to know each other a little first."

"OK. You're on."

"But anyway," I said, deflecting as I realized how little he'd told me so far of his life before we met.

Oh.

I didn't want to think about that too hard. *Before we met*—way too "start of an epoch" when we'd only shared a single dinner date.

“Anyway?”

I'd forgotten he was still waiting for the question.

“Uh, sorry. I lost traction for a second. I was gonna say I've been doing all the talking. What about you?”

“The personal stuff?”

I nodded.

“There's not much to tell. The usual string of guys, some more serious than others. My last ex is the closest I've come to settling down long-term. He's got a PhD in something to do with statistics and works at city hall. He asked me to marry him. I said no.”

That must've been tough on them both. I didn't say as much out loud, but Adam seemed to pick up on what I was thinking.

“Water under the bridge. We're all good now.”

I wanted to ask why he'd turned down the proposal. Was it because he didn't feel the same way? Or because he wasn't ready to make a commitment? The waiter came to collect our plates. After he left, Adam leaned closer, prompting me to do the same.

“He's with my ex now,” he explained.

I followed the direction of his gaze, to the guy working the bar. He couldn't have been much over twenty-one, and he was quite beautiful—thick black hair and emerald eyes. Very Irish. Adam sat back again.

“Not that he's any more the committing type than I am.”

That answered my question succinctly. *Again with the disappointment?*

“Did you want to stay for dessert?” Adam asked.

Quick as a flash I came back with, “Depends on the alternative.”

I felt myself blushing, surprised at my forthrightness. Adam's eyebrow went up a little, followed by one corner of his mouth. I shook my head and laughed at myself. He waved down the waiter for the check.

The wind had dropped, and it felt a little warmer as we walked the short distance from the restaurant to Adam's apartment. Or maybe it was because he was holding my hand again, his fingers firmly cross-hatched with mine. We must've looked a bit peculiar—two big, built guys, hand in hand, strolling

casually, laughing and chatting about all kinds of crazy things. It had occurred to me more than once during the past couple of hours that this was the first time I'd laughed properly in years. Not to mention the attacks of the giggles. It wasn't a behavior I was prone to, not since James. That realization hurt. Really hurt.

I pushed the pain away and continued listening to Adam's stories about the different places we passed by. The mix and mingle of college facilities and other businesses reminded me of Manchester's university quarter, not that I'd been back there recently—*perhaps best not to dwell on that either*, I thought, focusing once again on Adam's commentary. It would have bored me senseless, but for that deep, chocolaty quality to his voice, so sensual yet soothing, never mind his amazing accent—I was interested to know where he'd lived before London, and assumed it was Australia, but I didn't want to interrupt him by asking. I didn't want him to stop talking. Ever.

When we arrived at his apartment, he took out his key, but didn't unlock the door. He watched me for a moment.

"What?" I asked.

"You were a bit quiet for a while back there. Having second thoughts?"

"No." I laughed to cover how vulnerable I felt. "I was thinking about someone from a long time ago."

"Just say if we're going too fast, OK?"

Captain not-so-Impatient after all?

Yeah, right. He didn't even make it as far as the light switch.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seven

I wanted to see him, watch his face as his mouth met mine, stare into those liquid eyes as he moved in on me in the unlit hallway. All my other senses were working overtime. The sweet beery taste of his breath filled my mouth, the rough velvet of his tongue pushed hard against mine, his hot hands skimmed my shoulders, brushed down my back, drawing me closer in a suffocatingly tight embrace. He took his time, exploring my mouth, my lips, my neck, and I let him take charge, aware that the increase in my heart rate was only partly due to sexual arousal. I was kind of panicked, by everything—the dark, the overwhelming scent of his body, his confidence, the fact that I wasn't the one controlling the action, that this didn't feel casual. If I allowed this to continue, if I let him in...

"The bedroom's through here," he said, leading me by the hand. A door opened on a room illuminated by moon and street light, a silken drape of silver and gold across the wooden floor and the king-size bed. My heart was beating a tattoo on the inside of my rib cage. It was too dark. *Too dark?* I'd never been afraid of the dark, so why was I being such a wuss?

"Would you mind if we turned on the light?" I asked.

Adam's silhouette passed in front of me, drifting through the platinum gloom, merging with the shadows, and then there was light. Blinding, eye-burningly bright light, and not at all comforting. I must have looked as spooked as I felt, as the next thing I knew, Adam was sitting next to me on the end of the bed, his arm around my shoulders. This wasn't me. This was some crazy imposter taking over my body. Maybe my drinks had been spiked. Maybe he'd spiked them. That'd be right, wouldn't it?

"Look, Sol, if you don't want to do this..."

"No. I do. It's just..." I didn't know what it was. I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to steady myself.

"Has anything bad ever happened to you?"

I turned sharply and stared at him. "Like what?"

He was struggling to find a way to word it.

"I've never been assaulted, if that's what you mean."

“OK.” He was noticeably relieved. “I was just thinking about the store the other day, and how if you’d... what I mean is it was embarrassing enough without... added complications.”

I watched those mercury pools cloud with guilt. “Hey,” I said, taking hold of his hand. “Don’t sweat it.”

He laughed gently. “I’m gonna make us a coffee.”

Good idea. I followed him through to the kitchen, getting my first proper view of his apartment. It was sparsely furnished, tasteful, very masculine. After living with a woman for eight years, I felt qualified to make that judgment. Women fill homes with things of great emotional significance and no practical value, like stuffed toys and ornaments. OK, maybe not just women—some of the guys I’d hooked up with had their fair share of crap lying around the place—but it’s not my thing and it clearly wasn’t Adam’s either. Across the hall I could make out the profile of a large pale sofa, huge TV and fully stacked bookshelves. A dark square covering most of the floor was suggestive of a rug, but otherwise the room was bare. From what I’d seen of his bedroom, not that I’d been paying much attention, it contained little more than his bed.

His kitchen had the usual compliment of electrical appliances, with everything else concealed inside glass fronted cabinets. I leaned against one and watched him spoon instant coffee into two mugs: matching plain white with black rims. See? Functional. No flowers.

Mugs prepared, he advanced on me slowly, no doubt worried he’d provoke another overreaction. I put my arms around him and smiled apologetically.

“Sorry about before.”

“It’s fine. Like I said, if we’re going too fast...”

“It’s not that. I want you, big time, but this? It’s...” I lowered my eyes. He leaned in and kissed me gently on the lips.

“Intense?” he offered.

“Yeah.”

I probably had a lot more to say, but I forgot the moment his mouth opened against mine. I waited for him to lead. He didn’t. I cautiously tested him with my tongue. He allowed me in. His chin rasped against mine, the roughness contrasting exquisitely with the softness of his lips. I ran my hands up and down his back, and he writhed against me. I grabbed his T-shirt, tugged at it to

free it from his jeans. He shrugged out of his shirt, flexing toward me so I could pull the stretchy white fabric over his shoulders and head. It's quite a challenge, undressing each other when you're more or less the same height and wearing fitted clothes, but now he stood before me, topless and glorious, his nipples like buttons of dark chocolate topping firm pectoral muscles, well defined abs, a trail of dark hair running up the center of his lightly sculpted six pack and spreading like the fronds of a palm tree across his olive chest. Good God, he was a fucking magnificent sight. I shifted my gaze, staring into his eyes, willing him to undress me. I wanted to feel his skin against mine, but my earlier resistance made him hesitate.

"Do it," I said. His mouth twitched, fighting the urge to smile. He obeyed, grabbing my shirt and using it to pull me to him, kissing me deeply as he slowly unfastened each button and eased the linen over my shoulders. I was too hot and bothered for it to fall through gravity alone, and he helped it along, our torsos making that first, mind- and body-blowing contact. Like his hands, his chest was much hotter than mine, and the heat radiated through me, front to back, up into my cheeks, down through my groin, as if he'd pumped me full of liquid fire. In a far distant corner of the universe, a kettle came to a boil.

I was wearing my button-fly 501s—evidently my subconscious had been intent on playing hard-to-get all along. The rest of me was just hard, none of it making for an easy mission. Adam puffed and panted, fighting to gain access, his brow squeezed tight in concentration.

"Fuck, Sol. It's like a bloody chastity belt."

I laughed and made to help, but he pushed my hands away.

"I've got it," he insisted.

Aye, aye, Cap'n Impatient. Give him his due, he persevered for a good ten seconds before he raised his arms in surrender. With ease, I peeled the three buttons from their holes and shrugged.

"What was..." I started to say. The rest of it was something about all that fuss, but I'd lost the power of speech again, with his hand inside my jeans, inside my *boxers*. I loved this license to think in my own language, not that there was much in the way of thinking going on, with one hot hand snugly cupping my balls, the other around my dick, the firm yet gentle circle of his finger and thumb easing my foreskin down. He took a breath and frowned, like he was preparing to ask a question but decided against it, and descended to his knees, taking my jeans with him. His hand returned to my balls, his fingers

extending behind, stroking right the way back to my hole, and forward again. The sensation was so overwhelming that I almost missed his mouth closing around me, and he went straight for the kill, deep-throating me, no gagging. I thought fleetingly to my recurring fantasy of the past few days. It had served me well, but the reality? Pun intended, it blew me away. Adam really knew what he was doing. More than that, it was as if he knew me. He eased his lips up to the tip again and probed at my slit, glancing up to show off the string of precum connecting his tongue to me. I let out an involuntary groan, put my hand on his head, guiding him down so that his hot, wet mouth enveloped me again.

The thing about being a so-called “top” is that you receive more than your fair share of blow jobs, but rarely get to give them. In that pale imitation fantasy of mine, I’d had him suck me off so I could dominate him. If there’d been time to elaborate, I may well have imagined us fighting in an effort to maintain our position. Not so. As I tried to pull away, he moved with me, sucking me so hard that I was somewhere between yelling in pain and exploding in his mouth.

It turned out he was more patient than I’d thought, as at the next shuddering thrust of my hips, he released me and rose to his feet again, sharing his first taste of me. I had to flex away from him to break contact. I was teetering on the edge, and what a view it was. Time to try a return to the bedroom, where we could continue more comfortably, now I was in the swing of it and no longer freaking out like a teenage virgin. Actually, I guess that was a significant part of my initial reluctance. Adam was making all the moves, and I was expecting that he’d want to fuck me sometime soon. I wanted it too, but the last time was... Donny Dickless. By comparison, Adam was toting the Eiffel Tower. It was going to hurt like hell, and I wasn’t sure I could tell him. That, for all of my experience, and I’m honestly not bragging when I say I’d had more than my fair share, if he fucked me, and that was a BIG if, it would only be my second time.

For now, I settled on giving back in kind, pushing him down onto the bed and removing his jeans and shorts. Propped on one arm, he lay on his side diagonally across the plain burgundy duvet, smiling up at me expectantly. The street light’s amber reflected off those steely irises of his, heightening the molten metal effect, almost as if his gaze were being recast right in front of me. I knelt on the edge of the bed, and he made a grab for me, attempting to capture me with his mouth. I’d gone soft again and was feeling a little inadequate.

“No.” I pushed his face away. He stuck out his bottom lip and looked sad. “Your turn,” I said. He rolled onto his back with his hands behind his head. I paused, thrown slightly by his immediate submission. He narrowed his eyes at me.

“I expected you to put up more of a fight,” I explained.

He shrugged, as much as it's possible to shrug while lying on your back, and said, “I figured we'd save the fighting for next time.” He lifted his ass off the bed, his dick waving at me. That was all the encouragement I needed. Taking my time, I brought my lips down to greet that satiny head with a kiss. He stayed absolutely still, his lilting eyes settling momentarily on my mouth closing around him, then shifting to my rapidly rising erection. His musky scent smelled so damned incredible it was threatening to take me over. I wanted him so much, and yet I sort of didn't know what to do with him. It was the strangest sensation, to be overcome by need and not have the faintest idea how to satiate it. If he'd noticed my confusion he certainly didn't show it, as he was harder than ever, his balls tight against my tongue and lips. I nibbled the base of his dick and slowly worked my way up, licking every part of him, capturing him between my lips. I sucked. He fucked my mouth, his eyes now closed as he pushed down on my head, forcing me to take his full length, my nose buried in his neatly trimmed triangle of coarse, dark hair. A small tattoo peeked over the growth—a tiny green-eyed black cat, prowling on tiptoes along the hairline, tail held high.

He lifted his head to see why I'd stopped. I released him so I could explain, working him with my hand.

“Your tattoo.”

“Ah. My uni roommate's doing.”

“Drunken misadventure?”

“No. She insisted I needed some pussy.”

I chuckled, got set to return to my previous activity. He rolled onto his side and gripped my leg.

“Come here,” he said huskily. I allowed him to move me where he wanted me. A sixty-nine. Now that really would have been a first.

Except I couldn't do it.

Maybe I'd been drunker than I'd realized, and I was sobering up, because all of a sudden I needed to escape, get out of there, get away from him. The

question was how to do so without losing face. I resisted. He tightened his grip on my leg. I jerked sharply away and staggered to the kitchen to retrieve the abandoned heap of rags that was my clothes. I felt wretched.

“Sol?” Adam appeared in the hallway, watching in bewilderment as I quickly redressed. “Sol, what’s wrong?”

“Got a breakfast meeting,” I said quickly, which was true, incidentally, but I could’ve caught the first morning train home and still been at the office in plenty of time. Adam continued to watch me, scratching his head in confusion, stark naked. It would’ve been funny if I hadn’t been in such a state. It was madness. I knew that, but I couldn’t help it, and I was shaking so much that I ended up jettisoning my socks to hasten my getaway. As I stumbled past, Adam put his hand on my arm, stopping me in my tracks. I couldn’t look at him. I felt such a fool. He was no longer aroused—not surprising—and leaned toward me, kissing me lightly on the cheek.

“Call me. OK?” he said. I nodded, hoping he could tell from my face how bad I felt, how sorry I was. I left.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eight

I didn't sleep.

Across the other side of our bed, Elise snored gently, her back turned against me, legs curled up, a foot stuck out of the covers. It was familiar, safe. Depressing. I rolled onto my back, hazily following the flicker across the ceiling, the headlights of scant nighttime traffic, while I tried to comprehend my behavior of a few hours ago. I'd overreacted, but to what? And why? The thoughts whirled around my brain without resolution. I turned onto my left side, closed my eyes. His face appeared on the insides of my eyelids. I lay on my front, started to drift, and was rudely jolted awake by the sensation of falling. One final attempt on my right side—a half hour later I was watching headlights again. I felt sick, and so tired. My teeth hurt, my head was fuzzy, my stomach kept lurching. Flu? If only! I glanced at the clock—a little after six—and gave up.

Solitude in the shower did nothing for me. Miserably, I washed myself, barely a twitch as I recalled being with Adam the night before. Had I not seen enough proof that he was far more patient than I'd given him credit for? Or did I think that all his checking we weren't moving too fast was a ruse to get me into bed? In the past that would've been quite a turn-on, that someone would take such care to seduce me. Instead, all I felt was sadness, that I'd screwed up, that I'd had to walk away. What a fucking idiot I was. Anyone in their right mind would've at least stuck around for the orgasm, but not me. Oh no. I'd felt that tug of something far beyond lust and knew I had to do the decent thing, for him, for me.

So which one of us was impatient?

By the time Elise made it to the kitchen, I was on my third coffee, pretending to read the news on my iPad. She poured herself a cup and sat opposite.

"What time did you get home?" she asked.

"About two."

"Did you have fun?"

"It was OK, yeah."

She sipped her coffee, observing me. I kept my eyes on the screen. My pulse was booming in my ears.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. I chanced a quick glance up. She gazed steadily back at me. I shrugged.

“Nothing,” I said. Even I could hear how unconvincing it sounded. Elise nodded once. For a split second, her eyes blazed, and then she faked a smile. She let it go. For now.

“You haven’t forgotten about picking Mom and Dad up, have you?”

Ah, hell.

“No,” I lied. “What time do they land?”

“Five fifteen. They’re staying at the same hotel as last time. You know which one?”

I nodded an affirmation. I knew which one. It was the five star behind the Best Western where my once-naked admirer was staying.

“Good,” Elise said. “Can you tell Mom I’ll get there as soon as I can?”

“Sure.”

Elise slid off her stool, put her cup in the dishwasher, kissed me on the cheek and left for work. I followed five minutes later.

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Breakfast meeting cancelled, one of the projects had fallen through, lunch with the board, trying to justify our request for a budget increase, and an hour long argument over the color of the prototype with a prospective client who couldn’t grasp the concept that it was just that. A prototype, not the final product, asshole. Was it any wonder that by three o’clock I was physically, mentally, and emotionally done in? Were it not for my in-laws flying up for a weekend visit, I’d have left work early and gone for a good, long run. There was nothing like pounding my way through the streets and parks when I felt like... whatever it was I felt like. They were unfamiliar emotions to me, distracting, destructive, hopeless. I could only recall feeling like that once before—when I found out James was dead.

I was at university, and came home for the funeral. His family thanked me for being a good friend, surprised to see me there, as they didn’t know about us. They knew about James—everyone knew about James—that was why we were watching his broken body being lowered into a hole in the ground. But whenever I visited I played it absolutely straight, and being there that day I felt relieved and ashamed all at once.

Adam hadn't called. I don't know why I was hoping he would—he was waiting for me to call, and how could I? I'd fled his apartment just as we reached the best bit. No explanation. Not even a goodbye. If I wanted to make absolutely certain he was out of my life for good, all I needed to do was leave it alone. Instead, I pulled my phone from my pocket, scrolled through to "C" in my contacts, running my thumb across the letters, contemplating. I shook my head, an instruction to myself not to do this, tossed my phone onto the desk and buried my face in my hands. A knock at the door. George's faint little *tap-tap-tap*, like the smallest, meekest woodpecker in the world.

"Come," I called. The door opened. George came into view, facing forward for once. She was smiling. Some good news. Thank Christ!

"Sol, how are ya?" she asked, still beaming at me.

"Fine," I answered suspiciously, as we'd only done lunch an hour ago. What did she know that I didn't?

"Excellent," she said. She continued grinning and nodding. She looked slightly insane.

"Care to share?" I asked. I didn't mean to sound terse, but I really wasn't in the mood. Her smile faded, and I was immediately repentant. Too late. Her nostrils flared, her lips thinned to an underscore. She glowered at me, likely weighing up if I deserved letting back in the loop.

"The board just approved your promotion," she said tightly.

"Promotion?" News to me. "Remind me again."

"The second design team."

"But we lost the contract." Our team could handle a maximum of three contracts at a time. The fourth was where the idea for a second team stemmed from: now we were back to three, there was no reason to expand. My phone vibrated across my desk. I straightened up so I could read the screen and felt the blood rush to my cheeks. George glanced at the phone.

"You need to get that?"

"I'll call them back."

She nodded.

"So, this second design team. When did you hear it was still going ahead?"

"We just talked about it over lunch." She looked perplexed. I imagine she wasn't the only one. "Are you coming down with something?"

“No. I’m fine, kinda. Elise’s parents are visiting for the weekend.”

“Oh.”

I knew that would win me some sympathy. They were OK really, in small doses, preferably with us in Boston and them in New York. George was heading for the door.

“You need to confirm your acceptance with the board before you leave this evening,” she said.

“Do I have to accept?”

“What the heck are you talking about? It’s a promotion, Sol. A fifteen thousand dollar raise.”

“Yeah, but...” I rubbed the inner corners of my eyes with my finger and thumb. I was getting a headache. “OK.” Whatever. I knew the job—it was what I did when George was out of town, except I’d be doing it every day. I was sure I’d feel more enthusiastic once I’d got past the weekend.

When George had gone, I unlocked my phone, staring at the missed call notification. Strike four. I called back. Voicemail.

“Hey. It’s Sol. Just returning your call, and...” I swallowed hard. My pride stuck in my throat. “That’s all. Catch you later.”

I hung up.

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The drive to the airport gave me time to put my thoughts in order, and it was starting to make some kind of sense. Maybe sense wasn’t quite the right word, because two things about the previous night were completely at odds with each other, specifically, Adam’s comment about not being the kind of guy to settle down, and then everything else about the way we just clicked. I had no intention of giving up my career and marriage for someone who didn’t want commitment. I had no intention of giving up my career and marriage, period. But until he’d said what he did, I’d been hovering in a limbo where for the first time I was wondering, “What if?” In his presence I was completely ensnared, willing to consider the possibilities. Away from him I could rationalize, resist. I needed to make sure we never saw each other again, but I still owed him an apology.

At the airport I parked at Arrivals and waited, watching the information board. At least having Elise’s parents around would give me plenty else to

occupy my mind. They came through the gate, my mother-in-law scanning the group of us waiting for our respective friends and relatives. Spotting me, she waved and hooked her arm through her husband's, leading him over. He was losing his sight to glaucoma and wasn't far off being completely blind.

"Solomon! How lovely to see you. You look wonderful, dear." Elise's mom tilted her cheek in my direction. Dutifully I kissed it.

"Hey, Darla. You're looking great yourself. Tom?"

"Sol," Elise's dad responded to my greeting. They had carry-on luggage only. I took their bags from them, led the way to the car, and loaded up the trunk while Darla assisted Tom into the front seat. As I opened the driver's side door, I noticed my phone, still on the dash, screen illuminated.

"Captain Patient calling," Darla read off the screen.

Yeah. I'd changed his name. It was the least I could do, and maybe it was just a little wishful thinking, not that it mattered. Once I'd apologized, I was going to delete his number. I dismissed the call and removed my phone from the mount.

"Won't be a second," I explained, stepping out of the car and closing the door. I called him back. He answered right away.

"Hey."

"Hey," I replied, keeping my voice low. "Look, I can't talk now, but I need to say I'm sorry."

"Accepted."

I waited for more. I needed more.

"Was there something else?" he asked.

You, me, the world...

"I owe you an explanation," I said.

"OK. So... you want to meet up?"

"I don't think—" I closed my eyes, willing myself to say it. *I don't think it's a good idea.* "Elise's parents are here for the weekend," was what came out of my mouth.

"Monday then?"

I breathed out heavily. He heard me.

“Sol. If you don’t want this, just tell me now.”

“I...”

Oh God, how I wanted it. I wanted him.

“Monday,” I repeated.

“You coming up to Emerson again, or—”

“No. Meet me at my office.”

“OK.”

“I’ve got to go. Bye.” I hung up quickly, gave my pulse a minute to return to normal and got back in the car.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nine

Not really the weekend from hell. It didn't rate highly on any emotional scale. Friday night, Elise made it to the hotel by eight and we had dinner with her parents, who held off mentioning grandkids for the evening—plenty of time ahead for that. Saturday, we did the usual things. Elise and her mom went shopping, while Tom and I had a couple of beers and watched the game. Correction. I watched, he listened to the roar of the crowd and my running commentary of the action. I can't even begin to imagine how frustrating it must have been for him to not be able to enjoy the simple things in life, but he didn't let it get to him. Took it on the chin, like a real man. It got me thinking about the whole gender difference aspect. I'm actually OK with shopping, if there's a reason for it, rather than the browse and buy whatever takes their fancy Elise and Darla engaged in that afternoon, just like every other trip they took. In fact, I wasn't convinced that love or hate of shopping had anything to do with being a woman or a man. Like my attitude on most things, if it served a purpose, then all well and good. If it didn't, then what was the point of wasting the time, energy and money? I think it was probably more to do with being an engineer, as George was exactly the same as the rest of us in the office, the rest of us being men.

I left Tom napping, to go and collect Elise and her mom and their dozen multicolored bags. I even rustled up a little interest in the big reveal that followed. Elise had bought a stunning black dress—floor length and pulled in at the waist. She was quite tall and shapely, and looked mighty fine in slinky black. It was for the garden party, she said, accessorized, of course, by a pair of implausibly high-heeled black-patent sandals, and coordinating purse barely big enough to hold a lipstick.

All purchases stowed away, we settled down for a homemade meal—nothing special, just chicken and pasta. It was as we came to the end of this simple meal that Darla, in her roundabout way, raised the issue of starting a family again.

“You'll be looking to buy a house soon,” she stated.

“Mom,” Elise beseeched.

“Oh, Elise, sweetie, you're in your thirties now.”

“And?”

“Time is *not* on your side.”

Elise shook her head and started clearing the table. Darla smiled at me. She must’ve spotted the microscopic weak link in our defense.

“You could buy a place outright within a couple of years,” she said knowledgeably. Darla had worked in real estate for a while after Elise started high school. “There are some beautiful houses in Dorchester.”

I shrugged neutrally. “We like this apartment, Darla.”

“But you only have the one bedroom,” she said. Elise had her back turned, loading the dishwasher, making her disapproval of my engaging her mother wholly apparent. Darla reached across and squeezed my hand. I gave her a smile, but no more than that, hoping she’d let it go. She didn’t, and eventually I had to agree to drive them back to their hotel before all hell broke loose. That was the problem with Darla and Elise—both refused to plainly say exactly what they meant, so arguments tended to go round the same few vague points, where getting a house in the suburbs served as a euphemism for starting a family, and feeling accomplished in getting a promotion equated to having no intention of having children, ever. I often wondered if straight talking wouldn’t kill the issue once and for all.

*“When are you going to have children, Elise?”*

*“Never, Mom.”*

Done.

On the matter of straight talking, once we’d safely seen Elise’s parents onto their plane home, I headed for the gym—the Magda gym, that is. I’d been in there a couple of times before, and it was very well equipped, with the latest machines, two eager-beaver instructors on standby. The only staff that used the place over the weekend were security guards, maintenance crew and the sad nine-to-fivers with no life to speak of outside of work. Like me.

I snagged a free treadmill and cranked it up to a steady seven miles an hour, stuck my earphones in and switched off from the world. I ran up a good sweat, intending to get a full workout, because I really didn’t want to be at home with Elise. Tom and Darla’s visit had postponed the storm’s arrival, but it was getting closer now. I could feel it in my bones. I slowed the treadmill, removing my earphones as I stepped off, making a beeline for the weights room. And there, pumping away on the flies, was none other than Best Western 702. I swear the gods were conspiring against me.

"I didn't know you came here," I said.

"Just joined," said 702. He heaved the arms of the machine in front of him, grunted, eased them back again, released. "The name's Rick, by the way."

"Sol," I replied. I sat on the lat pulldown, not that I used machines normally, but I wanted to get a good look at him up-close, for no other reason than curiosity, it turned out. He was still a good-looking guy, well-toned but not built, like Adam, and he was smart and funny. He finished his workout and hung around a while, telling me about the new job he was starting the following day in our accounts section, having graduated from Harvard Business School the previous year. He'd been staying in the hotel while he searched for an apartment, and hadn't realized at first I could see into his window. There was nothing bashful about his admission. He was obviously very proud of his bod, and he had every right to be, but it did nothing for me. Not anymore. We parted company outside the gym, me wishing him luck with his new job, him yet again bemused by my rejection.

Back home, Elise was reading a case brief and glanced up as I passed by on the way to the shower. I knew what was coming, and I didn't want to deal with it. My head was completely screwed as it was. I stayed in the bathroom for as long as I could without further rousing her suspicion that I was avoiding her, emerged and grabbed my iPad, quickly loading a movie. I plopped onto the sofa, aware of her eyes burning holes in my back. I listened to the tap of her pen on the table. The tapping stopped. The pen rolled.

"Are you seeing him?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The guy from the store."

I closed my eyes, forced myself to keep breathing; slow, deep, steady.

"Since last Monday you've been different," she continued.

"In what way?" I turned so I could see her. She shrugged and looked away.

"I don't know. Kind of distant, snippy."

"Snippy?" I repeated, laughing with a little too much incredulity. "Has it occurred to you that it might not be me who's acting differently?"

"Meaning?"

"Jen."

At least she had the decency to blush.

"I like Jen. We get along."

"And that's all?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She got up, took her case notes, and went to the bedroom, closing the door ever so gently behind her.

\*\*\*\*

Monday.

I felt like death warmed up and was starting to think that maybe I really was coming down with something. I glanced up at the empty, dark window of Best Western 702, briefly thought about its previous occupant, conjured an image in my mind's eye of him in his smart suit, in his smart new job. He looked happy. My desk phone started ringing, ripping me from my pointless reverie. George's extension.

"Hey, George."

"Sol. We've got a problem. You need to head on over to the workshop."

Workshop. It was in actuality a massive factory, but I think Magda was trying for a more "cottage industry" image. Like Pottery Barn.

"Why? What's up?"

"The M-fifty-one dimensions don't match up to the design."

We got this from time to time with our mass-produced lines. Human error was usually the cause, and no one individual could be held accountable, considering the number of steps involved in the process between conception and production.

"OK. Send me the details in an email. I'll go now."

I hung up and grabbed my jacket.

I was halfway to the workshop before I remembered that Adam was swinging by at some point. We hadn't agreed on a time, just Monday, so as soon as I parked the car I called. Straight to voicemail. I left a message explaining I'd had to pop out and would hopefully be back for lunch, and went inside to find out what was going on.

As I'd suspected, it was nothing more than a mistyped number, but finding it took the rest of the morning. Whenever the opportunity arose, I checked my

phone for missed calls—there was next to no signal in the factory, on account of all the equipment. As soon as I stepped outside the call came.

“Talk about star-crossed lovers,” Adam said.

I registered “lovers” first, the rest of it taking a little longer to filter through. I waited for him to continue.

“I’ve got to see the police this afternoon. Make a statement about the student who died.”

“Oh. Not fun.” My stomach knotted tight. I felt bad for him. “Are you free this evening?”

“No can do. I’m flying to Montreal for a conference.”

He paused. I could think of nothing to say.

“I’ll be back on Thursday. You want to catch a movie, or something?”

Elise’s damned garden party.

“I can’t,” I said, the words accompanied by a sigh.

“OK. What about Friday? You free then?”

I was, but you know that feeling, when fate’s waving a red flag in your face? That’s what I was getting. Mother Nature thought this was a bad idea, and who am I to argue with a force that can take out entire continents with one puff of her mighty lungs?

“Yeah, I’m free Friday. I can be free all day.”

Valiant engineer, poking the face of fear in the eye. That’s me.

“Cool,” Adam said. I could hear in his voice that he was smiling. “I’ll call you, OK?”

“OK.”

I hung up and drove back to Magda, feeling a whole lot better than I had first thing that morning.

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And call me he did. Every day, at least three times.

“Hey, handsome.”

Huh. Too familiar. Too... permanent.

“Hey,” I replied stoically.

“What’s up?”

How did he know? I laughed, disconcerted. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Busy?”

“A little.”

“In that case I’ll let you go.”

“No.” Too needy? Well, he did call me handsome.

“OK,” he said. We both laughed. “I miss you.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“How? We’ve had dinner and half-sex.”

“It was great half-sex though. I can’t wait for the second course.”

I moved my phone away from my ear and stared at it, mostly to check the call was for real. I put it back to my ear. “We need to talk.”

“Yeah.”

We did need to talk. My life was hanging in the balance.

In between phone calls, he sent me sext messages—not the photographic type, just words.

*Made my very own loofah in the shower thinking of you. x*

*Oh really?* I typed back. *Did you know loofahs can grow up to two feet long?* x

*Uh huh?* was what I got back, with a winking smiley face.

Ha, yeah. Nearly thirty-one and texting like a teenager in love. Go figure.

What I didn’t factor into all of the fun and games was that it constituted documentary evidence for my newly paranoid wife. She’d never snooped on me before, so I had no reason to think she would then, or else I’d have made sure not to let my phone out of my sight.

Thursday morning, as she left for work, she turned back at the door, a warning glint in her eye.

“If you fuck this up for me tonight, Sol, so help me...”

I snapped. I’d had enough.

“What do you think I’m gonna do, Elise? Tell Rory you’re screwing one of his paralegals? His *female* paralegals?”

“Don’t you dare make this about me,” she yelled. She was angry, verging on hysterical. “I’ve seen the messages from *him*.”

I nodded slowly. I wasn’t going to deny it, though her reaction indicated she expected me to.

“Why don’t you close the door?” I suggested. “Clear the air before we go to work?”

“I’m late.” She left, a sob lingering in the echo of the slam of the door.

We did the garden party. It was... pleasant. Jen was there, with her sister playing the part of chaperone. Elise consorted with the other partners, laughing politely, complimenting them and/or their wives on outfits and hairdos. I followed in her wake, endeavoring to be masculine, handsome, hetero.

We did the garden party. And then we went home and argued goodbye.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Ten

We'd arranged to meet at the entrance to Boston Common on the corner of Charles and Boylston, in running gear, and I hadn't really thought it through. I didn't have a change of clothes with me, and had no plans to return home before Sunday. That was, however, not the foremost thing on my mind as I leaned against the railing, watching Adam all the way across the street. He was wearing a light gray tee, shorts of a slightly darker gray, his olive skin glowing in the early morning sun, his lip and chin sporting a day or two's stubble. Hard to believe, but his hair had grown enough in a week to be tousled, a stray lock punctuating the smooth slope of his forehead. He looked so damned hot, and not because he'd jogged all the way from his apartment, as evidenced by him being slightly out of breath. I half-considered telling him to forget about the run. There were far better things to expend our energy on. He came right up to me and kissed me tenderly. People passed by. My world spun wildly out of control. I kept hold of the railing a little longer, just breathing in his scent.

"Hey," he said. "How's things?"

"Can I answer that later?"

He examined my rueful smile through thoughtful eyes. "Is it bad?"

"Depends how you define bad." I stepped off. He kept apace, and as we entered the common, we increased our speed to a gentle jog. "How was the conference?" I asked.

"Really good. It was mostly workshops—scriptwriters, directors, producers—and research panels. I learned a lot."

"Such as?"

"How much I miss you already."

I chanced a glance his way. He met my gaze and gave me a big, genuine smile. I lost my rhythm and stumbled. He put out an arm to steady me. I found myself smiling back. Crazy little thing.

"Did it go OK with the cops?"

"Yeah." He turned to face front, staring into the distance. I'd hit a still raw nerve. "The pathologist says she's confident it was suicide."

I'd read the reports in the local press, and it was tragic. The victim, if that was the right term for it, was a nineteen-year-old from Washington DC, known

to have been suffering from depression. According to the papers, he'd hanged himself from the light fixture in the two-bed dorm, having previously taken a massive overdose of sleeping pills, along with a significant quantity of alcohol. His roommate found him, ran out of the dorm shouting for help, and was heard by "a member of faculty," who called 911, that member of faculty being Adam. I could see it had hit him hard, but he was still coping a hell of a lot better than I would have done.

We jogged around the perimeter of the common, a distance of around a mile, and slowed to a walk.

"What happened?" he asked.

"With Elise?"

He nodded.

"She saw the texts on my phone."

"Ah, shit."

"Yeah. There was a garden party at the law firm last night. She told me not to fuck it up for her, but I can't do it anymore."

I'd said it with conviction, like I knew I was doing the right thing, but my mind was racked with doubt. Adam and I barely knew each other, and the stakes were high. There was still the possibility to carry on as before, go back home on Sunday and continue with my sham marriage, the masquerade that was my life, but did I want that? Risk losing everything, or give up the one and only thing that felt real to me.

"I have a proposal for you," Adam said. We shifted up a gear, setting off on a second circuit. "You want to hear it now, or wait?"

"No. Let's hear it."

"Move in with me."

Wow. That was unexpected, not that I'd had time to speculate on what I was expecting.

"Are you serious?"

"Very."

I started working through the excuses in my head. It was less than two weeks since we'd met. We'd only had one date. I was married. Then there was the apartment, Elise, my career...

"If you're worried about the financial side of it, don't be. The apartment comes with the job, and I already checked on the rules about cohabiting.

"You did?"

Of course he did.

"And you don't need to decide right away."

Fit as I was, I didn't have enough breath for a discussion like that while running, and in any case we'd found our groove, so we continued in silence. It was a great feeling, running together. Once again I was struck by how comfortable it was, familiar. Normally I'd run alone, and I can't say I'd ever craved a running buddy. I can't say I'd ever craved anyone the way I did Adam. He stopped to deal with a cramp, bending over and rubbing his calf. A couple of younger women walked by and glanced our way.

"Nice ass," one of them called.

Adam laughed graciously. "Thanks."

I figured I might as well take a look too. He peered up at me, still smiling.

"Yeah," I said, in agreement. He had a really nice ass. I couldn't wait to get my hands on it.

We were at the junction of the path that cut through the middle of the common, back toward the street.

"You want to carry on?" he asked. I shook my head. We veered off, taking the shortcut, stopping at a convenience store to buy a bottle of water on the way back to Adam's place. It was a one-and-a-half-liter bottle, and we shared both it and a discussion of the different weights and measures in the US, compared to back home in the UK, our geeky conversation granting me an opening to ask Adam about his accent.

"My parents are Kiwis, but I was born and bred in London."

"That's crazy." I'd have laid money on him being a native New Zealander. Well, Australian at any rate. Close enough.

"They've got pretty strong accents. I guess they must've rubbed off on me."

That's what I hoped I'd be doing soon. He handed me the water.

"What about you?" he asked. "Where are you from? Up north somewhere?"

"Semi-rural Yorkshire." It was as concise a location as his "born and bred in London." South Yorkshire might not have been big by US standards, but it was

the largest county in England. He seemed satisfied with my response for now, more interested in watching me accidentally tip half a pint of ice-cold water down my front. I gasped. He gave me that lopsided grin.

“That was sexy,” he said.

“It was bloody cold!”

He laughed and put a hot arm around me. I screwed the lid back on the bottle, put my arm around him too, and that’s how we stayed for the entire walk back.

We didn’t fight about who got the shower first. We stripped off and stepped under the powerful jets together. He pulled me close, and we kissed hungrily, open-mouthed, biting, sucking, exploring, tongues reveling in the lubricating effect of the steamy hot water. The soft rasping of his stubble made me tingle all over. I was completely overwhelmed by his scent, the heat of his skin, the power of his body against mine. We were both so hard that we grabbed each other’s cocks and jerked off, our fists banging together in desperation for release. His grip was like iron, and he worked me hard and fast—just what I needed—so much better than going it alone. I tried to focus on keeping the same rhythm. His dick was slightly bigger than mine and felt familiar and different at the same time. I liked that. It reminded me that I was with someone else. I was with him. Adam. *My Captain Impatient*.

I withdrew from the kissing to look at what I was doing to him, what he was doing to me. He was watching too and that was such a turn-on. His eyelids fluttered, the goofy expression giving away how close he was, how much he was enjoying it. I returned my gaze to our cocks, fascinated by how they every so often touched tips, flesh warriors bowing in preparation of a fight to the death. The blood was pulsing hard through him, and I increased my grip against the tension of his orgasm shooting up, the white pearly strings rising in arcs, falling and nestling into my pubic hair, before being washed away. I experienced a brief panic that he was now left to finish me off when he was done, but he was still thrusting into my hand and had returned to kissing me, his tongue ramming deep into my mouth as his hand tightened around me, squeezing the panic out of me, tipping me over the edge. I shot a great stream onto his belly, followed by another, and another.

I caught my breath within his kisses. It was without a doubt the most intense climax I’d had in a long time, and I was still riding the wave, only partly aware of his other hand on my back, keeping me from buckling at the knees.

We didn't release each other right away, because it still felt good. We were both sporting porn-star semis, and everything had slowed down, our kissing now less hungry, yet just as deep as before.

"I'm going to make us brunch in a while," he said. "How does that sound?"

It sounded great. I was starving, but I didn't want him to let go of me. He cautiously moved his hand from my back, searching out the bottle of shower gel from the shelf behind me, flipped it open one-handed and squeezed a dollop of the purple gloop onto my chest. I held out my hand, and he deposited some more on my palm. We massaged and washed each other at the same time, and could have started up the whole process again, both of us rising to the occasion, but we didn't. We had three full days of being together ahead of us, time to get to know each other properly, take it nice and slow, exercise some patience! So we just washed each other, making sure we were thoroughly clean, everywhere. Adam washed my hair. I washed his, and we laughed at our dicks doing that mating dance of theirs.

We stayed in the shower until our fingers wrinkled, didn't bother drying off, just wrapped towels around our waists that soon worked themselves free. Adam made coffee and French toast, and we ate naked, feeding and teasing each other by offering a bite then snatching it away. I took a mouthful of coffee, didn't swallow, put my mouth around his dick, letting the warmth of the liquid bring him back to life. What a thing this was, in his kitchen, sharing brunch and sucking him off. He tasted so good, and I figured I owed him from the week before. I took some more coffee, lowered my mouth right down till my lips touched the surrounding flesh, slowly easing back up. I swallowed, descended, scraping my teeth over the silky-smooth skin. I could tell he was watching me again, and I changed position to give him a better view, reaching for my own dick, hanging heavy with need. I wanted to be inside him—I wasn't sure how he'd feel about that. I ran my fingers along his crack to see how he responded.

"You want to fuck me?" he asked. I nodded. "Here?"

In the kitchen. It was going to be the shortest fuck ever if we did it there, and the condoms were in the bedroom. We adjourned. I must admit I was a little nervous, and also aware that it was being in his bedroom that triggered it. Now I had a handle on that part, I could maybe start to understand why, though not right at that moment.

I hate to admit it, but stress put a real downer on the proceedings, and I'd well and truly gone off the boil. Adam noticed my change of mood right away.

“What’s up?” he asked. I glanced down, felt my face heat up.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to cover my embarrassment with an overexaggerated sigh. “I’m sorry, but can we have a time out?”

He didn’t question it, just opened a drawer and passed me a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

I sat on the edge of the bed to put the shorts on. “Sorry,” I said again.

“Chill.”

I was trying to. No way was I going to let these panic attacks, or whatever they were, ruin our weekend. Maybe if we just stayed out of the bedroom? Didn’t really make for much in the way of debauchery. Or sleep.

It turned out that’s how we played it—plenty of debauchery, everywhere but the bedroom, which we entered only to sleep, so not very much over the course of those three days. A favorite was sucking each other off in the shower. Adam looked unbelievably sexy with water cascading over him, the droplets glistening silver pearls against his dark complexion. I think I spent more time in a vacant daze, watching him get wet, than I did touching him. A close second was lying together on the sofa and kissing, with or without clothes. I even enjoyed lying in the bed with him for a short while on Saturday morning, until the jitters set in again.

The intimacy was incredible, but we also spent a lot of time just talking about anything and everything. No agenda—whatever came to mind. We laughed a lot too. For me that was what set apart this thing we had from every other relationship I’d experienced. Elise and I had sex for release, we talked about work, we went shopping for groceries. I don’t recall the last time we laughed. Very telling.

Adam and I had fun together. We got the giggles, we laughed till we cried. Sometimes we’d be caught up in a deep, serious kiss and we’d start fooling around, in a non-sexual sense. At one point we were in the kitchen. I was making us something to eat, while Adam opened a couple of beers, the arm with the tattoo closest to me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A QR code.”

“OK.” Seemed a strange thing to have tattooed on your arm. “Why?”

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone,” he said very seriously, “but I think I can trust you to keep this to yourself.”

“Uh huh?” I knew he was winding me up, but I went along with it.

“Yeah. I used to work for this secret government agency, as a spy.”

“Is that so?”

“A tough job, but someone’s got to do it.” He tapped the tattoo with his index finger. “These babies were in case any of us got captured. If they’re scanned they trigger a security alert and send a GPS signal to pinpoint our location.”

I shook my head, faking dismay. He grinned at me.

“It was a silly drunken idea a few of us had one night—tattoo a barcode linking to your Grindr profile. A hot guy comes your way, scans your arm, saves your details on his phone.”

“Did it work?”

“It used to, but I’m not on Grindr anymore.”

“Shame,” I said, retrieving my phone from the side and holding it up, pretending I was about to scan the tattoo. I didn’t even have an app for that! Adam snatched the phone and grabbed me around the waist in an attempt to fell me. I escaped his evil clutches, ran straight across the hall, leapt the sofa, and we spent a crazy couple of minutes edging one way and then the other, just like kids playing chase. Surprise, surprise, he got impatient and vaulted the couch too, getting me around the knees and wrestling me to the floor. I had the giggles again, our antics having put me in mind of the Freddie Mercury video for “I Was Born To Love You,” whereby he chases a woman through the rooms of a house, or a set that looks like a house, at least. Quite what he was intending to do with her once he caught her I really don’t know, but that was another moment of passion potential suspended as I recounted my mother’s response to me telling her—how being “gay like Freddie Mercury” was a one-way ticket to dying from *The AIDS*.

“She does know you have to fuck someone with HIV to catch it, doesn’t she?” Adam asked.

I raised an eyebrow, choosing not to comment. I don’t suppose he meant it the way I heard it, but he was right. Three days together and we’d done everything but fuck.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eleven

The apartment was in darkness when I arrived back late Sunday night. I assumed by the flickering of the TV screen on the bedroom wall that Elise was asleep. I preferred not to watch TV in bed—something else I'd discovered Adam and I had in common—but Elise said she liked the noise, especially when sleeping alone. At least I knew where I stood.

I lingered in the hallway, casting my eye over the dark silhouettes and shadows of our apartment—my home of the past eight years—for the first time acknowledging how little of me resided there. I'd never been the type to collect things simply for their sentimental value. I didn't get attached to books, or CDs. My memory was all the record I needed of those important moments in my life, and to be honest there wasn't that much to catalog—my graduation, our wedding...

There was something on the breakfast bar... Well what do you know? Three days and I was right back in the habit of thinking in my native tongue. I wandered over, flicked on the lamp, saw what it was. A birthday present, from Elise. I'd forgotten the next day was my birthday. Amazing. I'd spent much of the last year worrying about the significance of turning thirty-one, because a thirty-year-old screwing a guy in his twenties seemed far less perverted than a guy in his thirties going after a twenty-two-year-old. That's how it sounded in my head, where it had become such a big deal that I couldn't believe it had slipped my mind so completely.

On top of the small, gift-wrapped box was a white envelope, which I assumed at first to be a card. I picked it up and turned it over, wondering all the while why Elise had left it for me before the actual day. Maybe she was going away on business.

Or maybe not.

The envelope was too flimsy to contain a card. I lifted the unstuck flap and pulled out the sheet of paper within. A "Dear John" letter—kind of, as in the words made it clear this was the end. It was my eviction notice.

I don't know how long I remained there, reading over that letter, again, and again, waiting, anticipating something. I felt nothing. No remorse, no regret, no sadness. She wanted me to go right away, expected to wake up to an empty apartment in the morning, but after three days of physical exertion and very

little sleep, I was incapable of going anywhere. I grabbed some blankets and collapsed on the sofa.

The next thing I was aware of was Elise banging stuff down in the kitchen. I kept my eyes closed and listened to the intermittent sniffs and mucus coughs of someone trying to stifle their tears. It wasn't that I didn't care, but her sorrow was misplaced. Eight years together, an apartment that had held its value, successful careers—we'd done well to keep it up for so long. I pulled the blankets round me and got up, slowly turning to watch her going about her morning ritual, refusing to look my way.

"Elise, I—"

She cut me off. "I don't want to hear it."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"I'm not interested."

"You mean you can't face the truth."

She put her hand to her face and made a dash for the bathroom. I followed in my bulky blanket toga, watching her from the doorway, as she mopped at her eyes, trying to save her mascara. I addressed her reflection.

"I'm truly sorry. I didn't plan for this to happen, I swear, but now it has there's no going back. We knew it would come to this. We both knew."

"I didn't," she objected.

I stayed silent. I wasn't going to argue with denial.

"Do you love him?"

"I've only known him for two weeks. Not even that, really."

"That doesn't answer my question."

I didn't have an answer to give. Did I love him? If I judged it on the basis of a decade spent playing the field versus two weeks of desiring no one but him, then yes, perhaps I did. But that was by the by. Whether Adam and I had a future or not, the marriage was over. Any guilt I felt for my part was being overridden by the fact that Elise was more upset about what it meant for her career and her relationship with her mother than the demise of "us." She turned to face me, her eyes bloodshot, still more tears trickling from the corners. She flicked one away. As it fell, it sparkled in the wispy sunlight weaving its way through the slats of the window blind.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I do.”

The admission was nothing to do with my sudden fidelity. Watching Elise, trying to pull herself together so she could make it to the office, carry on pretending everything was OK, being something she wasn't? That's what made me accept the truth. I could almost hear myself making that speech to the board.

*I'm gay. My marriage is over. I've met someone new and I think I might love him. You can tell our investors to go to hell, or fire me. Whatever.*

Elise made to pass me in the doorway. I put my hand on her arm.

“I'll go today,” I said.

“You don't need to.”

I wasn't sure where yet, but I was going. Elise gave me a sad smile and kissed me lightly.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered. I watched her gather herself together and leave for work.

I hadn't even got as far as sagging in relief when the phone started ringing, and I knew who it would be. I shuffled, Geisha style, across the apartment.

“Hello, Mum,” I answered the phone, trying to sound bright and cheery.

“Good morning, Solomon. It is morning, isn't it?”

“Yep. It's just gone seven thirty.” I needed to get my ass in gear.

“I won't keep you, darling. I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday. Do you have anything nice planned for the day?”

Leaving my wife, booking into the YMCA...

“I'm thirty-one, Mother. It's not exactly worth celebrating. And I'm at work.”

“Not *all* day, surely?”

“Well, no, obviously.”

“You should get that well-paid wife of yours to take you out to dinner.”

Another of the grandparent-wannabe snipes.

“Yeah, there's an idea,” I said through gritted teeth. “I'm gonna have to go, Mum.”

“All right. Have a lovely day. Love to Elise.”

“Same to you and Dad. Bye.”

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Flowers. In my office. Lots, and lots of flowers. And not just any old flowers. Yellow daffodils, nodding a courteous greeting as I passed to get to my desk, and back again to fill the coffee machine.

*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*

“Come,” I called, heading for the door to rescue George from her imminent collision with my myriad new friends.

“Oh!” she said.

Oh, indeed.

“Where in the heck did all these come from?”

I took a breath, opened my mouth, closed it again, let go of the breath, frowned, and said, “Have a seat, George. I need to tell you something.”

She sat. I made the coffee and joined her. She studied me, patiently waiting to hear what I had to say.

“OK,” I said, aware of the slight tremor in my voice. My palms were sweaty. “You know I’m gay, right?”

Those little beady eyes narrowed, staring straight into mine, her mouth drawn tight. She took some coffee. “Right,” she said.

I nodded, pleased she hadn’t argued the point. “I’m going to tell the board.”

Her tongue rolled thoughtfully across her lips, and she chewed as if a matchstick were perched in the corner of her mouth.

“Sol.” She let a loud sigh go. “Oh, Sol.” She shook her head. “I’ve known you a long time, and you’re a very talented engineer. Magda—”

“Yeah, I know, George. But I’d rather quit than carry on pretending to be something I’m not. The thing is—” How to say it?

“You and Elise?” she prompted.

“We’re over.”

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “I’m not. See, I met this guy...” I smiled at the thought, deciding it wouldn’t help any to tell her I’d only met him a fortnight ago. “In

the store, and we just kind of hit it off.” I indicated the profusion of yellow filling the room. “He did this.”

“What a sap!” George was all southern sensibility, not a trace of romance in her, though I was inclined to agree. Filling someone’s office with flowers was... *sappy*! And not what I’d have expected from Adam at all. We were a lot alike—tough, masculine, testosterone and manly pursuits. I was definitely not a hearts and flowers guy, and I could see George still struggling to reconcile.

“He asked me what I missed about home—he’s English too. I said I missed seeing daffodils on my birthday.”

“It’s your birthday?”

Darn it.

“I’ve been trying to weasel that out of HR since you started here.”

“You know me, George. I don’t like a fuss.”

Past tense would have been more accurate, as I was flattered by the flowers, I must admit. However, the prospect of enduring the usual round of birthday pleasantries and gooey cake wasn’t one I relished.

George picked up one of the bunches, sniffed the bell of a daffodil and grimaced. I held in my laughter.

“They don’t smell of anything,” she said.

It was a curious observation. I could understand why she’d made it, though. I’d put her in a very difficult position. She’d been my champion at Magda, pushing me forward so I could make my mark. She believed in me, or who she thought was me. I’d let her down, not by being what I was, but because I’d made a liar of her. The tension between us was new, and tangible. Another knock came at the door.

“Come,” I called.

I watched as the door opened very slowly, no clue as to who was on the other side yet. I frowned in puzzlement. George was watching too, as a bottle of Champagne came into view. I recognized those fingers, *his* fingers, wrapped around the neck of the bottle like they’d been wrapped around me for much of the past three days. My heart went into a canter. Adam stepped inside.

“Hey, oh!” He smiled at George. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ll just...” He took a step away.

George looked him over, turned back to me.

“This him?”

“Uh huh.”

She nodded.

“Think I’ll leave y’all to it,” she said. She got up. I followed her to the door. She paused to examine us, standing side by side.

“Give me a call when you go upstairs. I’ll come with you.”

I smiled in gratitude, but this was my problem, not hers. “Thanks,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll be OK.”

She squeezed my arm affectionately. “Give me a call,” she repeated. She glanced up at Adam, gave him a nod that looked a lot like approval, and left, closing the door behind her.

“They arrived then?” he said, looking around my office.

“Yeah, they arrived. You! Are insane!”

He grinned and put his arms around me, hauling me in. I let him kiss me, but I wasn’t happy about it, not in my office. I liked my job. I’d prefer not to lose it, if possible. I freed myself from his embrace, returned to my desk and picked up the coffee cups. It was something to do.

“So Elise threw me out,” I said casually, as if I were delivering a bland weather related statement. *Turned out nice again.*

“She did, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m going to go book into the Best Western later.”

“Why?”

I turned and looked at him. “Because I have nowhere to live?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. He’d raised his guard.

“Can you help me out a little here?” he asked.

“Sure. What’s the problem?”

“You’re going to book into a hotel.”

“Yeah. It’s just across the street.” I pointed out the window.

“It’s only a train ride from Emerson.”

“And?”

"I already made the offer."

"That's not the same. I just need..." I shrugged. "Time. I need time."

"Then what the hell was the weekend all about?"

"Adam, I..." There it was: a flash of anger. Impatience. And more than that, pain. "Look, we've known each other two weeks. My marriage has just ended. It's too soon for me to—"

"OK. I get it."

The door slammed behind him, the gust setting off the daffodils in a Mexican wave right around the room.

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I did as I'd said I would. I booked into the Best Western, and as they handed me the key my heart sank. Room...

...701. At least it wasn't 702, though I could still have zipwired from my bed to my desk. Awesome.

That was as good as my evening got, sitting on an unforgiving hotel bed, creating mental drafts for an inter-building hydraulic cable system. By nine thirty, I'd given up on Adam calling. I went for a shower, crawled under the scratchy covers and turned out the light. Happy fucking birthday to me.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twelve

I spoke to the board, in George's presence, on Tuesday. They were very supportive, which surprised us both, but then the issue had never been with Magda's directors. Rather, it was their investors, or one in particular, and I could not fully appreciate the board's dilemma, duty-bound to uphold anti-discrimination law when it could put the firm in financial jeopardy. So many of our competitors had gone out of business already, and I felt dreadfully responsible for putting them in this situation. Magda was one of those companies with a "traditional family values" byline, which I'd known when I applied for the job, not that I'd ever figured out how traditional family values had anything to do with the design of innovative office furniture. But anyway, I didn't ask how they intended to take things forward. Indeed, I was avoiding thinking about the future at all—getting through the present was challenge enough. Too many unknowns. How long was I going to stay in a hotel? How long before Elise chucked my stuff in the trash? Did I still have my promotion? Was Adam ever going to call?

After work, I went down to use the gym, where Rick was on the chest fly again—funny to think he'd almost been my next door neighbor. We worked out together, chatting about his first week at Magda. He was part of the team responsible for analyzing the company's assets and setting investment priorities. I suppose it was a natural progression of the conversation that I ended up telling him about my "coming out" ordeal and the troublesome investor. He listened without comment, or, should I say, without vocalizing his disapproval, but it was obvious from his face what he thought. On some things, those ten years between us really did matter. I doubted he'd ever see the inside of a closet—probably didn't even use one for his clothes. It was easy to forget what those who had gone before had done for us. I thought back to Calvin's political rants about Stonewall and the importance of Pride marches, Matthew Shepard's legacy—it was all so detached and alien to me back then. And for all that Cal was aggressive, unfaithful and shallow, I couldn't fault his activism and passion. It was a life lesson Rick could benefit from—knock that sneering, "I'm gay, so what?" expression right off his face. I didn't say any of this aloud, of course. These were bitter, regretful thoughts, misdirected at Rick in an attempt to push away a much darker realization. *James died for guys like you. Like me.*

As Rick was leaving, he let slip that the CEO had already given the order to put out feelers for alternative backing, and I was moderately relieved to hear

that, but in truth I didn't care much. My daffodils were starting to wilt, as was my resolve.

Wednesday was more of the same. I was close enough to work that I could've got up at eight and still arrived early, yet there I was, six fifteen, staring sleeplessly at the ceiling, trying to ignore the backache and misery. It was so damned frustrating. I gave up, had a shower and went to the office.

At nine o'clock, I had my first official meeting with "my" team—George and I had agreed to split the old team in half and take two new guys each, except one of my new guys was a gal. She reminded me of Elise. I tried not to hold it against her, not that I had much opportunity to dwell on it, as it turned out to be a busy day, filled with reorganizing the design office to accommodate the extra drawing boards and Apple Macs.

The physical activity must have done something for me, as I slept right through to my Thursday morning alarm. A glimmer of hope on the horizon, I showered, had breakfast in the hotel, and strolled over to the Magda building, where my team sparkled with enthusiasm, all go-getter attitude and eagerness to please. The novelty soon wore off for me, though they were still buzzing at quitting time—I swear I'd never consumed so many lattes in one work day. Needing to burn off those calories, I followed it up with a full cardio workout in the basement gym. Rick wasn't around, which was disappointing, not that I was healing any, but I enjoyed his company; he was easygoing and interesting. And he was a distraction.

Friday, after another sleepless night and clearing my office of most of the daffodils, cracks started to appear in the concrete of my resolve, pieces breaking off under the pressure of the corrosion within. Five days. That's how long I'd been single, but it was more than enough for me. I considered calling Elise, not to seek reconciliation, nor even to ask if I could sleep on the sofa. I'd put off calling her all week, hoping to have a definitive timescale for when I'd be coming for the rest of my things, though I knew if I called I'd be spending Friday evening carting my junk from the car to my hotel room, only to have to do it all over again when I found somewhere more permanent. No, I knew how I wanted to spend my Friday night, and it didn't involve being bitched at or ignored by my soon-to-be ex-wife.

Straight after work I took the Red Line up to Park Street, only calling him when I was outside the station—stupid, I know. Voicemail. I called again. Still voicemail. I was there already, so I figured I had nothing to lose. I mean, what was the worst that could happen? He'd be out of town again, or teaching,

maybe, or out with friends, in which case I could just get right back on the train and return to staring at a Best Western ceiling.

Or he could be with another guy.

The realization hit me as I climbed the steps to his apartment. I could hear music from inside, so I knew he was home. I raised my hand to knock, hesitated. I couldn't deal with even the thought of him being with someone else, but for as long as I didn't knock, that was all it would be; a thought, a suspicion. Why in hell's name was I here? Definitely some form of self-torture. Oh well, nothing ventured...

I knocked. Loudly, to make sure I could be heard over the music. It stopped.

"It's open." His voice sounded muffled, and I got the feeling he'd been expecting someone else. I decided to stay where I was.

"It's me," I said, then added, "Sol." Just in case.

The door opened. A waft of cologne came my way. He was clean-shaven and dressed smartly, for him—an open-necked shirt, blazer and slacks. Shoes, not boots.

"Hey," I said, disarmed by his silence. "I owe you an apology. Again."

He checked his phone screen. "For?" he asked carelessly. It was faked, I hoped.

"For..."

Actually, why was I apologizing? All I'd done was book into a hotel. Call me old-fashioned, but two weeks is a little hasty for moving in with the self-proclaimed "love of your life."

I said, "If you'd given me a chance to explain—"

"You assumed I was asking you to move in as my lover."

"Weren't you?"

"You needed somewhere to stay."

"You honestly thought we could be roommates and nothing else?"

"I was under the impression we were already more than that."

"Which is exactly my point. I can't just step out of eight years of marriage and into a relationship with you."

"With me specifically?"

“With anyone! But now you come to mention it. It’s too fast. I mean, what’s the big rush? We hardly know each other.”

He checked his phone again and breathed out heavily. Impatiently. I was stopping him from leaving. I could see that. I turned to walk away, all set to offer a vague “I’ll be in touch” dismissal over my shoulder, and was stopped short by the sight of someone coming up the steps—a slim, auburn-haired, good-looking guy. He gave me a curious smile. I nodded in acknowledgement and left without looking back. If everything I’d said were true, then why did it hurt so much?

I was halfway to the station when I heard the sound of someone running up the street, feet pounding, getting closer and closer. Wishful thinking, right? It wasn’t going to be him. Why would it be him? He was going out for the evening, with his hot date, and I... was going back to my lousy hotel room to spend the night alone. I had only myself to blame. The runner stepped off the curb to go wide and back up again a few yards in front of me. No. Not him. Ah, crap.

Worse still, a train was leaving as I arrived at the station. God only knew how long I’d be hanging around before the next one. I flopped miserably onto a bench and did a quick recap of the past two weeks and five days: accosted in the store by gorgeous guy, dinner date with the same, followed by inexplicable panic attack, job promotion, awesome weekend of sex and laughter, kicked out by wife, dumped, homeless, sitting in a subway on a Friday night. Was it any wonder I was so damn tired? I let my eyes close and listened to the conversation happening on the next seat along. Two women, discussing where they were headed for their evening of fun and frivolity, the words fading in and out, someone sitting down next to me. I opened my eyes again to find Adam at my side.

“Didn’t you hear me?” he asked.

I stared at him dumbly.

“I was shouting to you all down the street. I thought I’d missed you.”

“Apparently not.” I was thinking of the guy outside his apartment. “Did you ditch your date?”

“My date?”

“The redhead?”

“Oh!” He laughed nervously. “Marcus? He wasn’t my date.”

“No?”

“No. He’s a colleague. He stopped by to pick up some papers.”

“And the fancy get-up?”

He looked sheepish. “I was on my way across town to see someone.”

The train was pulling into the station. I got up.

“You getting this?” I asked.

“That depends if you are.”

“I was planning to.”

“Then I guess I am too.”

I moved toward the now stationary train.

“Or we could go back to mine?” Adam suggested.

“I thought you said—ah!” Now I got it. I sighed in exasperation. “Why couldn’t you just say that?”

Adam smiled and rolled his eyes. “Because you didn’t give me a chance, as usual.”

I took a breath, ready to protest. Who was it who stormed out of my office? Not me, no siree! Though I had to admit in principle he was correct.

“So, what do you think?” he prompted.

“About?”

“Coming home with me.”

What did I think? I had no idea.

“Why didn’t you call?” I asked. Because that was obviously the most important question of the moment.

“Why didn’t *you* call?”

An equally good question. The train was about to depart. I made a dash for the doors, grabbing Adam by the hand and pulling him on with me. He just made it through the gap. The doors hissed shut.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ll come home with you.”

He frowned. “So where are we going?”

“To get my things and check out.”

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I'd already paid for the room for the night, so there was no need to rush. We packed my belongings into the one suitcase I'd brought with me—a crinkled heap of shirts and ties and a couple of pairs of pants—and put it by the door ready to take out to my car.

I don't quite know what happened next, but I was suddenly lying flat on my back on the bed, Adam on top of me, attempting to pin down my arms. I instinctively fought back.

“Just relax,” he said, quietly but firmly. He stooped to kiss me, the gentlest pressure of his soft, warm lips on mine. I was breathing too fast. It wasn't that I didn't want to. I was actually thinking it was a good idea—less complicated, easier to deal with, especially as my previous visits to his bedroom had been nothing short of disastrous. So why was I still fighting it?

“I need to shower,” I said, struggling against him. He released me.

“Are you worried about losing control?” he asked.

I didn't reply, feeling painfully self-conscious with his intense gaze following me across the room to the en suite. I set the shower running and undressed, watching my reflection mist over in the mirror above the wash basin. I'd fared poorly in my short life as a singleton, and I looked a sorry sight, with dark rings under my eyes, my hair falling over my face, my skin even paler than usual. Sad to say, with the guy of my dreams waiting just the other side of the wall, but my self-esteem was at an all-time low. I didn't know if I was ready. If I'd ever be ready.

“Want a hand in there?”

I closed my eyes, laughing in spite of myself. I felt his arms slide around me, his lips nuzzle in between my cheek and shoulder.

“You're still dressed,” I said. Not much of a protest, and not very convincing with the evidence rising before me. He released me and took off his clothes.

“Better?”

I nodded and we squeezed into the shower stall together. Once there, he washed me, smoothing the soapy cloth over my body as if I were a delicate babe, his eyes remaining locked with mine, though we were both fully aroused

and raring to go. I appreciated what he was doing, showing me he could slow it down if that's what I needed, and I did need that—in every other part of our rapidly blossoming relationship. As for the sex? If I had time to think, I'd screw up, lose the moment. I reached down to fondle his dick and balls to indicate I was ready, whether it were true or not. We finished showering and wrapped ourselves in towels, returning to the bed, where he waited for me to take the lead. Yet again I floundered. What was this thing with him and me and beds?

“You OK?” he asked. I attempted a smile. He sat on the edge of the mattress and beckoned me closer. I complied. I felt my towel fall away and tried to focus on the sensation of his hands and lips roaming over my body.

That was my other worry, of course. How two typical alpha males—tops, if you like—did this. I guessed we could take turns in the longer term. In the shorter, Adam had the condom out of the packet and was already rolling it onto my throbbing hard-on. That was his doing, for while my mind had been taunting me with doubts, he'd been caressing my ass and sucking me. He climbed onto his knees, pausing to give me a deep, lingering kiss, his hand still stroking my dick, his own jutting into my hip. He released me.

“Ready, handsome?”

I watched him turn his back and rest his hands on the wall at the top of the bed, his balls hanging like a ripe pear ready for picking, his firm buttocks covered in soft dark hair, his hole puckered, waiting. He wiggled his ass. It made me laugh and broke the tension between us.

“Aw, come on, Sol. I'm horny as hell here.”

Now I was ready. I spotted the lube he'd left on the bed, squeezed some onto my fingers and for the fun of it into the top of his crack, giggling as he jumped at the coldness.

“So cruel,” he said, his voice deep and husky with desire.

“I know. I couldn't resist.”

I knelt behind him and smeared the lube down, skimming over his hole, watching him drop one hand to work his dick.

“I'll take care of that,” I said, pushing the hand away and replacing it with my own. I'm not that skilled with both hands when it comes to most things, but I was pretty adept when it came to foreplay, the fingers of my right hand brushing against his already opening hole, my left pumping him. I pushed a finger inside; he resisted for a second, and relaxed. I moved in and out,

watching his shoulders tense and drop, waiting until I thought he was ready for more. He started to push back onto my hand, repositioning himself. There were some seriously animal-like sounds coming from him, guttural utterances of pleasure, goading me on. I went for a second finger, then a third. He was wide open, as happy receiving as he was giving.

I shuffled closer, positioned the head of my achingly hard dick and pushed, knowing he would close around me. That was the toughest part, when all I wanted to do was ram hard into his ass, but I'd learned for myself just how unpleasant it was to be on the receiving end—unless the guy was into S and M, and I hadn't noticed any handcuffs lying around Adam's place. He relaxed again, and I pushed deeper, giving him a moment to ease himself back onto me. I began to move. Small, gentle in-out, just using the slightest sway of my hips, waiting for him to catch the rhythm. He hardened in my hand, and I increased my speed, feeling him push back against me. He put his hand over the one I had around his dick, my other holding his shoulder. I leaned forward, my chest to his back, reaching to try and kiss his neck, but couldn't. I nuzzled his shoulder blade instead. He pumped his hand harder, forcing me to do the same, now buried deep inside him, each forward thrust making him moan under his breath. It felt good in there, like we fit together perfectly. I was really doing this—not a one nighter, but the brink of a real relationship.

I pulled away until I was almost completely out, pushed back in, the moans turning to grunts that got louder as I moved faster, a piston building to full speed. I had to release him so I could get a grip of his hips, circling my thumbs over his ass cheeks, watching his elbow working hard, the muscles all up and down his arm taut against the skin. I was close. He was close. I wasn't sure I could hold on much longer.

I slowed a little and ran my finger up and down his spine. He moved, not me. I resumed, thrusting up on his down beat.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Right there."

I was done for. I entered the build-up, the heat searing through me, ignited by the sound of his pleasure, his fist pumping hard and fast, with me inside him, making this happen. I slammed into him one last time, stayed there, no longer aware of anything other than the glorious sense of release and sparks in the back of my eyes that knocked out half my visual field. I heard him emit a growl, opening my eyes in time to see his load shoot high into the air. I fell back on my heels, and he fell with me, craning his neck to meet my lips with his.

“Wow, do you know how to fuck a guy!”

I laughed, breathless, sweating. It had been embarrassingly short (isn't it always the first time?) but intense, and I found my thoughts wandering back to Calvin and the earth tremor that had accompanied his arrival in my life. We'd had great sex, epic sex that could last for hours, but you know what they say about quality over quantity? If I added up all the sex I'd had with Donny, Cal and anyone else since, it still didn't come close to this.

Adam eased himself off me and we fell onto the bed, side by side, in each other's arms. I wondered if the earth had moved for him too, because mine was tilting right off its axis, all set to roll deep into interstellar space.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Thirteen

If I'd known living life as an openly gay man was going to involve spending all my time enduring or avoiding interfering, bossy women, I maybe would've thought twice.

OK, maybe not. I was happier and more content than I'd been in a long time, which isn't to say that the path was running true and smooth for Adam and me. When I wasn't fighting with everyone else, I was fighting with him, over his knee-jerk reactions to things said or done, his sudden reversals on our plans to go out, his temper tantrums when stuck in traffic, queuing in the bank, having to step around someone holding him up, me spending too long in the bathroom. I soon lost count of the times he pulled the checkout stunt, and had long since given up trying to get him to see how much his attitude pissed people off when they were probably in as much of a rush as he was.

Not that I had any delusions that I was perfect. I was having my fair share of temper tantrums, though I chose to take them out on the Magda gym equipment. I was struggling with the whole relationship thing and for reasons I couldn't yet share with Adam, because I was only just starting to face up to them myself. Still, the make-up sex almost made up for it—Adam might have been living up to the nickname I'd given him in all other respects (not that he knew anything about it), but he was the most patient, understanding, and considerate lover. Even so, I have to admit the constant conflict was getting me down.

First came the battle with Elise to get my stuff. The day after I'd left she changed the locks on the apartment, which I didn't discover until the following weekend, and she wasn't home, she claimed, but I suspected she was sitting inside, laughing at my efforts to break into what was still my apartment. I called her cell.

"Make an appointment through my attorney," she said, and that was the last time she spoke to me. After that it was all yelling. Her attorney—her boss, Rory, of all bloody people—told me that if I wanted access, a witness would need to be present to make sure I didn't try to take anything that wasn't mine. Like I owned anything in that apartment to begin with. Infuriatingly, the insinuation I would actually *steal* only made me more determined to make damned sure I got half of everything, whether I wanted it or not. She wanted the fridge? Fine. I was taking the dishwasher. Keeping the TV, Elise? Sure!

Best order your new sofa now, honey, because that baby's mine. As requested, I emailed Rory my list for Elise's approval. He emailed it back—eventually—with half the items crossed through and an instruction that in the interests of avoiding further distress for Elise, pickup would be during the week, *and* in the daytime. The hell with Elise's distress. I had a job to keep, a new team to manage.

I went round at the weekend to have it out with her, hoping to grab my things while I was there.

"You're not coming in," she shrieked, attempting to slam the door in my face. I blocked it with a well-placed foot, swearing under my breath as my toes were crushed between the door and the frame.

"You can't stop me, Elise," I shouted. I heard the guard lift on a spyhole across the hall.

"I'll call the police!"

To do what? Turn herself in for maiming me for life? I shoved the door. She shoved back.

"The fuck you are." I shoved again. She let go, sending me hurtling, head first, into our apartment. I staggered to a stop just before I collided with the closet, funnily enough, because surprise, surprise, who should be sitting on MY sofa, drinking out of MY goddamned coffee mug?

"Hey, Jen," I said, offering up my biggest, bestest smile. I was seething with anger and she knew it. "How are things?" I managed through smiley gritted teeth.

"Oh, just great," she replied, eyes flitting between us warring spouses. "I'll, err, go get those papers you needed," she explained to Elise, set down her drink and scurried past me, coughing nervously as she exited the apartment. The door was wide open, which I thought was probably a good thing. I wasn't sure which of the two of us wanted to kill the other more.

"I told you to go through Rory," Elise said coldly. She turned away and refolded the top two items in the neat pile of laundry next to her.

"I tried that. For some reason he thought it would be acceptable to further inconvenience me by insisting I call during the week."

"And?"

"I'm at work!"

“Being at work didn’t stop you from screwing *him*, did it?”

I pride myself on being quite a tough, manly kind of guy, so was more than a little horrified by the high-pitched “ha” of disbelief that came out of my mouth.

“Don’t you dare!” Elise started before I got any further. I went on undaunted.

“Don’t what? Point out the obvious?”

“There’s nothing going on.”

“You’re kidding me, right? Do you seriously expect me to believe that Jen is here to do what? Offer you moral support, a shoulder to cry on?”

“Believe what you like, Sol. I’ve done nothing wrong. It was you who cheated, not me.”

What I couldn’t believe was that she was still denying it. What was the point? I could see Jen’s clothes in the laundry pile.

Elise continued, “Every time you were seeing someone, I let it go. You’d come back here, stinking of sex, and you know what? I could take that. It’s what I agreed to when I married you, so you could hide the fact you were queer from your prissy boss lady. Even when you turned your back on me in bed.”

I don’t know whether I was more angry that she was claiming I rejected her, or that she’d called George prissy. Both were lies. Everything coming out of the bitch’s mouth was a lie, but I was way past controlling my temper, so I shut up and left. It was that or hit her over the head with something blunt and heavy. Like her wit.

Anyone chancing to look in the car as I drove back to Emerson would’ve thought I was stark raving mad, muttering to myself, saying all of the things I’d wanted to say to Elise, how I hated the way she shoved her promotion down my throat, how much of a coward she was when it came to standing up to her mother, how stupid she made herself look by lying to me, how I’d got through fucking her by pretending she was someone else—I’m kind of glad I kept that last one to myself, as she’d have thrown it right back.

When I got back to Adam’s, he was fresh out the shower. He looked me up and down and frowned in query.

“Where’s your stuff?”

“Don’t ask,” I grunted. I needed to vent my fury. He seemed only too happy to oblige, and we fucked, right there in the hallway, him naked, me with my jeans around my knees. It felt dirty and illicit, with his shoulder slamming into the wall, my belt buckle jingling along to a thrusty rhythm. We’d both tested negative on the full battery of STIs, but it was the first time we’d done it without protection, and as I banged into him, my mother’s voice popped into my head, harping on about Rock Hudson and Freddie bloody Mercury. It could’ve ruined the moment for both of us, but I somehow managed to convey to Adam what my ridiculous giggling fit was about, at which he started up a breathless rendition of the mock opera section of “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

“Galileo, Fig... oh fuck, yeah! Yeah, like that. Ugh. Ugh.” He was yelling loud enough for half the kids on the block to hear.

“Shut up!” I said, still laughing and covering his mouth with my hand. He bit me! “Oh, you are so gonna get it now.” I cranked it up a notch, and it was un-fucking-believable how horny we were. I was grunting, he was shouting, both of us were giggling, right up to the moment of orgasm. Man, I can’t tell you how incredible it felt, coming inside him, white hot jets launching from my balls and shooting like a rocket right into his soul, while he redecorated the wall with his own swirly signature.

When we were done cleaning up, he went to throw on a pair of sweatpants, returned to the living room and flopped down on the sofa, slinging an arm around me.

“I’ll forgive you for laughing all the way through sex,” he said.

“How gracious of you,” I replied, leaning in to kiss him. He returned it, then looked at me very seriously.

“On one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You start sleeping in the bed with me.”

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Adam didn’t work regular hours—in the US sense, as in he had a schedule, but he sometimes taught evening classes—so he made an impulsive, executive decision and called Elise. I wasn’t impressed, and told him as much. When I was done shouting, he explained she’d agreed to leave my things in the hallway, and whether I thought it was a good idea or not, he was going to get them. What I actually thought was he’d dialed a wrong number and spoken to someone else, but apparently not, as when I arrived home the next night, the

deed had been done. He'd got there to find her waiting, pen at the ready to make an inventory of everything he took. Not one to be so easily slain by bitterly betrayed dragons, Adam cranked up the Ashton charm, even going so far as to share a coffee and a chat, before departing with my pathetic plunder of worldly goods, relatively unscathed. A couple of weeks later, Elise sent a check for my half of the apartment, minus the cost of changing the locks and a complete overhaul of the interior. In other words, not much more than a dime.

In the middle of all this was the call I got from Elise's mother, which went something along these lines:

"Solomon, dear, please tell me it isn't so."

"Uh, could you be more specific, Darla?"

"That you've left Elise."

"Yeah," I pushed out a sigh of mock regret. "I'm afraid it's so."

"But I thought you were happy together. You looked happy together. Your wedding was so beautiful, do you remember? Elise was just like one of your princesses..."

By which she was alluding to those possessed of our sovereign isle, as opposed to me personally. I almost said, "I don't do princesses, Darla," but bit my tongue and let her continue.

"...and I just know she'll change her mind about getting that house in Dorchester. I was only looking the other day, and..."

Ah, the old grandkids chestnut again. From this I deduced that Elise had told her parents I'd left because I wanted to "move to Dorchester" and she didn't, but she *had* told them, whereas my own parents remained blissfully unaware that my marriage was over and I was living with a man I'd known for less than two months. I took the coward's route and sent my mother an email, fully expecting her to call the minute she got it. No such luck. The hours of dread and waiting turned to days, to a week—I was beginning to think my confession had gone astray, or ended up in her junk mail. Time for me to grow a pair.

When we next went grocery shopping, I stuck a bottle of bourbon in the cart. Adam eyed it in puzzlement.

"I'm going to call my mother," I said. He nodded and mouthed an "oh." Back at the apartment, I cracked open the whisky, filled a glass, took a long slug, thought I was going to die. My lungs felt like they were on fire.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” Adam asked, hitting me hard between the shoulder blades with his fist to try and halt the coughing fit. No, it definitely wasn’t. I gave up on Dutch courage and postponed making the call for another time, when I was sober, and Adam wasn’t around to see me squirm at my mother’s distant derision.

“You coming?” Adam asked the following morning. It was Saturday and he was in his running gear.

“Think I’ll give it a miss,” I said. He raised an eyebrow but made no further comment. Once he’d gone I got my phone and hit “call” before I had second thoughts.

“Hello?” a female voice answered.

Ah. Not who I was expecting, but infinitely preferable.

“Hey, Claire.” My little sister. “What are you doing there?”

“Oh, it’s you,” she said glumly. I tried not to take it to heart. Our parents were very difficult people to love.

“How are things?” I tried.

“Erm, well, they’ve been better,” she responded cagily. “I was summonsed.”

That was a typical ploy of my mother’s—to guilt her children into visiting, and partly why I’d stayed in the States after college.

“Why?” I knew why, but was hoping to be proved wrong.

“Why d’you think?” Claire hissed.

I didn’t know how to respond to that, or even if she was expecting me to.

“Hold on,” she said. From her end I heard the muted thuds of feet on carpeted stairs, followed by a door being closed. “You still there?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“What were you thinking, Sol?”

I drew breath—pointlessly, as she was far from done.

“An email? Are you out of your mind? She was getting on the next plane over there, do you know that? The only way I stopped her was by promising to talk to you about it, except I didn’t have your mobile number, and Elise refused to give it to me. What the hell did you do to her?”

“You mean apart from leaving her for someone else?” I asked sarcastically.

“She hates you. To be quite honest, right now I don’t like you very much either.”

I could totally understand that. Claire was only two years younger than me, and we were very close. She’d known about my relationship with James. She’d even visited me at uni and met Calvin, verily declaring him to be a “man whore” who wasn’t good enough for her brother. When I’d told Mum I was gay and she’d refused to accept it, Claire had been the second wave of reason, not that it made any difference. My mother insisted I’d marry a girl, and I did, completely ignoring Claire’s advice. She’d said it would come to this eventually, because running away solved nothing.

After a long silence, I said, “I’m sorry.” I meant it with all my heart. I heard my sister’s heavy sigh. “I need to talk to her.”

“Yes, you do, but she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Fine.” I was already adjusting to giving up the fight, but it’s not that easy when it’s your parents. It didn’t matter that she’d rejected me, pushed me into choosing the life she wanted for me. She was still the woman who had brought me into this world, sat up with me through nights of teething, tummy bugs and tonsillitis. She was my mum. I wanted her to know that whatever happened, I loved her.

Claire sighed again. “OK,” she said. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Hurrah for bossy little sisters. She was back in the game.

She continued: “You’re going to hang up and call back in five minutes. I’ll try and talk her round.”

“Thank you, Claire Bear,” I said far too gushily, following it up with a super-soppy, “I love you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Love you too. Bye.”

She hung up.

I watched the clock, counting seconds in my head to hurry along the minutes, wandered to the kitchen, grabbed some juice and returned to the living room, feeling decidedly wobbly. My legs weren’t quite my own and I sat on the floor—nowhere to fall—leaning back against the sofa, phone in one hand, glass in the other. My five minutes were up.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Fourteen

"Hello?" a female voice answered. The right one this time.

"Hi, Mum," I greeted breezily.

"Solomon," she said in that flat, emotionless tone that meant trouble.

"You got my email?"

"Yes, thank you."

The silence descended. I waited it out as long as I could.

"Um, did you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

I heard Claire say something in the background. My mother shushed her.

"I'm very disappointed with you, Solomon."

"I know. I'm sorry, Mum."

"I don't agree with your decision."

"My decision?"

"Just because it didn't work out with Elise..."

I pinched the inner corners of my eyes, trying to keep my cool. "Mum, do you remember our conversation before I came over here to study?"

"I can't say that I do," she lied.

"Yeah, you do," I countered.

"You were young and impressionable. You didn't know what you wanted."

"I didn't change just because I grew up."

"You still have the choice."

"No, Mum, I don't."

She stopped arguing. I could hear the quiver in her breath. She was crying.

"Mum, I love you. That's why I tried to make a go of it with Elise, but it's not me."

She sobbed.

"I met someone new."

"A man?" she gasped.

"Yes, a man. His name's Adam." I said this just as he returned from his run. He paused in the doorway. I gave him a quick smile to assure him everything was OK. He nodded and continued on his way to the bathroom.

"What about Elise?" my mother asked, still sniffing.

"Elise is fine."

"And are you sure this is what you want?"

"I'm sure, Mum. Adam makes me happy. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Of course it does! What kind of mother gets in the way of her children's happiness?"

I thought it best not to answer that one.

We got through the rest of the call by chatting banally about work and my father's plans to take early retirement. He worked on a rig in the North Sea, and it was a tough, physical job that saw him away from home for up to three months at a time. Mum said that now he was in his midfifties, he could opt to retire on a reduced pension, and his back was causing him problems, so he was giving it serious consideration.

At some point during the conversation, Adam clambered onto the sofa behind me and massaged my shoulders. My mother didn't ask about him, not once, but she did tell me she loved me before she said goodbye.

It wasn't long after this that the divorce finalized and Elise officially moved her new "roommate" in—did she honestly think anyone was fooled? It was an utterly blatant and pointless lie, but it was no longer my business. We were divorced, and my parents knew the truth. Time to let things settle... or so I thought, until George kicked up a blinding dust storm with a single, off-the-cuff remark.

"When are you guys getting hitched? I've never been to a homosexual wedding."

I was laughing when I told Adam that night. He... well, let's just say he didn't see the funny side.

"I think we should," he said.

“Been there, done that,” I responded flippantly.

“But I haven’t.”

I left the room to get a beer, returning to find him on his knees. I may have further offended him by commenting on his enthusiasm for giving blow jobs, though I didn’t realize it at the time. I was flying to L.A. the next morning for an engineering convention. I kissed him and left, believing all was well...

“I’m going to London,” he repeated. I’d missed it the first time due to bad cell reception. I was in the departure lounge, waiting to board my flight.

“Why?” I asked, thinking it was college related.

“We’re headed in different directions.”

Well, yeah! If you’re going to London and I’m going to L.A.

“Why didn’t you say something before I left?”

“I only just decided.”

“When are you going?”

“There’s a flight tomorrow.”

Captain Impatient strikes again.

“Can it wait till I get back?”

“What’s the point?”

“The point is...”

He’d thrown me. Sure, our relationship wasn’t the easiest ride, but I didn’t think it was bad enough for either of us to consider fleeing. Not yet. However, if he was asking that question, then clearly he felt something wasn’t right. I needed to think quickly. They were getting ready to open the gate and Adam would be gone before I got back. We hadn’t been together long enough to survive going “on a break.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said.

*What?* Where did that come from?

He didn’t answer me, but I’d said it, so I’d committed to it. “I’ve got some leave due. We could make a holiday of it.”

Still nothing.

“At least wait for me to get back so we can discuss it?”

“Fine.”

Well that was something. The gate opened.

“I’ll call you when I get to L.A. Bye.”

I hung up, no time to wait and see if he had anything else to say, like those three little words, for instance, not that I’d said them to him at any point. I was still trying to deal with living with a guy, and it was amazing in so many ways that I couldn’t begin to explain. But it was also hugely new and disorienting. The good: we liked the same things—running, working out, our jobs, beer, music, funny movies, clutter-free apartments. The sex was incredible, mostly. We still had a few issues to iron out in that regard, like that I was still spending most nights on the couch. The bad: Adam’s impulsive decisions drove me to distraction, but I could hardly fault him for that when I’d known it from the start. In fact, we probably wouldn’t have been together at all if he wasn’t so damned impatient. It forced me to take action quickly, often without the luxury of thinking it through, just to avoid him going off in a huff.

Oh, and according to him I was dismissive.

Yeah, whatever.

Joking aside, it was a defense mechanism. In all of my thirty-one years, I had never felt so connected to another person, so... dependent. I guess that was the part I was struggling with most, and maybe it was a gender thing. Strong and independent woman that Elise was, she still deferred to my maleness within the confines of our relationship. Spider in the bathroom? Sol the spider catcher at your service. Light bulb needs changing? Call Sol for all your electrical needs. If I’d let him, Adam would have taken on all of those “masculine” duties within our relationship in a heartbeat—not intentionally to secure his dominance. It was just the way he was, and the way I was too. To maintain the status quo, I had my own mental list, and it needed to balance perfectly. If he took out the trash, I washed the car. If I made dinner, he did the laundry. I was aware that it was more than a bit nuts, and that I needed to deal with the root cause, if only I could figure out what that was.

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I arrived back from L.A., fully expecting to find Adam sitting on our packed cases in the hall, and waving airline tickets at me. Actually, I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to find he’d already gone ahead of me. That, alas, was not what I came home to.

Adam stood before me, unshaven, his hair all over the place, crumpled clothes, bare feet. His musk reached me a second later. Musk, and alcohol. He stepped aside to let me pass. The place was a mess. Takeout cartons, the bourbon bottle, along with several others, scattered around the floor, empty and lidless.

“What the hell, Adam?” I was shocked. Truly. He stooped to remove some of the clutter, clearing a seat for me on the sofa. I didn’t take him up on his invitation, instead helping him clear away the evidence of his week of drunken abandon. He took the trash out, and I opened the window, the hot wind rushing through the apartment, lifting the papers from the desk and depositing them on the floor. I pulled the window almost shut, leaving a two-inch gap to try and vent the stench of stale alcohol, set his papers straight and waited for him to return.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said, walking right past without so much as a glance my way. I heard the running water, went to make coffee for us both, and resumed waiting.

Still unshaven, he emerged from the bathroom. He took the coffee cup from me with no more than a mumbled thanks. I followed him back to the living room.

“Has something happened?” It was the only way I could think to ask that didn’t sound egotistical. Part of his role at the college was to be on the rotating schedule to deal with emergencies, and students could be an anxious bunch, so it might not have been anything I’d done.

“Ha. Yeah, you could say that.” His voice was humorless, tired. His eyes met mine for a second. “You happened.”

OK. Not egotistical then. So what was this? Second thoughts about our relationship? He’d done all the chasing, not that I’d tried too hard to get away, but it was typical Adam; jump first, look back later to see what it was you landed in.

“You want to be more specific?” I asked.

“Not really.” He got up and walked to the window, staring out across campus. It wasn’t that great a view, but I gave him a minute or two to admire it before I pressed for more information.

“So what’s changed?”

“Nothing.” He turned to look at me and shrugged. “It was naïve of me to think that it would.”

"I don't get you."

"That you'd change your mind about us."

Confused? You could say that.

I said, hoping it would offer assurance, "I still feel the same about you—us."

He nodded ruefully. "That's what I mean."

We had to be talking at cross purposes. Personally, I'd have been delighted to know someone felt for me the way I felt for Adam. I may not have told him, used the exact words, but I was crazy about him. Surely my offer of taking the trip to London should have left him in no doubt?

"Did you book the airline tickets?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because I was leaving you."

And that was when it hit me. Hard. My stomach churned, sucker-punched by the realization of what I'd done. How had I not seen it before? Adam wanted us to get married. He'd even done the whole getting down on bended knee thing. My response? Make a joke out of it and jet off to L.A., which sent out the exact opposite message to, "I'm crazy about you." I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid. No wonder he was a mess. But there was a hope in that, surely? His head was screwed because of me, because he thought I didn't care. We could still fix this. Couldn't we?

I got up and walked toward him, thinking on my feet, trying to come up with a way to convince him how much he meant to me. But I was no good at this. He was the impulsive one, whereas I needed time to think, to plan and consider what I wanted to say. He did open and emotional. I did technical, practical, sensible. Straight to the point, no nonsense communicating came with the territory of being an engineer. However, there was a world of difference between yelling, "Stop the production line!" across a workshop, and uttering the words, "I need you. Please don't go," to the man standing before me now, miserable and defeated. Because of me.

"Are you still going to leave me?" I asked.

"I don't know." He stepped away, avoiding my gaze. "I'm going for a run."

I watched in a daze as he went to put on his running gear, heard the door close and the sound of his feet against the loose gravel, fading into the distance. I was tired from my trip, and I desperately needed sleep, but I couldn't leave it, not knowing him the way I did.

*The way I did?* Was three months long enough to get to know someone? Really get inside their head, understand how they tick? Was it long enough to fight for?

I knew he'd have it all worked out by the time he got back, made up his mind based on the facts as he saw them. And the facts as he saw them were what? That we had no future?

With much effort, I got my legs to work, left the apartment and jogged in the direction of the common.

The wind had dropped, and it was humid and stuffy, the air hanging damp around me, making me feel groggy and grimy. I crossed the street, pausing to peer along the path that cut through the grass and trees, and saw Adam run past the far end, his expression fixed straight ahead. I turned left, so I could intercept his circuit, his decision-making. It was a struggle drawing enough oxygen, and I was feeling breathless as I rounded the edge of the common, anticipating that I would soon see him heading my way. I waited. I waited some more. Five minutes passed by, still no sign of him, which meant he'd either doubled back on himself or veered off somewhere, which was unusual. For some reason we always took the path counterclockwise, and if we wanted to run longer we carried on in that direction. We didn't double back, and we didn't take shortcuts, but whatever, I now had no idea where he was, and time was running out.

I jogged back the way I'd just come, slowing to a stroll as I approached the exit, a cold sweat descending over me, the outer edges of my vision blurring, tunneling my attention, refusing to let me look away. For there, with his hand on another guy's shoulder, was Adam.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Fifteen

I don't recall getting back to the apartment, or how long I'd been sitting waiting, but it was dark by the time Adam got home. I had my back to the door, and I heard him stop. If he was watching me, all he'd have been able to see was my outline in the twilight of the evening spilling through the window.

"Sol?"

"Hm?"

"You OK?"

I closed my eyes and stayed completely still. I could have fed him the lie we feed strangers—hey, yeah, I'm fine, thanks—because that's what he felt like to me at that moment. A stranger. I could have got angry, but what good would it do? He'd said he was thinking of leaving me and I'd still gone to L.A. I had no right to feel betrayed. In his mind I'd already made the decision, and this was his place. It would be me leaving, not him, to go where? Back to the Best Western with my life in a suitcase?

"I'm going to switch the light on," he said. The warning registered a second after the event and I instinctively screwed up my eyes. When I found I could open them without my eyeballs turning to dust, Adam was kneeling in front of me, his head bowed, long dark lashes fluttering against his cheeks.

"I went to find you," I admitted.

"Yeah. I saw you."

"Who is he?"

He closed his eyes, his head shaking from side to side, a slight, rapid motion of denial. Or was it guilt?

"I could tell you knew each other. Were you screwing him while I was in L.A.?"

Back in the days of arguing with Elise, we'd reach that stage of the fight where I'd stop trying to defend myself. If we'd been dueling to the death, she'd have had me face down in the dirt before I'd even reached for my pistol. And she'd yell, "The right to remain silent has no jurisdiction here." And I'd think, "Fuck you, Elise," but I knew better than to say it out loud. Now it was me on the receiving end of the silent treatment, I could appreciate just how disempowering it was. If I'd had the energy to scream and shout I would have

done, but I was too tired and couldn't see the point. Not if he'd cheated on me. I sat forward, all set to go and pack my bags and leave.

"Doctor Michael Finnegan," Adam said.

I stayed where I was. He glanced up at me. I was sure I knew that name from somewhere.

"My ex."

Ah, maybe that was it, though I couldn't recall Adam mentioning him by name before.

"He was out for a stroll. He's a bit weird like that. He got dumped and was feeling miserable. After you walked off, we went for a coffee, and I told him all about you."

A smile broke across Adam's face, lifting it with joy. My heart skipped a beat at the realization it was for me.

"Michael said I was to pass on his condolences to you, for having to put up with me, and to look him up if you ever need a sympathetic ear."

I laughed quietly. "You're not that bad."

"I can be. I know I take things too fast for you. I forget how little time we've been together, because it feels like forever."

"It's like that for me too." I shuffled forward, lifting his chin with my finger so I could look into those beautiful quicksilver eyes. "I don't want to lose you, Adam." He leaned his head to the side, my palm now cupping his cheek. It felt so right to be with him. "I thought you were with someone, you know. Back at the checkout?"

Adam frowned. "Why did you think that?"

"You took a call, and it sounded... I don't know. Well anyway, I was jealous as hell."

He thought for a moment and shrugged. "I don't recall, but I wasn't seeing anyone."

"I guess it doesn't matter then." I watched his face for any indication that he might be lying. He stared right back at me, his expression sincere. I smiled. "I bet you can't remember what you said on our first date either."

"What did I say?" The corner of his mouth twitched. He remembered, all right.

“That you were the love of my life.”

He smiled coyly. “Yeah.”

“I think you might be right.”

“Uh huh?”

“Uh huh,” I repeated. I took a deep breath and looked away, preparing to say words that were so out of character they didn’t even sound like me in my head. I resumed eye contact; held it. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone before.”

“So why do you push me away?”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just all so new, different. Sometimes I can’t deal with how intense it is. And you scare me.”

He looked horrified.

“Not like that,” I amended quickly. Since that first night, when I’d panicked and fled, he’d remained convinced that I’d been in an abusive relationship, and I have to say, faced with the same evidence I’d think that too. But it wasn’t so. I could look after myself. I’d always made sure of that, since James was beaten to death. With much effort, I refocused on the present, meeting Adam’s worried gaze.

“How do I scare you?” he asked.

“Just your impulsiveness. I never know what you’re going to do from one minute to the next. Like when you left this afternoon? I was so frightened if I didn’t find you quickly enough you’d have made the decision to leave.”

I saw pain on his face, the reflection of my own. He lifted his hand and pressed my palm to his lips, kissing it once. He shook his head.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Slowly he rose to his feet, jiggled one leg and then the other to thwart pins and needles, and held out his hands to me. I took them and he pulled me into his arms. “I missed you,” he said.

“I missed you too.”

“What I said before you left, about getting married? I meant it. I do think we should, but when you’re ready.”

I nodded. “What happened to not being the committing type?”

“You were still with Elise. I was trying to offer you a no-strings package.”

A no-strings package. Huh.

"I like the package just as it comes, thanks," I teased. Adam smiled and kissed me, the lightest touch of his lips to mine.

"Say the word, and I'll propose properly."

"How will I know you're not just after getting your mouth around my dick?"

"I can do that while I'm down there, if you like."

I laughed. "Gee, you're so romantic!"

"Yep. Like I said, I'm the love of your life."

My mind did a quick scan of the facts, bringing up records for my review. Before Adam, I could honestly say that the only ones who'd really meant anything to me were Elise and James. There he was again, and that gut-wrenching pain that went with the memory of him. Adam was studying me.

"What's on your mind?"

I blinked to clear a path through the shambles of thoughts and memories. "Someone I need to tell you about."

Adam's shoulders sagged in defeat.

"No. Someone from... my old life."

"You loved him very much," he observed. I nodded, feeling tears spring up from nowhere. I buried my face in his shoulder, trying to pull it back together. I wasn't a crying kind of guy. Really. Reminding myself of that helped get it under control again. I cleared my throat.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize."

"I feel like I'm betraying you every time I think of him."

"You're allowed to have a life before me, and you loved him. How is that betraying me?"

"Because I love you."

Amazing. We build that phrase up into something so grand and meaningful, spend so much time practicing the announcement, that when it comes to the crunch it's almost impossible to push out the words. And it had fallen right out of my mouth, just like that.

Adam put his arms right around me and squeezed until I had to flex my shoulders to stop him from crushing me.

“Ow! What’s that for?”

“I’ve been holding off saying it, in case it was too soon.”

I moved back so I could look at him. “It’s not too soon.”

“In that case, I love you, handsome.”

I felt myself grinning, a big stupid grin.

“So that means—” Adam tapped his finger against his lips and studied the ceiling, hamming up thinking about it. “I’m actually the love of your *new* life.”

I shoved him away. “You can be such an ass sometimes.”

\*\*\*\*\*

We went to bed together—so far so good. Oh, all right, I’d only made it as far as sitting on the edge of the mattress, where I was taking great care to ensure my phone was set to silent. From behind me came a cough to draw my attention. Nothing else to delay, I shuffled down under the covers, cuddled up, felt him harden against my thigh, and made a mental note to make it up to him, because right at that moment I had nothing to offer in return. He held me tight, his fingers firmly locked together so that his arms formed a complete loop around me, presumably so I couldn’t run away again. Silly as I felt, I was quite sure if he released me that’s exactly what I’d do. No words passed between us in that amber-lit peace, yet I sensed him waiting. Quietly, *patiently* waiting, for the explanation I’d promised him back at the start of this fast and furious love affair of ours.

And so I began to recount my relationship with James, how he’d been killed while I was away at university, that I’d returned home for his funeral. I kept everything simple and factual, because I couldn’t say out loud how it made me feel. Not yet. Adam asked for no more than I gave—I was so grateful for that—and for a long time after, we lay there, just holding each other, kissing occasionally. I was so tired, but sleep eluded me. At three a.m. Adam rolled onto his side to face me.

“Is this about James too?” he asked.

That was it. The dam broke, a tsunami of grief surging from me, unrelenting, swell upon swell, engulfing my every shoreline, obliterating my carefully constructed defenses, until all that was left was an ocean of nothing,

and in the middle of all that blackness was me, treading water, exhausted, clinging to a fragile life raft, a remnant of the past. I cried till my throat was raw from trying to swallow the memory of the last time I broke down, almost eleven years ago—I'd been through some crap, with Donny, with Cal, and more recently with Elise, but none of them had brought me to this. Not even when I thought Cal had broken my heart, which he hadn't. It was already broken.

Adam was right. He was the love of my *new* life, a lighthouse I had seen in the distance, the place I needed to get to, to start over, begin again.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Sixteen

“Did they go to prison?”

Our plane lurched to a stop. The safety belt lights went off. I unclipped myself, delaying answering the question Adam had wanted to ask since I told him about James.

“No.”

I got up and retrieved my jacket from the overhead compartment. Adam did the same.

“They were never identified,” I said, keeping my eyes averted.

“But you know who they are.” It was a statement, and a correct one at that. I turned and looked him in the eye.

“It’s ancient history.”

\*\*\*\*

The English late spring air was the purest tonic, filtering through my lungs, into my blood stream, replenishing, oxygenating, invigorating. We rented a car from Heathrow, cleared the M25 and were soon on our way up the A12 to Norfolk, to visit Adam’s family. Two weeks in the UK, the second of which would be spent with my parents, but was I going to let it get me down?

OK, maybe I was a little. I was dreading it, to tell the truth, but it was still a week away, so I pushed it to the back of my mind. I was really looking forward to meeting Adam’s mum and dad, and his kid brother and sister, not that he’d told me much about them, other than that they were pretty laid-back and were eager to meet me too.

It was early evening by the time we turned off the main road and headed cross-country, weaving our way along winding lanes, slowing to pass through villages consisting of little more than a couple of houses and a pub. Having grown up in the Yorkshire dales, I was well used to driving roads like these, except I wasn’t the one doing the driving, and Adam had only visited twice since his parents moved from the city to “the sticks.” Needless to say, I was playing the backseat driver role to perfection, ordering him to brake when he was, allegedly, already braking, pointing out hazards he claimed he’d already seen, and pre-empting the GPS.

“Would you please shut the fuck up!” Adam growled, taking a bend like a left elbow at forty.

“Only if you slow the fuck down,” I snarled back. He slammed on the brakes, throwing me forward violently, pulled into a turning point and got out.

“There! It’s all yours,” he said, yanking the passenger door open and storming off along the scrub at the side of the narrow road. He stopped, unzipped his jeans, took a piss. I got out and climbed in the driver’s seat. He returned, glowering, saying not a word. Seatbelts fastened, we set off again. I doubt we’d even covered as much as five miles when he started fidgeting. I ignored it, focusing on the stuffy English voice of the GPS as “she” commanded, “At the roundabout, take the third exit.” I signaled right, entered the roundabout and passed the first exit. Adam reached across and flicked the indicator arm. I flicked it back again and completed a full circuit of the roundabout, sailing right past our exit. Petty? You bet!

Next time around I continued on our route as directed by heavenly bodies, the screen showing we had just three miles to go. Two miles. One mile.

“Your destination is on the left.”

I peered across the empty field, aware of Adam’s smug expression in my peripheral vision.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“They live in a field?”

“Nope.” He laughed. Bastard.

I peered at the tiny display, trying to make sense of the road layout displayed there, comparing it to the view through the windshield. It kind of looked the same, other than there being a whole lot more houses than on the map.

“Try the next right,” Adam suggested helpfully, with a light sprinkling of know-it-all. I did so, and almost grounded the car as it dove into a crater-sized hole in the road. We powered on through, rising out the other side, the new houses still on our right, up ahead of us a big old farmhouse.

“You have reached your destination,” quoth she-in-the-box on the dash.

“Have we?” I asked—not her. Adam.

“Yep.”

He unclipped his seatbelt, waited for the car to stop and leaned over to kiss me. He grinned.

“Sorry,” he said, “but you were being such a pain in the arse.”

“Me? Are you kidding?”

He shut me up with another kiss, just as a woman emerged from the gate of the ancient farmhouse. At least I assumed it was a woman, but I was suddenly blinded by a flashlight of about a thousand watts beaming into the car.

“Who’s that?” a voice called from Somewhere Beyond. “Who goes there?”

Speaking out the side of my mouth, I said, “You did tell them we were coming, didn’t you?”

“I did, yeah,” Adam confirmed. He slung open the door, almost hitting the woman with it. “Lay off, Mum,” he said.

I watched, or attempted to through my scorched eyeballs, as they embraced each other in a tight bear hug. Their conversation was mumbled, as if I wasn’t supposed to be able to hear it.

“You got yourself a real hottie there,” Adam’s mum said. Her New Zealand accent was really very strong.

“You know mums aren’t supposed to say things like that?”

“I’ve got eyes, haven’t I?” She released him and waddled round to meet me as I got out of the car. She was a big woman—large breasts, wide hips, tall, curvy and beautiful.

“You must be Solly,” she said, extending her hand and using first contact to haul me in for one of those bone-crusher hugs, squeezing the breath right out of me, meaning I didn’t get to protest that, with the exception of my mother, sister and James, people usually called me Sol. She released me—almost—grabbing Adam’s arm with her free hand and leading us toward the house.

“I’m Maddy, by the way,” she explained to me, then to Adam, “Dad’s at the pub.”

“Great,” he said dryly, with a doleful glance my way.

“I’m bloody not!” a voice hollered from behind us. I turned, saw a hefty, dark-skinned man storming in our direction. He walked right up to me and slapped me hard on the back. I just about held my ground. “Warren,” he said. “Good to meet you, mate.” That enormous hand came swooping down in front of me, gripped my own lesser hand and near shook my arm out of its socket.

“Sol, and likewise,” I managed to utter. Warren released me, turning his attention on Adam. The man oozed testosterone. Like father, like...

“Son,” he said, throwing his arms around him in much the same way Maddy had done. I watched, completely enthralled by the whole display. Adam’s parents were both huge, towering over the pair of us, and at six one and six two we weren’t exactly shortstops. Before I knew it, I was being carried to the house by the force of Maddy’s grip around my arm, soon thereafter getting ambushed, first by an enormous German Shepherd who answered to both Suky and “noisy bitch,” and then by Noah and Lily, Adam’s younger brother and sister. Noah was eighteen, the same build as Adam, but looked nothing like him; Lily was the image of him, though a good six inches shorter. There again, she was only fourteen. She’d probably be six foot ten before she was done.

“A stubby, mate?” Warren thrust a small green bottle of beer into my hand.

“Err, yeah. Thanks.”

“So you’re Adam’s boyfriend?” Lily asked. She sat on my knee!

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

“Cool,” she said.

Yeah, I’d have to agree.

“Noah’s gay too,” she declared.

Noah turned red. I gave him a quick smile of understanding.

“Do you think it runs in families?” That was Lily again.

I shrugged.

“Give it a rest, love,” Maddy appealed on my behalf. I peered through the gathered crowd of Ashtons assorted to watch Adam on his hands and knees, with Suky pouncing at him and tearing around in circles. He glanced up at me and smiled.

Only then did it dawn on me that these crazy people were my in-laws.

My in-laws.

Totally never saw that coming.

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I awoke the next morning to discover I couldn’t move my arms. I lifted my head to try and establish the cause of my immobility, getting a large slobbery lick on the chops for my troubles.

“Hey, Suky,” I said. She crawled even further up the bed and batted at Adam with a big heavy paw until he awoke. He rolled over to face me, the dog giving his face a good wash.

“Good morning.” His voice was husky with sleep, and he was smiling. Wow, this felt so incredible, other than the large, hairy prophylactic coming between us.

“Off you get, Suke,” Adam said. She wasn’t happy about it, but she did as he told her. Adam scooted closer, wriggling until his morning wood made contact with mine.

“Cute name for a massive, scary dog,” I remarked, my hips starting to move all by themselves.

“Scary? She’s a big softy!”

I heard her grumble and peered over Adam, laughing at the sight of that big nose resting on the edge of the bed, huge brown eyes staring up at me. She let out a heavy breath that sounded like a sigh.

“I feel guilty now,” I said.

“Don’t. It’s all a cunning ploy for sympathy.” Adam put his arms around me and pulled me on top of him.

“Are we really going to do this in your parents’ house?” I asked. And of course I was resisting his moves. Hm—true for about three seconds. I lowered my lips to his.

“Thick walls,” he murmured. We settled into a gentle rocking rhythm, sliding together easily. He smelled so good I could’ve got off on that alone, but if we came like this we were going to have some serious cleaning up to do. With difficulty, I moved away. Adam groaned.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m not.” I shuffled on my knees and lay down again, next to him, but facing the opposite way.

“Ah,” he said, figuring what I was up to. He moved down the bed to give me legroom, his big hot hands on my ass. I smiled, my teeth touching the head of his dick at the same time as the heat wrapped around mine. I mimicked his movements, circling my tongue around the drawn foreskin, closing my lips around the head, poking the tip of my tongue into the slit. He tasted fantastic—salty, metallic, familiar. He took me deeper into his mouth. I did the same. He

sucked. I sucked. I started swaying, pushing deeper still. He matched my moves, grunting approvingly as I rested one hand on his buttock, while the other fondled his balls. His hands roamed, found my hole, a place he had yet to visit. I lifted my topmost leg to grant him access. He wet his fingers and slowly worked his way in, taking great care not to push me, though I was kind of past caring, with his dick filling my mouth, mine filling his. I found myself torn between the two sensations, but as I thrust forward he stayed with me, working me expertly with the tip of his finger. I heard a low guttural groan, realized it was coming from me, and tried to pull back to warn him of the imminent explosion, my grip tightening on his balls as the sensation soared through me, taking me over. I fought to keep my lips closed around him, needing this to be as good for him as it was for me. He increased his tempo, the first spurt hitting the back of my throat, subsequent ones not quite so powerful, pooling on my tongue. I swallowed and kept him in my mouth, gently easing back, still reveling in the taste of him.

He released me, and I somehow crawled back up the bed to join him. We shared the deepest kiss, the lingering taste of ourselves on each other, mingling, merging into one. It was glorious, and wonderful, and I loved him.

I really did. I loved my Captain Impatient.

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“Laidback” turned out to be something of an understatement. When we finally made it downstairs just before midday, with Suky racing ahead of us and barking excitedly, it was to a kitchen full of Ashtons, eating toast, slurping tea and reading various publications. Lily was scrolling through social network stuff on her phone. Noah was reading a real book—for college, he said, though it looked a lot like trashy fiction to me. Across the farmhouse kitchen table, Warren and Maddy were sharing a disheveled heap of Sunday newspapers.

“G’day,” Maddy greeted us. She got up and gave us each a kiss on the cheek. “You boys want some brekkie?”

“Please, Mum,” Adam said.

*Boys.* That amused me. Adam noticed me smiling and gave me a puzzled look. In daylight, Maddy didn’t look much older than we were and possibly would have appreciated the compliment of my saying so, but I was treading carefully, trying to make a good impression. Until that point, Lily hadn’t noticed us, and when she did, she bounded to her feet, hugging me tightly around the middle. Adam tutted.

“Get off, you,” he said, nudging her playfully. She released me and grinned.

“If you ever change your mind about being...”

“Delilah!” Warren cut her off without lifting his eyes from the paper. Sulkily, Lily returned to her seat. I had wondered about her name—guess Mr. and Mrs. A. had a thing for the Old Testament.

“Sit down. You’re making the place look untidy,” Maddy said, pulling out a chair for me and removing the clean but unfolded laundry from it. Adam was left to fend for himself. He and Noah exchanged a look. I tried not to laugh. The place *was* untidy, but it was... charming. I couldn’t believe I’d thought it, but there was no other word. My family was nothing like Adam’s, with their hugs and kisses, and their old house full of clutter. I liked it. A lot.

Maddy brought across a plate stacked high with thick-cut buttered toast, placing it in front of us. Oh well, I thought. I suppose a few days of carbs wouldn’t matter that much.

“Tuck in,” she encouraged. I lifted the top slice from the pile and took a big bite. Melted butter ran down my chin. I think I maybe melted a little too. It was divine. Adam was watching me. He licked his lips, and I blushed.

“Yip,” Warren said with a sigh, still reading the paper. I wiped the butter from my chin, taking a moment to observe him. I could see where Adam’s coloring came from: his father was very dark, with a broad nose and thick lips. I guessed he was part Māori. He folded the paper and sat back, resting his big hands on his chunky denim-clad thighs. “Lily, go and sort the chooks, will ya, darlin’?”

“Why me?”

“I did them yesterday,” Noah remarked pointedly.

“Yeah, but Adam’s here now. He could do them.”

“Do as you’re told,” Warren scolded lightly, his tone still peaceable.

“It’s OK. I’ll do it,” Adam said. “I wanted to show Sol around after breakfast anyway.”

“Your call, son.” Warren got up, pausing to kiss his wife on his way past.

“Chooks?” I asked.

“Chickens,” Adam explained. I nodded in understanding. Why wouldn’t they have chickens? They lived in a farmhouse.

I finished off my fourth round of toast and decided to leave it at that, completely stuffed and feeling like a million bucks. I picked up the empty cups and plate to take them to the sink, but Maddy shooed me away, so I followed Adam outside, leaving Lily to help her mother. Noah had departed a few minutes before and was standing in the middle of the yard, talking on his phone, chickens everywhere, pecking at the ground and strutting their stuff. A cockerel preened himself on top of the gatepost. Noah gave us a nervous smile and walked off into the expanse of long grass running alongside the house. Adam beckoned to me, and we stepped inside the hot, stinky hen coup, where two birds sat, one up, one down, on the hay-littered shelves running the length of one wall.

“What does sorting the chooks involve, exactly?” I asked.

“Collecting the eggs, a quick disinfect and throw some corn around.”

“Sounds easy enough.” I peered up and along the top shelf, where a white hen roosted alone. I think she was watching me.

“Be careful with Betty.” Adam nodded at the white hen. “She’s a bit narky.”

Narky. I hadn’t heard that word in a long time. I heeded his warning and took the box he offered, leaving him to brush and disinfect the concrete floor, while I set about collecting the eggs. I started at the opposite end of the shelf to Betty, gently lifting each of the warm, shitty eggs and setting them in the box. As I moved along, Betty clucked and fussed, the volume and frequency of her *puck-puck* rising the nearer I got. There were just two eggs left, right next to her. I edged closer. She clucked. I slid my hand along the shelf, secured the first egg, put it in the box. Feeling brave, I reached for the second egg. Betty pecked me sharply on the back of the hand, drawing blood.

“Fuck!” I said, quickly withdrawing. Betty fluttered her feathers and settled down again. Can chooks be smug? Because she was certainly looking pretty bloody smug to me. Adam was laughing hard, and I had to admit it was kind of funny, even if I was bleeding.

“I should’ve made you do it,” I said. “I mean, you had Elise eating out of your hand.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he objected humbly, but it was the truth. He was a charmer, and I was completely under his spell.

After we’d finished with the chooks, we left the eggs with Adam’s mum and headed out across the fields with Suky, Adam giving me a brief history of

his family's present home as we walked. The farmhouse, yard and meadow were once part of a large farm, the surrounding land bought and filled with new houses long before the Ashtons moved there. The house had been built in the 1700s and was a grade II listed building, although only the chimney stack and the north-facing wall of the original house remained. The rest had been rebuilt and extended at various times in the interceding centuries, making for a unique and strangely beautiful property that would have given my ex-mother-in-law spasms.

We walked for a couple of hours, along footpaths, over stiles, through fields of cattle and sheep, pausing to watch a narrowboat pass by on the Norfolk Broads. I'd never seen them before, and this was a vast waterway, nothing like the narrow, meandering canal that ran near my hometown.

On the way back, Adam pre-empted my question about Maddy being very young-looking.

"Mum was only sixteen when she had me," he explained. "Dad's fifteen years older. They ran away to London when Mum was pregnant."

"Wow. That was brave."

"Yeah. They didn't have visas."

"Illegal immigrants?"

Adam grimaced.

"They've got citizenship now, though, I take it?"

Adam grimaced some more.

"Oh."

"Hm," he said. "They're not married either."

"But he is your biological father?"

"Can't you tell?"

"Well, yeah." I laughed. It was so obvious to look at Adam, with his thick dark hair and sexy olive skin. I tried not to think too hard about it, because that's what was going down. Or, should I say, going up.

"My grandma was Māori," Adam said, dragging me away from the image in my mind of him naked, lying on top of me. I nodded in understanding, and listened as he set off talking about his extended family. I wondered if he'd wanted to tell me about his parents before and felt unable to, because now he

was on a roll—man, that voice! His accent was stronger than ever, adding another layer to the rich velvety chocolate—he could've been reading the finance report and I'd have been equally rapt.

We arrived back at the house and ate a Great British Sunday roast, minus the Yorkshire puddings, as we were having chicken, not beef. It was delicious, but I was finding it quite a trial, what with the chooks strutting and pecking just outside the window. After dinner, we went up to our room and napped, because we could, then visited the pub with Warren and Maddy, followed by an early night and more silent sex.

That was pretty much how we spent the week—late breakfasts, long walks with Suky, family dinners, during which Noah hardly said a word, and Lily hardly shut up. She was great fun though, for all that her attentiveness toward me could be inappropriate.

On Friday morning, only Noah was home and was surprisingly chatty with no one else around. Adam took Suky for a walk, leaving me to check through my work email, while Noah sat across the table, typing at speed on his laptop. When he reached a pause he sat back and watched me, waiting until I looked up.

“You’re not gonna hurt him, are you?” he asked.

“I don’t plan to.”

Noah correctly interpreted my frown as a sign that I had no idea why he was seeking assurance on his older brother’s behalf.

“He didn’t tell you about Bobby?”

“No.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He was right about that, and while I was curious, I could see he felt really uncomfortable about letting the cat part way out of the bag.

“I love Adam. I won’t hurt him, I promise.”

Noah nodded and gave me a quick, nervous smile. “Thanks. He’s a good brother.”

“He’s a good boyfriend, too.”

“Yeah. T-M-I.” Noah grinned and for a moment he looked just like Adam. He got up and gave me a playful punch in the arm. “Off to college, see you later.”

“See you. Have a good day,” I said. I relaxed into the chair, listening to the wind gently rustling the trees, punctuated by the intermittent crow of the rooster standing on the gatepost across the yard. No noise of traffic, air con, people—wonderful, perfect peace. As I watched, Adam came back through the gate, waved to me through the window and smiled that lopsided smile. I was surely in heaven.

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Our last day with Adam's family: it was raining, on and off, with flashes of bright sunshine between the showers. Warren scowled at the gray sky through the droplet covered pane.

“Wither's bloody tirrible,” he complained. Everyone else nodded in silent agreement, other than me. I thought the “wither” was perfect, considering a few hours from now we'd be trawling up north for a week of torturous hell with my parents—the more drab and dreary the better as far as I was concerned. Claire had promised to come visit at some point, thankfully. She always could stand up to them better than I could.

“Yip,” Warren said, followed by the gasped little sigh that was his trademark. “We're going back to Auckland before the winter.”

Adam's head slowly rotated until he was looking his father in the eye. His face was a picture, and I was dying to laugh. I guess impulsivity was as much in their genes as their dark, rugged handsomeness.

“Are you serious, Dad?”

Warren didn't answer, but his expression said it all.

“What are you gonna do with this place?”

“Dunno yet.”

“I'm not moving to New Zealand,” Noah chipped in. “I'm starting uni in September.”

“Stay here then,” Warren said. He got up and left. That was another of his little foibles. Noah raised his hands in despair.

“Where exactly am I supposed to live?”

“In halls?” Adam suggested.

“I'm only going to Norwich. I was gonna stay here.”

“Tough,” Maddy told him. “You won't be able to afford the rent on this place.”

“Maybe Adam and Sol could come and live here,” Lily said.

Adam laughed. “Yeah, right. As if that’s gonna happen.”

Yeah, right. As if!

But Lily had got me thinking. What if it did happen? OK, engineering jobs in England were few and far between, but I didn’t have to work in engineering. Hell, I’d work the local supermarket checkout if it meant being here with Adam, in this big old house. I had to smile at my brain’s default choice of a make-do job. Who would’ve guessed you could find the love of your life, correction, the love of your *new* life, in the checkout line?

See, I was starting to realize that it wasn’t really impatience Adam suffered from. In fact, he didn’t suffer at all. All those decisions we spend forever agonizing over, only to go and do what we’d have done if it had been a snap decision? Adam, and his parents too, simply cut out the middle man, jumped right in with eyes open and to hell with the consequences. It was very liberating.

“I think we should go for it,” I said.

“What?” Adam looked at me in amazement.

“Why not?” I shrugged. “Noah could stay here. You could probably get work at the uni.”

“What will you do?”

“Work at Tesco? Tend chooks? I don’t care.”

“That’s, err...” Adam narrowed his eyes. “That’s a little impulsive, don’t you think?”

“Yip,” I said, following it up with one of Warren’s little sighs, which made them all laugh.

Adam continued to gaze at me—I chose to interpret it as adoration, though I suspect he was waiting for me to reveal it was all a big joke on him. I kept on smiling. I couldn’t help it.

“OK,” he said, finally. “Let’s do it.”

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seventeen

The minute we walked in the goddamned door. She didn't even wait for it to close.

I won't lie. I was expecting trouble. I gave my mother a kiss on the cheek and a swift, generally insincere, hug. Adam was directly behind me. She eyed him up and down like she was trying to identify his species.

"This is Adam," I introduced.

She nodded curtly, glanced down at our feet, said, "Shoes off, if you wouldn't mind. I've only just had the carpets cleaned." She turned away. "Make sure that door's shut properly, Solomon, please."

Stuffy, English pseudo-middle-class household that ours was, she'd never insisted on the removal of footwear before. She was disarming us, and would no doubt be complaining about the smelly feet next. Adam and I dutifully kicked off our shoes, pairing them neatly against the wall. He rubbed my arm and gave me a wink in reassurance.

"Would you like a coffee?" my mother called from the kitchen.

"Yes, please," I responded.

"That would be lovely, thank you, Mrs. Brooks," said Adam.

"How do you take it?"

"Just milk, thanks."

Silence. We stood in the hallway, not sure what to do.

"Oh, Solomon." My mother's voice was steeped in exasperation. "Take Adam through to the lounge."

I did that. We entered. New suite. Very nice. And clean. Hardly used. Such a stark contrast to Maddy and Warren's place, with its saggy sofa and muddy floors, peeling paintwork, pans hanging from the rafters, chooks...

"Here we are," my mother said, placing the two floral china mugs on silver plated coasters. When Americans think of "England," this is precisely what they imagine. I swear my mother wasn't as bad when I was younger, though. She left the room again. I realized I'd sighed heavily. Adam took my hand in his.

"It's fine," he assured me. I nodded, perhaps hoping that by agreeing with him it would make it true. My mother returned.

"So, Adam." She perched uneasily on the edge of the armchair, smiled, tried to ignore our hand-holding. And failed. "What is it that you do?"

"I'm a teacher," Adam said.

"Oh." She nodded approvingly. "What do you teach?"

"Performing arts. I teach at Emerson College."

"Not at Harvard University?"

"No. I was offered a position there, but I decided to go with Emerson. I like the atmosphere."

My mother was suitably impressed, as was I. Adam hadn't told me he'd been offered a job at Harvard. There again, I'd never asked.

"Do you work, Mrs. Brooks?" he asked.

"Please, call me Betty."

Adam still had hold of my hand, and he squeezed, really, *really* hard. I probably should've prepared him for that one, but it was too good a comedy opportunity to miss—that my mother shared her name with Psycho Chook.

"Betty," he repeated, with difficulty. I was trying, and only just succeeding, to contain the giggles.

"I don't work, Adam, no. Solomon's father is a senior engineer on one of the biggest oil rigs in the North Sea."

"Oh, right," Adam acknowledged tightly. I could feel the tension running right through him, and it made me worse.

"I'm just..." Helplessly, I pointed at the stairs and made a run for it, clearing them two at a time and leaning back against the bathroom door with my hands over my face, tears streaming from my eyes. Below me the conversation continued. Actually for conversation, read "interrogation," because in a previous existence my mother definitely worked for the Gestapo. I wanted to go and rescue Adam, I really did, but I could not for the life of me get the giggles under control. It was nerves, not that it helped any to recognize why I was tittering like a schoolgirl, though I did manage to pause momentarily at the sound of the doorbell.

“Oh. One moment,” my mother said. I listened to her open the door. “I didn’t think you were coming until Tuesday.”

Hm. Someone she was expecting. I kept listening. The door closed.

“Hi. You must be Adam.”

Claire. Thank the Lord for great big and very welcome mercies. I flushed the unused loo and legged it downstairs, slowing as I reached the hallway. Adam was on his feet, smiling and shaking my sister by the hand.

“Claire, I presume?”

“That’s right. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“You too.”

“Ahem.” That was me. Claire pirouetted to face me.

“Grunt!” she squealed and came running at me. My sister was petite and jumped into my arms, lifting her feet from the floor.

“Hey, you,” I said, holding her tight for a moment, and then lowering her back to the ground. “You’re looking great.”

“Thanks. So are you. I’ve really missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. You’ve met Adam?”

“Oh yeah,” she said with a wicked grin. She had her back to the others and mouthed silently at me, “He’s gorgeous.”

“He is,” I agreed. Arm in arm, we rejoined Mum and Adam.

“They’ve always been just the same,” my mother told him, with her gaze on Claire and me. It was true. We’d never fought, not even as kids. Well, there was just the one fight, over me marrying Elise, but that was all done with now. I sat down next to Adam, Claire on my other side, both of them holding my hands. My mother eyed us in disdain. Such terrible, conspiratorial offspring.

“I’ve put you in your old room, Solomon, and Adam in the spare room.”

Claire fielded that one on my behalf.

“Mum! Why have you put them in separate rooms?” Before my mother even drew breath to answer, Claire continued, “You let John share with me.”

“Yes, but you’re getting married.”

“How do you know Solly and Adam aren’t getting married?”

“Oh, Claire, don't be pedantic.”

“Did you ask them?”

“It's fine,” I interjected. I didn't want an argument. “We'll get a room somewhere.”

“Where?” My mother's tone was brusque. “This isn't Boston, Solomon.”

Yeah, I'd kind of noticed, Mother.

Aside from the lack of hospital, supermarket, sports centre and high school, our hometown possessed just one bed and breakfast, predominantly used by the local council for emergency housing, and then there were the rooms over the King's Head pub, an establishment owned by Mr. and Mrs. Coolican, aka mother and father of the late James Coolican, aka my first boyfriend, beaten to death at the tender age of twenty by ignorant bigoted fuckwits while on his way home from a night out with friends. Going to stay at the King's Head was deliberately walking into my own personal hell, but I'd rather take that any day than fight my mother over sharing a room with Adam.

“I'm sorry,” she said, “but I... I can't.”

For what it was worth, she did sound genuinely sorry. I nodded and smiled sadly.

“I know, Mum.”

I just had to keep in perspective that the last time I made her face up to who I was, she'd ranted about Freddie Mercury and AIDS. This time she was meeting me halfway. We were here and she was making an effort with Adam. So, the only other obstacle now was my father.

“When's Dad home?” I asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“OK. We'll go and get booked in somewhere, come back tomorrow.”

“Won't you stay for dinner?”

We stayed for dinner. It was... well, it was awkward, to say the least. Adam and Claire chattered like they'd known each other forever, leaving me at my mother's mercy.

“How's Elise?”

“Fine, last time I saw her.”

“Is she still a solicitor?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Oh, Solomon. We use the Queen’s English here.”

Huh.

“Well, Mother, in the United States of America, one does not refer to those who practice law as solicitors. Indeed, one would imagine that one’s ex-wife is in a position akin to that of a barrister in English law.”

My mother glared at me. Claire kicked me under the table. Adam fidgeted uncomfortably. I stuffed a large piece of cod fillet in my mouth, swallowed, followed by another, and another, endeavoring to clear my plate as quickly as was possible without choking to death. The food, I’m sure, was delicious, but I couldn’t stand being there any longer. When everyone else caught up, Claire and I washed the dishes, returning to the living room, where my mother was once again perched on the chair, telling Adam all about my father’s job. I waited for her to finish and nodded at Adam.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He stood up, as did my mother. As she moved toward the door to see us out, I intercepted and gave her a hug. She looked taken aback—understandably, as I don’t think we’d properly hugged since I was about eight years old.

“See you tomorrow,” I said. While Adam and my mother shared a clumsy mix of handshake and embrace, I hugged my sister tightly. “In a bit, Claire Bear.”

“Later, Grunty,” she said. She gave Adam a big hug.

“Grunty?” he queried.

“It’s not a very exciting story.” She squeezed his hands and released him, nodding and smiling with that look that is approval and warning all in one. That’s my little Claire Bear, always looking out for me.

We said our goodbyes, put our shoes back on—duly noting Claire didn’t have to remove hers—and went out to the car.

“Grunty?” Adam asked again once the doors were closed. I waved at my mother and sister. They waved back briefly and returned inside.

“Solomon Grundy,” I said.

“Huh?”

“You’ve not heard the nursery rhyme about Solomon Grundy?”

“Nope. Can’t say I have.”

“Solomon Grundy, born on a Monday... which I was.”

“You were named after a nursery rhyme character?”

“It’s no different to you all being named after people in the bible.”

“Fair comment.”

I was glad he’d agreed. I hated being named after Solomon Grundy. Like tempting fate—died on Saturday, buried on Sunday—kind of put a damper on weekends.

“Well, anyway,” I said, concluding the point, “Claire thought it was Solomon Grunty and it stuck.”

Adam grinned. “It’s a good fit.”

“Don’t!”

“I mean, you do kind of grunt when we’re...”

“Adam, seriously.” I was trying to be cross, and failing miserably.

“Don’t I get a pet name yet?”

I faced straight ahead.

“It’ll make up for you not warning me your mum shares her name with the queen of the roost.”

That revived our earlier giggling, and we continued to do so until we neared the King’s Head, at which point my stomach landed in my shoes. I pulled into a parking space and stopped the engine.

“You OK?” Adam asked. I nodded and gave him what I hoped was a carefree smile. I could see he didn’t believe me. “You’ve gone a funny color,” he observed.

“I’m all right,” I said. We got out of the car and went inside. James’s mum was behind the bar. I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Hello, stranger!” She greeted me with a big, happy smile.

“Hi, Mrs. Coolican,” I replied. It was a major effort to sound casual. She laughed gently.

“Mrs. Coolican? That’s very formal. It’s Yvonne to you.”

Until then I hadn’t even known her first name—she was just “James’s mum” or “Mrs. Coolican”—landlady of the King’s Head.

“Are you here on holiday?” she asked.

“We are, although we’re thinking of moving back soon.”

Interesting. I really didn’t know James’s mum—Yvonne—that well. Other than his funeral, we’d only ever shared a polite “hello,” so quite why I’d told her our plans, when I hadn’t so much as mentioned them to Claire or my mother, I had no idea.

“Back here?” Yvonne asked. I could tell by her tone she didn’t think it likely.

“Norfolk.”

“Oh, right. I was going to say—there’s not much of anything here these days.” Momentarily her eyes became glassy. She switched back. “All the businesses are moving out—there’s only this place, the B and B and the post office left, and they’re looking to close that down at some point.”

The post office. Lots of happy memories for me there—going with my mum and sister to post letters to my dad out on the rigs. It was how we got through the winter months, when the weather was bad. Sometimes he wouldn’t get our letters until he came back to shore on his way home, because the sea was too rough for transport to get out, but we kept writing them anyway. These days Mum stayed in touch with him through email. I hadn’t written him in years and the thought made me nostalgic for those trips to the post office, leaving our letters with “Aunty Pam” and then departing with our little paper bags of strawberry laces and jelly teddies.

“That’s a shame,” I thought aloud. Adam and Yvonne were both frowning at me. “The post office,” I explained. Adam tutted.

“Do you want a drink?”

I got the feeling he’d already asked me once. I blushed and turned my attention to the ornate brass handpumps along the edge of the battered oak bar.

“Old Brewery Bitter.”

In Norfolk we’d stuck to lager, because Warren had a tab and they kept bringing pints over without us asking. However, like most Yorkshire lads, I was

a bitter drinker at heart. There were a few places in Boston that sold a decent passing imitation, but it was never as good as the real thing—that uniquely warming mix of rich, dark molasses and tangy aftertaste of hops, topped by a three-quarter inch head of thick creamy foam.

“Two pints of bitter?” Yvonne confirmed.

“Yeah, thanks,” Adam said.

I waited for her to start pulling beer into a glass before I made our next request.

“We also need a room, if you’ve got any available?”

“We’ve only got one person in at the moment, so you can take your pick. A twin, is it?”

“Double.”

“Oh!” She quickly glossed over her reaction, but Adam had already seen it and was staring away across the pub, avoiding looking at me.

My nausea continued all the way through booking our room and confirming we wanted breakfast—Full English, of course. We retired to the beer garden with our pints of dark ale, both of us silent for a long time. There were quite a few other people sitting at the picnic tables dotted around the walled off courtyard, and I tuned in to their different conversations, every so often glancing at Adam, deep in thought, spinning his glass between his hands. I had a feeling I knew what was troubling him. I reached across and put my hand on his, granting him permission to speak. He went through a couple of false starts.

“You were in the closet.”

“Apart from when I was at uni.” I closed my eyes, swallowing back the saliva, still not convinced that I wouldn’t throw up all over him. “That was James’s mum,” I explained.

“The landlady?”

I nodded. I wasn’t looking at him, but I knew he was watching me, worrying about me. I glanced up through my eyelashes.

“We could’ve booked into separate rooms, you know,” he said gently, reassuringly.

“No. I’ve got to deal with this. I’ve run away from it long enough.” I looked up again. There were tears in his eyes.

"You're so brave," he said. "And I feel honored to be with you."

I attempted a smile. "You know, that's kind of mushy?"

He blinked a few times and laughed tearily. "Yeah, it is. You've been through so much to get to this point—your parents, Elise, your job, this small town—I'm beginning to appreciate why you pushed me away. I made it even more difficult for you, and for that I'm sorry."

"Hey! Don't start regretting it."

"I don't regret any of it. I only wish I'd understood better. I would've been more patient."

That made me smile for real. I took out my phone. "Call me."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"It'll cost us a fortune."

"I don't care. Call me."

He submitted and pulled up my number on his phone. Mine started to vibrate in my palm.

"So, you were wondering about pet names?" I turned the screen toward him. He squinted to read it, looked up at me, back at the screen, and shook his head. I dismissed the call and put my phone away again, let it sink in awhile.

"Patient?"

"Yeah, though I'll admit I had you down as Captain Impatient at the start."

"That'd be right. What made you change it?"

"Because you *are* patient, in the ways that matter."

"Pushing in at the checkout?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Asking you to move in with me after two weeks?"

"Doesn't matter either."

"Hm." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He'd shaved before we left the farmhouse, so he was all smart and tidy, set to impress my mother. She was easily swayed by such things. I, on the other hand, was looking at the barely visible shadow on his lip and chin, wishing there was a little more stubble there.

I loved the rasping of his whiskers against mine. I shuddered at the thought. It was pure desire running through me. I picked up my pint and downed it in one go.

“I’ll get our things from the car,” I said. His mouth sloped into a lazy smile. I wanted to kiss it, needed to, in fact, so I did, right there in the beer garden—not a full-on, lingering, tongues an’ all kiss, mind you, but still enough to give him a taste of what I had planned. I slowly moved away, noting the flush of color in his cheeks.

“I’ll come give you a hand,” he said.

We took our empty glasses with us, depositing them on our way through.

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I’d seen him, sitting in the corner of the beer garden. I couldn’t believe he’d stuck around, let alone had the nerve to drink in the King’s Head, of all places. I don’t suppose he recognized me. I’d changed a lot—grown taller, bulked out, gained a whole truck full of confidence. But I’d seen him watching Adam and me. And I knew what he’d done.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eighteen

In the past, like many of the old inns across England, the King's Head Hotel had been a traveler's rest. These days, most were owned by large chains, and while they often kept "hotel" in their name, the rooms upstairs were used to accommodate the pub's managers. The King's Head, by contrast, was still a free house, with two floors above the bar: the first, blocked by a fire door marked "Private," was where the Coolicans resided. Our room was situated on the second. It was basic, but clean and well-decorated, with a small cubicle in the corner: a wetroom like those found in trailers, where the toilet and washbasin are effectively within the shower stall. We were at the back of the building, overlooking the beer garden, the sound of chat and clinking glasses floating up through the open window. The cool breeze picked up the scent of the honeysuckle screen, wafting over me as I waited for Adam to finish showering. The pub was next to the parish church, at the highest point of the town, and from where I was sitting, the view as far as the eye could see was of green hills crisscrossed by dry stone walls, and dotted with sheep. It was a beautiful place to visit, not so much to live in. Adam emerged from the "bathroom," and I moved to pass him. He halted me with a hungry kiss, his tongue probing inside my mouth, exploring as if he had never been there before. With difficulty, I pulled away from him.

"Be right back," I said, trailing my hand over the bulge under his towel. I took the quickest shower ever, scrubbing frantically with the facecloth to make sure I was absolutely as clean as I could be for him. He'd waited long enough, and I was ready to let him in.

He lay on the bed, the towel still wrapped around his lower body, still aroused. He watched me approach and reached out to rub his hand over my enduring erection. I could feel the blood pulsing through me, my heart hammering in anticipation. I removed my towel and lay down next to him, leaning over to kiss him, my hand straying down to his nipples. I gently pinched the one closest to me, waited for it to harden, rubbed my fingertip over the nub. I repeated this with the other nipple, slowly trailing my mouth down his chin and neck, running my tongue over the dark chocolate circle, sucking and biting until he gasped. I paused to change position.

"Don't stop," he said breathlessly. I smiled.

"I wasn't going to."

I moved across to the other nipple, my dick now pressed hard against his hip. He pushed one hand down between us to stroke me, the other searching out the lube on the bedside table. He stopped to take the cap off the tube, expecting me to hold out my hand. I shook my head and took the lube from him.

“Are you sure?” he asked. I didn’t reply, waiting for him to tell me how he wanted to do this. He shifted across and patted the bed. I went to lie on my front. Adam took one of the pillows and rolled me onto my back.

“Lift up,” he said. I did, and he put the pillow under my ass. “We’re doing this slowly, OK?”

I nodded, watching him squeeze a huge dollop of lube into his hand. He moved down the bed, leaving a trail of kisses in his wake, stopping to suck me, his arm sliding down between my legs. I bent my knees up and felt the first touch of his hand, smoothing over me, covering me in lube, warm, firm strokes, followed by the gentle prod of a fingertip against my hole.

“Have you ever done this before?” he asked.

“Once.”

He pushed gently. I tried to relax, but I felt under pressure. It was of my own making. He eased off, waiting a moment before he pushed again. It felt good, and I started to open up to him. He continued to move carefully in and out, returning his mouth to mine, as always, just what I needed. His kisses seemed to melt my insides, as if nothing in the world could touch me with his breath filling me, sustaining me. It seemed strange to think about love at a time like this. Sure, we all like to believe we do, but when that animalistic instinct takes over, the only thing driving us is the search for release. At that moment I was somewhere between the two states, completely overwhelmed by how much I loved him, that conscious feeling about to be drowned by the arousal building in my groin. I felt more pressure against my sphincter, knew it was a second finger, and focused on the kiss, pushing my tongue into his mouth at the same moment as I accepted him once again. My cock twitched eagerly. My God, I wanted him, but I bowed to his experience, his... *patience*.

The slow build was a heavenly form of torture. Compared to Donny’s stark, blunt entrance and the excruciating pain that accompanied it, this was bliss. Adam changed position, crouching over me so that he could still kiss me while working me—with three fingers now. We were nearing the point of being in agreement that I was really ready for him to...

I pushed on his chest to lift him from me so I could speak.

“Before this goes too far, I want you to know I love you.”

“You’re not going to die, Sol.”

I laughed. “I didn’t think I would.”

He rolled his eyes and resumed fucking me with his fingers for a little while longer. I’d have lubed him up myself but I was barely functioning outside of the sensation of his touch. He withdrew, applied more lube to both of us and lowered himself between my thighs, the smooth head of his dick pressing against me, a slight burn already beginning.

“When I push, you push too.”

I looked up at him in horror.

“What if I shit?”

He smiled and kissed me, kind of condescendingly. “You won’t,” he said.

How to ruin a moment! I wasn’t a virgin. I knew about these things. No need to panic.

Adam wrapped his hand around me, tugging me, watching my face.

“Better?” he asked. I nodded and lifted my head to capture his lips. He slowly pushed into me, little by little, pausing each time I held my breath. It was so easy, being together like this. I felt no requirement to be anything but what I was. I felt safe, and loved, and as he broke through that final wall of tension, we both groaned aloud, and then laughed about it. From there on, I was kind of out of it, conscious of nothing, beyond the two of us. I recall feeling so full of him, the thought going round and round my mind that he was inside me. Adam. My captain. Making love to me, slowly, gently at first, but each thrust sent him deeper, made me push back harder. His balls were banging against me, the hairs prickling and tickling, stimulating all of my nerve endings at once. My dick was sandwiched between us and that really was enough. I was so close, trying not to cry out even though I was in the most incredible state of pleasure, and pain. Adam was panting, his breath sending shivers running right through my body. He pushed, I relaxed, he pulled, I squeezed. The bed squeaked, I moaned, he grunted, an erotic percussion with an ever-quickening tempo. He was shaking, right on the edge, and that tipped me over too. I grabbed his face with both hands, pulling his mouth down hard to mine, the kiss muting our cries as we soared together, high into the air and came crashing down to earth again.

He pulled out and I grimaced, a little from the pain, though mostly at the immediate sense of loss. I reminded myself that it was the first, not the last time he would make love to me.

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“Hey, handsome.”

I snuggled down under the duvet, refusing to open my eyes. “Hey, Cap’n.”

Adam chuckled and kissed my cheek. “It’s almost nine. We’re gonna miss breakfast.”

“Hm, ’kay.” I rolled onto my side, a minor twinge serving to remind me of the night before. Amazing. Donny Dickless left me crippled for days, and while I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t suffering a little, my wounds were healing nicely.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” Adam goaded, not that he seemed in much of a hurry to get out of the bed either.

“You first,” I said. My mind was drifting, half-asleep still. However, some of me was very much alive and kicking. It was a bad idea. But...

“What are you doing?”

I straddled him, sliding back so that I lifted his dick with my crack, and pushed down. I yowled. Definitely a bad idea. I lifted up again to reposition myself. That was better. I started to rock back and forth. Adam watched me with a slight smirk. I must have been making some really funny faces, trying to keep the momentum when my glutes felt like I’d run a marathon. He lifted his head so he could watch the motion of our dicks rubbing together, one of those big, hot hands now coming into play, his fingers wrapping around us both. I stopped rocking, let him do the work, and what short work he made of it. As I came, I inadvertently tensed and it made me swear. I felt Adam lose focus and reached under my balls to grab his, squeezing gently as he thrust up, his cum mingling with mine as it ran down his hand. I shifted my gaze to meet his, both of us smiling and probably looking just as goofy as each other. But then I remembered what the day had in store. I got up, drawing breath sharply as I staggered to the shower.

“You don’t fancy going for a run then?” Adam called after me.

“Run?” I repeated, sticking my head around the sliding door. “I’m having enough trouble walking!”

“Sorry. I tried to be gentle.”

“You were.”

I showered quickly, as did Adam, both ready for our breakfast—the smell of frying bacon was drifting up from the kitchen, making our bellies rumble. Other than Yvonne and James’s dad (I had a feeling he was also called James—Jimmy), we were the only other people in the pub, which was massive and chilly, citrus furniture polish battling to overthrow the aroma of yesterday’s beer. I felt... weird. I tried to pinpoint why and by the time I did, Yvonne was in front of us with two large plates loaded with bacon, eggs, fat herby sausages, black pudding, fried bread, baked beans—it looked superb. She set down the plates on one of the round bar tables, pulling two sets of cutlery from the pocket of her chef’s apron.

“There you go, lads. Eat up.”

“Thanks, Yvonne,” Adam said, his eyes almost the same size as the enormous yellow yolks of the sunnyside-up eggs. Sunnyside up—like we do them any other way in England! Jimmy followed up with a tray containing a little steel teapot, milk jug and two mugs.

“Thanks,” I echoed, aware that it didn’t sound quite so heartfelt as it was. Still distracted, I sliced the end off a bacon rasher. My appetite was fading. What on earth had possessed me to think staying here was preferable to suffering at my parents’ house, when the last time I’d been inside the King’s Head was for James’s wake? I guess in the end the “where” didn’t matter—I was trying to hide from memories stored inside my head by avoiding physical reminders. There was no escape.

“Sol?”

“Hm?”

I looked across the table, saw Adam’s nearly empty plate, and glanced back at my own, still full apart from the missing end of bacon.

“Eat,” he said.

“Not hungry.”

“I know, but you still need to eat.”

I sighed, somehow choking down the rest of the rasher of bacon and one sausage without prompting.

“A bit more,” he instructed.

I shook my head and put my fork down.

“Don’t make me feed you.”

“As if you would!”

He picked up my fork, scooped some of the beans.

“Here comes the choo-choo...”

“OK!” I grabbed his hand and the fork, and ate the beans. He did it again, and again. It was starting to annoy me, but then I began to feel a little more like myself. He was right. I just needed food. Low blood sugar and dehydration—Adam passed me a mug of tea.

“Better?” he asked.

“Better,” I said.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not here.”

We took our plates to the kitchen door. Yvonne was sitting on a high stool, writing on a thick white pad.

“Everything OK?” she asked.

“Yes, thanks. Delicious.”

She observed the half-full plate and gave us that questioning look mothers have.

“That was me,” I said apologetically.

“You not well, love?”

“Just tired, I think.”

“Oh, heck. Well you take it easy. Got anything nice planned for the day?”

“Going to my parents’ later—my dad’s coming home.”

“I heard he was retiring?”

Did she? From whom?

She looked like she was going to say something else about my parents, but thought better of it. She smiled. “We serve food till nine,” she said. “If you don’t get round to eating elsewhere.”

Well, it was a small town, and everyone stuck their nose into everyone else’s business, but my parents weren’t *that* bad.

“Actually,” Yvonne continued, “you can do me a favor.” She slid off her stool, lifted a hardcover book down from the top of the fridge and passed it across. *Song of Solomon*—hilarious—could be any one of a hundred books with that same title. “Tell your Claire I said thanks. I really enjoyed it.”

I took the book, holding Yvonne’s gaze. *She knew*. I somehow mustered a smile, the fizz of tears rising in my throat. She squeezed my hand and released, glancing past me to Adam. I turned away and followed him, out to the car, fell into the passenger seat. He closed the door. I broke down.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nineteen

Adam drove without direction, through winding country lanes, revving to climb hills, braking hard as we swooped down into valleys, keeping his eyes on the road, maintaining a silent vigil, while I wept, so far into my grief that I was past caring how unmanly it was. After however long—I had no idea, actually—Adam slowed, stopping next to a tattered wooden gate set back from the road. He switched off the engine and turned in his seat to face me. I stared out the windshield, across the fields, watching black and white dairy cows make their cumbersome stop-start expedition in search of lush pasture. I had nothing new to say. I'd told him about James. He would have understood Yvonne's unspoken message as well as I did, so he knew all that I knew. And still I felt like a lead weight was meat-hooked to my soul, ripping and wrenching it down, down, down.

There are always those in our lives we might describe as happy-go-lucky—the sort who take everything in their stride, and could be dragged through hell for all eternity but still keep smiling. Like George. Widowed young, with kids to care for, fighting to keep her house, scrambling her way up the career ladder in a notoriously sexist industry, stamping on the fingers of anyone who dared to try and stop her. She just kept on smiling, and I admired her for that. She was the best boss I'd ever had, my champion. My friend. I, on the other hand, had never been one of those kinds of people, not that I was usually prone to falling apart at nothing more traumatic than an uneaten breakfast. One of my schoolteachers used to call me Solemn Solomon, because I was always so serious. Factual, practical, objective—perfect traits for engineering, and I was quite resilient. So what was this?

Adam reached across and took my hand in his, still without a word. I had sorely misjudged him. So much patience, I felt like I was abusing it with my misery, ruining our trip, when it had been his original intention to go it alone.

*Because he was leaving me.*

The thought set me off on a new round of tears, and his patience finally started to ebb.

“You said you wanted to talk to me,” he said.

“I've told you everything already.”

“Then tell me again.”

“Where do I start?”

“James. Tell me what he was like.”

“He was...” I paused to bring up the image of him in my mind, so I could describe him. I couldn't do it, couldn't find the words to do justice to his memory. I took out my phone and loaded the one and only photo I had of him, from the newspaper report about his death. It was taken a couple of years before the attack, so he must have been about eighteen, gone was the chubby cherub face I had loved to kiss, in its place high cheekbones and a square chin, those blue sky eyes still sparkling with fun and life. He was a beautiful young man—slim and fair with crazy blond hair that was always too long—it used to fall right down over his eyes and would turn the color of caramel during our sessions under the covers, working up a sweat. I came in his hair once, and it dried in rigid toffee stalactites right across his forehead. We tried rinsing it out, but it didn't work. It was around that time he told his parents he was gay—I never asked him why he'd chosen that particular moment to tell them, terrified that they'd spotted his stiff hair and demanded an explanation. But they hadn't known about us back then, or at his funeral.

Adam handed my phone back. “He looks a bit like Bobby,” he said.

“Your brother mentioned him.”

“Did he? What did he tell you?”

“Nothing. He wanted to make sure I wasn't going to hurt you, and once he realized I didn't know about him he said no more.”

“Oh. Well, there's not much to tell. Bobby and I were roommates at uni, along with a couple of others, but we weren't officially an item. I think he saw me as a backup for when he didn't have a boyfriend. We got a place together after we graduated, stayed there until he decided I couldn't give him what he needed and moved out.”

“When was that?”

“Just before I went to Boston.”

“And did he hurt you?”

“He hurt everyone. He had a drug problem, stole stuff from me to pay for it. It reached the point where I had to fit a lock on my room and didn't leave anything where he could get at it. One day he smashed the lock and nicked my laptop. It was brand new and had all of my work on it, my photos, music,

everything. He sold it for fifty quid. I told him I was going to leave if he didn't get help. He did a runner, left me with all the rent to pay."

"What a prick."

"Yeah, he was an idiot, and I should've laid down the law a lot sooner, rather than believing I could help him. But I think he finally got his act together. He sent me a message last Christmas, said he'd been through rehab and was sorry for everything. I ignored it, thought it was more of his usual manipulation—that's how he'd get people to lend him money. Then I got a PayPal notification that he'd sent me a thousand pounds. I replied to say thank you. That's the last I heard from him. Nicely deflected, by the way."

I smiled. "Hey, you mentioned Bobby, not me." I unlocked my phone screen to look at James again. "You said I was brave, but I wasn't. I was a coward. He was the brave one." I ran my thumb over the photo. "Look where it got him." I watched until my phone screen dimmed. It was gone midday and we were due at my parents' place. I locked my phone and put it away. "We'd best make a move."

Adam's eyebrow rose.

"What?" I asked.

He shrugged and started the car. As he reversed, he said, "Given that being openly gay got him beaten to death, I'd say you were being cautious, not cowardly."

"Yeah, well, it's not you with blood on your hands."

"It wasn't your fault, Sol."

"I didn't say it was!" I sounded defensive. He let it go.

We must have been driving round in circles, as we pulled up outside the house less than fifteen minutes later. My father had yet to arrive, my mother was cleaning, and Claire was about to head out to the supermarket for supplies of the alcoholic variety.

"I'll come with you," I suggested, not wanting to be left alone with my mother. Nor was it my intention to abandon Adam, but that's what he assumed.

"You not coming?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I didn't think I was invited."

I tutted, making light of his misunderstanding, but it had resonated on a deeper level.

We drove to the closest supermarket, which in the US would've been considered a local store. By UK standards it was "bloody miles away." As we wandered the aisles, Claire gabbled on about her wedding plans, and I was listening, kind of. Oh, who am I kidding? I didn't hear a word. I was watching Adam, the subtle glances my way to see what I thought of it all. I could feel the pressure mounting, building inside with no outlet. I couldn't stand it anymore.

"I'll wait outside," I said, and made a hasty retreat, pausing only for the automatic doors to slowly swish and let me pass. I kept going, right through the car park, right through the pain, the physical reminder of our love-making and the mental torture both lessening the longer I walked. I traversed the perimeter of the car park, trying to get my head together, an increasingly urgent requirement, as I was almost back at the entrance to the store and could see Adam and Claire queuing at the checkout. She was loading stuff onto the belt, still chattering, and Adam was nodding and smiling, occasionally looking past her, searching for me. He found me, smiled and pointed at the space in front of him, a reference to how we met, how long ago now? Not yet four months—just enough time to get a divorce, to form a habit, to make a complete and full recovery. I heard whining and glanced down: a black and tan puppy, leash tied to a post, tail in a frantic wag, greeting every person that passed by as it waited for its owner. And I thought about Suky, her simple, unconditional love for Adam. How much easier to be a dog than an idiotic, selfish, fucked up human being.

My dad was getting out of his taxi as we arrived back at the house. He looked shattered but relieved to be home. I went over, and took his holdall. He nodded an acknowledgement at me, then at Adam. Claire abandoned the trunkful of beer to give Dad a hug.

"Was the trip back OK?" she asked.

"Fine," he said, and that was all. Later, no doubt, we'd hear all about the adventure of making it back across the choppy North Sea. The occasional news reports of helicopter fatalities made us ever aware of the very real dangers the riggers faced each time they took that trip, and we tried not to think about it. But once Dad had loosened up with a few beers, he'd turn it into a thrilling saga that sounded too far-fetched to be real, of ex-military pilots fighting to keep control of their craft in hundred mile an hour headwinds, swells of up to twenty meters rolling below, the copter being thrown from side to side, pitching thirty feet in a second, rotor blades juddering. It was like reading a scene from a Wilbur Smith novel, and I'd loved those stories when I was young, before I had any understanding of the fragility of life.

I took my father's bag inside, returning to help Adam bring in the crates of beer, not a word passing between us, even when I tripped over the bag, which I'd stupidly left right in our path. We deposited the beer next to my parents and their tight embrace, my mother sniffing against my father's shoulder. Yet more of my doing? Probably, but it wasn't mentioned. We dodged around them and followed Claire out to the garden—marginally more neutral territory than the living room. She'd thought ahead and collected three bottles of beer on her way through. She flicked off the caps and handed one to each of us.

"I'll drive," Adam offered. "I'll just have the one."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure."

I was grateful. Intoxicated was the only way I was going to make it through the day.

"So, this is Adam," my father said. He held out his hand. Adam shook it firmly.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Brooks."

"Dave," my father said. His name was, in fact, Alexander, but the riggers called him Dave and it stuck.

"Bet tells me you're a teacher."

"That's right," Adam confirmed.

"Sport?"

"Performing Arts."

"Right," my dad said, nodding, clearly no clue what that was, not that I'd be any the wiser if Adam hadn't explained it to me. Mostly he taught acting, with some directing thrown in, but he didn't look or behave like an actor. He was a physical, sporty, feet firmly on the ground kind of guy.

The rest of the day progressed in much the same way, conversations revolving around jobs and family, nothing so controversial as mine and Adam's relationship. To be fair to my dad, he was taking it—well—like a man, as in he was avoiding all the stuff he couldn't deal with, such as mine and Adam's relationship. I tried to follow his example, giving long, detailed answers to his questions about how my job with Magda was going. And drinking beer. Way too much beer.

We left late evening, though still early enough for Adam to grab a pint before last orders, and with an arrangement in place to meet up for dinner on Tuesday, which gave us a couple of days to go sightseeing, or whatever. I was too drunk to care, quite frankly. Back at the King's Head, Adam examined me doubtfully when I said I wanted a whisky. He ordered it anyway, along with a beer for himself, and got Jimmy to fill my glass to the top, with lemonade. I caught my scowling reflection in the mirror behind the bar as I took the glass from him, staggering a little. He grabbed my arm to steady me.

"Fresh air," he said. I shrugged, staggered again. We went out to the beer garden. My eyes weren't working properly, and I struggled to focus. So drunk. So what?

He was there again, sitting in the same corner as he had the previous night, watching as Adam talked close to my ear, and laughed at my protests that I was perfectly fine. I could barely get the words out and gave up trying after a while.

"Get 'em down you," Jimmy called. "Come on, folks." He circulated the tables, collecting empty glasses. It was almost eleven o'clock. He paused by our table. "Once this lot are gone I'll get you another, lads, all right?"

"Cheers, mate," Adam replied. I nodded, lolling on Adam's shoulder. I wanted to go to bed. My eyes sagged shut, and I listened to people making their way past us, back through the pub and out onto the road. Someone bumped into my arm as they passed. In fact they banged into me really hard. I turned, wobbling and almost sliding off the bench, trying to see who it was. He stared back at me, the hate coming off him in waves.

"What's the matter?"

It took a moment for me to register that Adam had asked the question. I turned around again, saw two of him.

"Hm?"

"Someone you know?"

"Uh. Yeah." I scrambled around in my brain, trying to make a sentence, but couldn't. "Key," I opted for, holding out my hand. Adam fished in his pocket and passed over our room key.

"I'll be up in sec," he said. I left, dragging myself up the stairs, clinging to the banister rail, the ascent to the second floor seemingly never-ending. Getting the key in the door was quite a trial, but I got there eventually, catapulted into the room, pulled off my sneakers and jeans and collapsed on the bed.

I awoke to the shrill song of blackbirds, and eye-stinging daylight, which, at this time of year could mean it was anywhere between four in the morning and ten at night. Adam was fast asleep in the bed beside me, his hands clasped under his cheek, his long, slow exhalations lifting my hair. I shivered, stretched a chilly arm out of the covers and felt around for my phone. Couldn't find it. I sat on the edge of the bed, instinctively putting my hand to my head in an attempt to mute the debilitating *thud-thud* against the inside of my skull, spotting my discarded jeans on the floor. Gingerly, I reached down and retrieved my phone from the pocket. 4:35 a.m. I felt like shit. Pulling myself to my feet was a further ordeal, but I needed to use the bathroom and brush my teeth to get rid of the horrendous taste in my mouth. I made it across the room, did the necessary and got back in one piece, wide awake now. I brought up the image of James on my phone, studying it, zooming in so I could seek out the little dimples he got in his cheeks when he smiled. I smiled back, remembering the conversation with my mother, and the realization that she'd walked in on us so many times that we hadn't known about. I'd sent James an email, telling him what she'd said. His reply?

*Well, duh! She already knew.*

Was he right? Had she known all along? I never got the chance to ask what made him think that, not that it mattered really. It wasn't my mother I'd been hiding from all these years. Of course I cared what she thought. I wanted her approval—all children, however horrific their upbringing, want their parents' love and acceptance; to make them proud. Not that I'm saying my parents were cruel—they were emotionally distant, but never cruel. No, I was hiding from the pain, the soul-crushing agony that kept catching me unawares, getting in the way of any chance Adam and I had of finding happiness. What he'd said about Bobby—about not laying down the law sooner—I could see now I was forcing him to make the same mistake again. Adam couldn't help me. No one could. I wanted Solemn Solomon back. I missed him, stoically flatlining through life, getting the job done. It was stupid to think I could be anything else, romanticizing that short period of freedom and happiness before James died, believing I could feel like that again. Adam deserved better, deserved to be happy. It was time for me to say goodbye, to both of them.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty

Next time I awoke it was to the sound of voices, distant and mumbling, echoes deadened by carpets... I looked up at the familiar ceiling, the stark chrome spotlights. My feet were touching the wall at the end of the bed, feeling out the wallpaper join with my big toe. Claire was livid, understandably—not about the wallpaper. Who likes being woken up by their still slightly drunk (even now) and very miserable big brother at five in the morning? If I'd been she and she'd been me, I'd have slammed the door in my face, but thankfully she wasn't me, hence how I came to be here, in my old room. A knock came at the door. I groaned and pulled the pillow over my face. The door opened anyway.

“Hey.”

Adam. My mother had let him upstairs, to my room. My, how the times they were a-changing. He tugged at the pillow. I kept my grip on it.

“I've been looking everywhere for you.”

Yeah, well that couldn't have taken more than about ten minutes in a town like ours.

“I got Claire's number from Yvonne in the end.”

*So fucking what?* That was the voice in my head, the teenage me. It must've been the environment—being back in my room, with my boyfriend. Flashback...

“Sol, please?”

“Please what?”

“Talk to me.” He'd stopped fighting me for the pillow.

“There's nothing left to say.”

He stopped fighting me for the words.

I was finding it difficult to breathe, but I didn't want to see his face as I said what I needed to. I'd lose my resolve. Even now, I could imagine those beautiful gray eyes staring into mine, confused, hurt. I didn't want to be the cause of that pain.

“I think we should go our separate ways,” I said.

“You do.” Not a question.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Is it what you want?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Do you want us to break up?”

No. I didn’t, but what choice did I have? He snatched the pillow away and tossed it on the floor, his eyes locking with mine. I wanted to look away but I was trapped in his gaze, drowning in liquid silver.

“I shouldn’t have left Elise.”

A cruel thing to say? Indeed, I’d planned it that way—not to hurt him, but to make him walk away, run out of patience. Instead, he smiled.

“Sticks and stones.” He leaned forward, kissing me gently. It sent a shiver all the way through me, in spite of everything. “You think you can break me that easily? I love you.” He smoothed my forehead with light-touch fingertips. “Do you love me?”

I nodded, felt tears trickle down either side of my face. He wiped them away with his thumbs.

“Why did you insist we stay at the King’s Head?”

“I didn’t insist.”

“No?”

“It was that, or stay here.”

“There’s a hotel a few miles out of town.”

He was right. There was. Had I even considered that option? I honestly couldn’t say, but at the very least I’d dismissed it on an unconscious level.

“The way I see it,” he continued, “either you did it to sabotage our relationship, or you were trying to save it.”

“Why would I want to sabotage it?”

“Perhaps because you think you’re unworthy? Or I am? I don’t know.”

I felt so vulnerable, lying flat on my back, pinned down by my single quilt. I could move my arms to cover my face. I could turn my face away. Hell, I could’ve just closed my eyes. They were all physical possibilities, yet I knew

that doing any of them meant so much more than the act itself. I would be breaking the connection between us.

“But then you tell me you love me,” he said.

I blinked up at him. It meant “yes.” Words would probably have made that clearer. However, they were a little beyond me right at that moment.

“Which means you want to try and save us.”

I blinked again, forced my head to move in the affirmative. He sighed in frustration.

“I’m done with all the crap, Sol. I know it’s only been four months, but we’re either doing this, or we’re not.”

Ah, *there’s* my Captain Impatient. I sensed an ultimatum coming.

“Straight-talking time. Do you want to break up?”

“No.”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to fix this?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” He put a hand on either side of me, so that now I really was pinned down, and he kissed me slowly but deeply. My resistance gave up resisting. I kissed back. He moved away from the bed and pulled the covers off. I was wearing only boxer shorts, my erection already tenting the jersey fabric. He smirked. “We can deal with that later. You need to visit the cemetery.”

“What for? I have no trouble accepting he’s dead. Seeing his grave isn’t going to change anything.”

“Your guilt. I don’t know why you blame yourself for James’s death, because you keep avoiding it, refuse to talk about it. I do understand that’s how you feel, but it’s screwing with us.”

“Adam, I...”

“You need to visit the cemetery,” he repeated, passing me my clothes, and then standing back, watching me expectantly. I sighed and pulled myself into a sitting position. At least my head wasn’t banging anymore. He waited long enough to see me shove my legs into my jeans.

"I'll be downstairs," he said. "Don't run away. Again."

Not funny. He left. I finished dressing and went to use the bathroom. I bumped into my father on the way back.

"Morning," he said.

"Hi, Dad. Sleep well?"

"Other than some idiot hammering on the door in the middle of the night."

"Ah. Sorry." I looked down at my feet. Thirty-one years old—you'd think I'd have the whole acting like an adult thing nailed. A hand landed heavy on my shoulder.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," my father said.

I lifted my head and frowned, unsure if he meant what I thought he did. Too much to hope for?

"Being homosexual," he added.

Huh.

"There's a couple of lads on the rig, get ribbed mercilessly, they do. And being the boss, I have to intervene. It used to make me uncomfortable saying something, because it's all banter, you know? 'Backs to the wall, fellas, Smithy's coming through.' Just banter. And then your mate, James..."

"Boyfriend," I corrected, my chest tightening at what had been an instinctive admission, because I'd never had "that conversation" with my dad, not about the birds and the bees, or about being gay. Nothing. Three months on the rigs, a month at home—he was around a lot more than most people's dads, I supposed, but we didn't have that sort of relationship. It made what he was doing now all the more meaningful.

"Aye," he said. "Boyfriend." He turned away from me and headed off for the bathroom, newspaper tucked under his arm. One hand on the door, he stopped and looked back. "Sorry, son. You've had a rough do of it." He went inside, slid the bolt.

I remained where I was, dazed, until Adam called up, "You coming?"

I shook myself out of it and went downstairs, right into his waiting arms, aware of my mother watching from the kitchen. He smiled and hugged me tight.

"You're not going to run away this time?"

“I’ll try not to,” I said.

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The cemetery was how I’d expected—quiet, with one or two people delivering bunches of flowers to graves of loved ones. I’d always thought it was a bit pointless. I mean, what do the dead care for flowers? Still, I felt naked in my empty-handedness, and cold, in spite of the sun that was strong enough to turn my bare arms pink. Adam walked at my side, though not too close, and it was I who sought out his hand, lacing my fingers through his. He glanced my way, wordlessly. I kept my focus on him, aware that James’s grave was just up ahead of us. I wasn’t sure I could bear to see it, but as we got closer the profusion of color drew my attention. I faltered. Adam kept moving forward, gently pulling me along, until I was standing on the path in front of the plot. I gazed down in awe. Every single inch of it was covered with vibrant, fresh flowers, so many colors, so beautiful. I was speechless.

“Yvonne said people come visiting all the time,” Adam explained. “It’s always like this.”

I thought about it, and it made complete sense to me. James was a popular guy—friendly, loving, open, but also flamboyant and outrageous in every way—his clothes, the things he said, the way he said them. Just like Calvin with his LGBT buttons, James sent out the message, loud and clear. No two ways about it, he was gay. You could love him, or hate him. Most, it would seem, chose to love him, because unlike Cal, James was warm, kind, compassionate. He didn’t deserve to die. He had so much to give.

“You’ve not been here before, have you?” Adam asked. I shook my head. “So you haven’t seen the inscription on the headstone?”

I glanced at it briefly, taking in that it was black granite, a rainbow inlaid into the arched top, James’s name beneath it, along with his photo. It was one I’d never seen before, and I stepped around the flowers to get a better view. He was smiling, always smiling, the little dimples in his cheeks just visible. His expression was cheeky, flirtatious, his eyes looking up and to the right, rather than at the camera. I followed their direction, past the headstone, up into clear blue sky. Nothing there. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I was still disappointed. I returned my gaze to the headstone. And that was when I saw it, lurking just behind the rainbow.

*“You know that Sol means ‘sun’ in Spanish, don’t you?”*

*“So you keep saying.”*

*“Which means you’re not allowed to be a grump. You’ll turn my blue skies cloudy.”*

“Let’s go blow those clouds away,” I whispered.

I’d left Adam at the end of the grave, but now he moved closer and put his arms around me from behind. I grabbed them, held on tight.

“After you moved to the States,” he said, “Claire told James’s parents about you, and they weren’t surprised. He thought the world of you. When they had the headstone made, they wanted to acknowledge that you’d lost someone special too.”

I started to cry.

“The song is for you, Sol.”

“The song?”

I hadn’t got as far as reading the rest of the inscription, which was in smaller, cursive letters, rendered blurry and illegible by my tears. I wiped my eyes and moved closer. Adam kept hold of me, thank God, because if he hadn’t I’d have collapsed and crushed the flowers.

*Don’t you cry, you will see bye and bye,  
that a rainbow bright will shine on high,  
there are always rain clouds in the sky,  
and I’ll tell you sweetheart why:  
’Cause it takes a little rain with the sunshine,  
like the tear drops come with the smiles;  
but the troubles never come all at one time,  
just wait a little while, remember,  
flowers couldn’t grow without rain, dear,  
happiness we share with the pain, dear,  
’cause it takes a little rain with the sunshine  
to make the world go around.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-One

On the drive back to the King's Head my mind kept going over and over the first two lines of that song: "Don't you cry, you will see bye and bye, that a rainbow bright will shine on high..." I'd taken a photo of the headstone, in case I should ever forget, but that whole rainbow thing? The freedom flag, they called it, right? James and I were on our own, two boys trying to love, in a town that, to me, had always been infused with hate.

*I chucked the T-shirt back at Calvin.*

*"It's gaudy and stupid. I'm not wearing it."*

*"Your opinion is not important. The colors are symbolic. The pink—"*

*"Pink schmink. Mix them all together, and what do you get? White-out, that's what."*

See, love wasn't a freedom to me. It was a prison I'd refused to enter. Yet all those flowers on James's grave, the messages of love and acceptance that accompanied them—I could see now that I had allowed a miniscule, ignorant minority to control my life. My mum, bless her, with her obsession with AIDS, my dad, and George, being pushed to the frontline of a battle no one should have to fight, and Elise, whom I had perceived to be the enemy, when we were cabinmates, cowering in a dark corner, hiding from ourselves—that was real homophobia—fear of losing a child, a friend, a parent, a lover. What those animals did to James wasn't an act of fear. It was an act of violence, of hatred. Calvin would've ripped off their balls, put them on display for all to see. James would've forgiven them. Me? On this occasion I was inclined to side with Cal.

I was standing at the bar, not entirely sure how I'd got there. Adam stood next to me, talking to Jimmy, their conversation an indecipherable nonsense as I watched Yvonne watching me. I could feel her sadness, her love.

"Can I talk to you, please?" I asked, a sob escaping with the words. I walked off, toward the stairs, leaning against the wall, trying to regain some control, aware of Yvonne standing next to me, gently rubbing my back and shushing me. So much for talking. I could hardly catch my breath.

"Come up to the flat," she suggested, leading me by the hand up the stairs and through the door marked "Private," into the Coolican home. She sat me on the sofa, disappeared, returned with a box of tissues. "I'll make us a cup of tea,"

she said and left me again. I sniffed and sobbed, trying to find distractions in the room around me, but everywhere I looked James stared back. School photos, professional portraits, a large print of the picture on his headstone, an artist's impression. I couldn't escape his watchful gaze, those blue sky eyes like blazing sapphires, cold and hard, judgmental of my lies, my denial of how much he meant to me. I had loved him, and abandoned him, then abandoned myself.

Yvonne returned with the tea, handed me a cup and sat next to me.

"You've been to visit James?" she asked. I nodded. The tears started again. "Adam said he was going to take you. He went looking for you this morning, and when he came back he asked me about the song."

"Claire told you?"

"Yes, she did. She told us everything. James adored you. He never stopped talking about you. We always thought it was one-sided, until Claire explained the way your mum reacted."

"I adored him too," I said. Kind of said. I was crying too hard to speak properly, but Yvonne somehow got the gist.

"I know you did, sweetheart. When you arrived here with Adam on Saturday, I was surprised only because I knew you'd married a woman, and you went to such lengths to convince people you were straight whenever you came home. I thought maybe Claire got it wrong."

I laughed through my tears, not out of joy, or because I thought it was funny. I think it was just out of relief at finally being able to let go of my grief.

"Adam is wonderful," I said. "He's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"That's exactly what he said about you."

"Did he?"

She nodded. "He sat right where you're sitting now, telling me how he fell in love with you the minute he set eyes on you."

"He said that?" I was sure she was making it up to try and jolly me along.

"We were laughing at how it sounded like a story in a magazine—love at the checkout."

OK, so maybe she wasn't making it up then.

“Did he tell you he tried to push in?”

She chuckled. “No. He left out that part.”

I shook my head, and smiled. I was starting to feel a little better, a little more like me. Confession time.

“I finished things with James after I thought my mum had caught us together. She’s always been so opinionated, and there was all the stuff in the news about AIDS when we were growing up. I think she honestly thought that you got it just by being gay.”

“Oh, I know. We’ve heard it all before, Sol. Some of the things people said when James came out, because, as you know, he did it in style. They soon changed their tune after he was killed.”

“They need shooting, the fucking lot of them.” My anger flared so suddenly and violently that it frightened me. With a bit of a struggle, I pushed it back down inside. “Sorry,” I said.

“It’s all right. It’s perfectly normal to be angry, but you also need to know when to let go. We were angry for a long, long time. We used to think that if they caught the boys who did it we’d finally get peace of mind, leave the anger and hatred behind, but it fades, and James’s death wasn’t all in vain. It made people think, question their beliefs. A lot of the regulars in here, for instance, used to be so hateful, but not anymore.”

“It shouldn’t take someone dying to change people’s minds.”

“True enough.” Yvonne sipped her tea, waiting for me to say more, and there was so much more I wanted to say. Whether it was wise to do so was an entirely different matter.

“I was scared,” I admitted.

“That’s understandable.”

“No, I don’t mean of being beaten up, or at least I was scared I’d get beaten up, which is why I started kickboxing and working out. I was scared that people would judge me, hate me, just because of what I am. James was a much stronger person than me.”

“I hope you know better now than to care what people like that think.”

“Yeah, I do, but it took meeting Adam for me to realize.”

“You got there in the end, that’s all that matters.”

I nodded, glancing around the room again. Those eyes weren't judging me quite so harshly now. One more confession to make, and I was done. My plan was to gradually build up to it, lay some groundwork, not just so it didn't come as a shock to Yvonne. I despised myself for concealing it all these years and wasn't sure I could cope with allowing it to the surface, but like she'd said, there's a time to let go.

"I know who killed James," I blurted. Absolutely nothing like a gradual build-up. Way to go.

"We all have our suspicions, Sol."

"But if you were able to prove who it was?"

She shook her head. "Nothing's going to bring him back."

I clamped my teeth together. I'd told her as much as I needed to. I'd just wanted to see her response, to try and decide how to act on what I knew. I drank the rest of my tea.

"I'd best get back to Adam," I said. We hugged. "Thank you for listening to me, and for the inscription. I'm truly honored, not that I deserve to be that important."

"What nonsense!"

She was quite cross with me, but it was the truth. I'd betrayed James in the worst way imaginable.

Bruised and battle-weary, I retired to our room and sat on the end of the bed, looking out across the green hills, absently tallying sheep. The door opened behind me, strong, warm arms encircled me, holding me tight, holding me together.

"Thank you," I said. Adam kissed the top of my head.

"I'm going to buy a pair of handcuffs for you."

I turned to look at his face up close. He was smirking. I smiled.

"Kinky!"

"Isn't it?" He kissed me again. "You OK?"

I thought for a moment, nodded. "I'm OK."

We spent the rest of the afternoon lying on the bed together, making tentative plans for the move back to England. In the occasional pauses in our dialogue, I considered the enormity of what we were doing. Boston had been my home for eight years, and I'd worked at Magda for almost as long. That, really, was the only part I was going to miss. I loved my job, I loved working with George, but she wouldn't be around forever. In fact, it occurred to me that she'd pushed for the second design team to train me up for her job. I was sure she'd understand I hadn't meant to let her down.

The chatter of the first wave of evening customers floated up to us, and we decided to go out for a walk, stopping by the fish and chip shop, I'm not sure why—we were both already suffering for the lapse in our diet and exercise regimen.

"I'm getting flabby," Adam said, dumping the last of his supper in the trash and patting his very firm and unflabby abs.

"Yeah, right!"

"I am! Feel." He lifted his T-shirt and pressed my hand to his belly, flexing against my fingers.

"I guess you could do with a little toning up," I said.

"Uh huh? We should definitely work out tonight."

"Definitely," I agreed, kissing him. An older man and woman getting into their car across the street didn't give us a second glance. I could've taken it as evidence for what Yvonne had said—that James's death had made a difference—but that's not what I saw. In this town, this *small* town, where everyone was aware of everyone else's business, people would have known who James's attackers were. Family members would surely have questioned whereabouts when asked for alibis on the night that James Coolican was fatally wounded, would have wondered about blood-stained clothes. Why didn't anyone say anything? Do anything? Do *something*?

"Sol, wait!"

I was running, I discovered at the sound of Adam's voice far behind me. I was running away. From me.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“Get off me!” I tried to break free of Adam’s iron grip on my arms. How the fuck he’d got me to the ground I’ll never know, but that’s where I was, with his hands crushing my wrists. He was sitting on my chest, and I used my lower body to try and roll him off. He was one strong bastard.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked. He looked angry and bewildered.

“Let me go.”

“Oh no. No way. We’re going to have this out, right here, right now.”

“Adam! Please?”

“No, Sol. I’m done chasing you. If I let you go and you run away again, that’s it. Done.”

He eased off on my wrists a little. I knew better than to fight back.

I said, “I know who killed James.”

“You think you know...”

“I *know* who killed James. I’ve got evidence.”

“You’ve...” He released my wrists completely. He was still sitting on me, though, and now he’d leaned back I was finding it difficult to breathe. “What evidence?”

“Text messages.”

“Explain.”

“Can I get up, please?”

“No!”

“If you let me up, I’ll show you.”

I watched him consider my proposition. He slowly lifted a leg clear, grabbing one of my wrists again as he did so.

“I’m getting those fucking handcuffs,” he muttered, not entirely joking. I swear I had never been like this in my life. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I was beginning to think I might need to see a shrink. I dug my phone out of my pocket, opting for the original messages, copied from phone to phone over the past eleven years. I also had backups, and backups of backups, the

printed version in a box of letters in Elise's apartment. I opened the first message I'd received and passed my phone to Adam.

"There's about thirty of them, just scroll down," I said. If I sounded matter-of-fact, it was because I knew this was the end of the line. He was already scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, the color left his face.

"Oh my God," he gasped. He was still scrolling, blinking, head shaking, disbelief, outrage, fury, then, "Oh my God," again.

And as I stood there, watching him reading those text messages, I felt violated, like a part of me was being slashed and beaten, just as James had been. My own fault. I'd kept them to myself when I should've gone straight to the police. Their names were attached to the messages, but it was unlikely they'd still have those numbers now. I'd withheld evidence. How fucking stupid and selfish of me. Not only had I blown any chances of proving that it was them, I'd lost Adam too. I could see it, in his horrified expression.

He reached the end of the messages, slowly turning to face me.

"I wish..." I began, I think, to say, that I wished it had been me who had died, or I wished I could take it back, or... I don't know. The fierceness of Adam's embrace knocked the thought right out of me. He was sobbing, and apologizing, and we were standing in the middle of the high road of my home town on a Monday evening, and it was all so surreal. Why was he telling me he was sorry? I contemplated giving him a slap, you know the way they do in old movies when women come over all hysterical? I decided against it, thought he'd probably knock me out with one punch.

It took a lot of effort for Adam to stop crying. It seemed I'd been crying too, but I really wasn't connected to my body, like I was inside a spacesuit, or something, and now Adam was telling me he loved me, and wiping my cheeks with his thumbs, staring deep into my eyes. Lights on, no one home.

We were back in our room, washing faces, getting jackets. We were sitting in a car, my sister was driving. We were in the living room of my parents' house, and there were police. I was talking, they were writing, Adam was holding my hand. Claire was holding my hand. Mum was crying. Dad brought cups of tea.

"I wish Suky was here," I said.

I rolled over to check the time on my phone, wondering why my alarm hadn't gone off. No phone. So tired, must have stayed up late drinking. What was I doing last night? It ripped through me like a rush of icy wind, and I gasped, sat up suddenly.

"Adam!"

"Hey," he answered me sleepily. "I'm here. It's OK."

Oh, thank God. I lay down again, moving closer so I could wrap myself in his warmth. A bad dream?

"You should still be out for the count," he said.

"Huh?"

"The pills the doctor gave you. He said they'd knock you out."

"Pills?" That would explain why I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

"You need anything?"

That was the last thing I remembered.

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"Good morning."

He kissed me on the forehead. Very paternal. I frowned.

"Yvonne's going to bring our breakfasts up."

"Um..." In my head the phrase went, "What the fuck is going on?" My mouth didn't want to play along.

Time passed. There was a knock at the door. Adam got up and answered it.

"How is he?"

Me?

"OK. A bit groggy."

"Understandable. How are you holding up?"

"Fine, thanks. You?"

"Same. I'll let you go."

The door closed.

"Sit up, handsome."

That was me too. I shuffled up the bed, with much effort. My eyelids needed props.

“What were they?” I asked.

“What were what?”

“Pills.”

“Oh. Valium.”

“Why?”

“You were... very agitated.”

Hm. So agitated I couldn't remember anything about it. I ate slowly, feeling very heavy. The room tilted a little. I grabbed hold of Adam's arm. He dropped his fork.

“You OK?” he asked. He looked worried.

“Yeah. Dizzy.”

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As the morning wore on, the effect of the drugs wore off, and I remembered what had happened the day before: visiting James's grave, the song, talking to Yvonne, showing Adam the text messages. I knew I'd spoken to the police, but couldn't recall what was said. Claire phoned to check we were in—we were sitting in the smaller of the two rooms of the pub. She came to visit.

“They got three of them,” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

She frowned. “The police.”

I rubbed my eyes. “What?”

“The police got three of the men who attacked James and threatened you.”

Oh, *them*! Of course! Claire hugged me and started crying. All these tears. It was like being at a funeral.

After Claire had gone, I shrugged at Adam. “I don't know what the fuck is happening,” I said. “Why haven't I been arrested?”

“Why would you be arrested?”

“What's it called? Perverting the course of justice.”

“You're the victim.”

“No, James was...”

“Sol.” Adam’s lips pressed to mine, stopping me from protesting further. Not helpful. My brain was misfiring all over the place. He moved away.

“Victim?”

“Death threats.”

I nodded slowly. It had never occurred to me before, but I suppose that’s what they were.

*You saw what we did to your faggy friend. Your turn next.*

*Gonna fuck you queers before you can fuck us.*

“Do those pills cause hallucinations?” I asked.

“No idea,” Adam said. “Why?”

“Because I’m sure my parents just walked in.”

He looked toward the door and waved. My parents came over. Mum hugged Adam.

Mum hugged Adam.

Wow. My mum just hugged my boyfriend. I got up, staggered a little. He caught me.

“Hi, Mum,” I said, sounding pathetic and small—not an act. She hugged me and my dad gave me a swift embrace, followed up by a good, solid pat on the back. Madness!

“Feeling better, son?” my dad asked.

“Yeah, thanks.” I had no idea if it were true. My dad went to the bar, returning with pints of bitter for Adam and himself, a glass of wine for my mum and I got to have a Coke. Awesome.

We chatted. No. *They* chatted. I sat nodding like a bobble-headed bull dog toy on a parcel shelf.

“We’ve postponed dinner, darling,” Mum said.

“Dinner?” I queried.

“With Claire and John. The booking is for tomorrow now, at six, as they’re driving home afterwards, but if you’re not up to it—”

“I’ll be fine, Mum.”

Yeah, so... talk about entering the twilight zone.

Adam and Dad went to get another drink. Mum reached across and squeezed my hand. She didn't say the word, she kind of transmitted it telepathically. She was sorry, I wasn't sure what for, but figured it was probably something to do with, well, everything. I squeezed back.

"Have you got your dress for the wedding?" I asked.

She sighed loudly. "No. Honestly, Solly, you have no idea of the trouble I'm having finding something."

And she was off. I listened, smiling to myself, because she sounded just like me, so maybe it was nothing to do with being an engineer after all. Don't get me wrong, our relationship was far from fixed, but it was... better. Much better than it had been in a long time. In fact, since the fateful "Gay like Freddie Mercury" conversation. As for Adam and my dad, or Adam and my mum, or Adam and Claire, Yvonne, Jimmy, the world... I'd yet to meet anyone who didn't get on with Adam, and griped as much in jest when we were in bed and finally, finally alone.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-Three

On Wednesday morning, still fuzzy from the tranqs, I forced myself out of bed to go for a run with Adam, mostly because I was feeling uncharacteristically clingy. However, that soon dissipated once we were out in the open. The early morning air was wonderfully cool and refreshing. We jogged through low cloud, the microscopic droplets of moisture accumulating on our faces, dripping from our chins, and down our necks. I was finding it quite a trial to keep up, so we alternated between running, jogging and walking, pausing to watch a collie dog steer a herd of sheep into the distant misty hills, before we jogged back to the King's Head. Yvonne was already toiling away in the kitchen—another couple had arrived the previous evening and we greeted each other with a friendly “good morning,” settling at a table in the beer garden with our glasses of orange juice. Not that we were being antisocial—the beer garden was a sun trap, where we could make the most of the beautiful morning, and a minute or so later the other couple followed our lead.

The food and exercise invigorated me, helped along in no small part by having faced up to the baggage that had been dragging me down for so long that it was a wonder I didn't walk with a stoop. Needless to say, I was up for a spot of very personal attention and was *almost* reaching Adam's level of well-practiced impatience, waiting out my turn for the shower. By the time I was done, he was dressed.

“Ha! I don't think so,” I said. I grabbed him by the waistband of the jeans he'd just put on, unzipped them and freed him from his boxers. He spread his feet apart, granting me access to his balls. I opened my lips wider, trying to fit them in my mouth too, tickling him awake with my tongue, easing back as he sprang to life. His hand was on my head, resting gently, no pushing, allowing me to control the speed and the depth, which was a little frustrating. I was in the mood for some hard, hot action, but my captain was taking it nice and steady this morning. I lifted the hem of his T-shirt, an unspoken request that he remove it. He did so. I ran my hands up over his abs, reaching his nipples with the tips of my fingers. He started to grind his hips. I brought my hands back down and grabbed his ass, pulling him deeper down my throat, breathing through my nose, the air ruffling his pubes, making it seem as if that little tattooed cat was prancing right in front of my face. Adam watched, that crooked smile telling me he was enjoying it as much as I was. I could honestly have carried on forever, with his taste and his scent filling my mouth and nose. I eased back, sucking hard, plunged again. He pulled away and shook his head.

“Too close,” he said. I got to my feet, his hand immediately wrapping around my dick, his warm fist delivering a tantalizingly slow squeezing tug. “Get on the bed,” he instructed. Aye, sir. He kicked his legs out of his half-mast jeans and sidled up alongside. I reached out for him. He captured my arm, commencing a trail of kisses that started at my fingers, detoured to explore my mouth, continuing down to my nipples, pausing to circle them with his tongue, sucking each in turn, until they stood, proud buoys marking the rocks in my ocean. He climbed aboard, navigating that familiar yet treacherous route, as I, the long-lost Marie Celeste, finally made port in the rolling calm before the glorious storm.

With each upward thrust his abs tensed, highlighting the outlines of the individual muscles. A week of carbs, beer and no workouts had given him a little bit of a belly, I supposed, though not much, and as he moved I noticed the faintest of crinkles in his skin. I ran my fingers over them, fascinated. Early thirties wasn't that old, but we weren't getting any younger—obviously. I smiled at how silly that was, and how wonderful it would be, years from now, still doing this. Would we look like our dads? Warren was a big man, and I could see Adam now, with a sprinkling of gray at his temples framing those sultry silver eyes, my sexy-hot cuddly man, keeping me warm through the English winter nights. As for me? I couldn't visualize what I'd look like, but Adam had already seen me at my worst, and he was still here, making love to me. His dick beckoned my attention, swooping low before him, bobbing with the motion. He pushed down again, forcing me deep inside him, his smile lingering awhile, eyes half-shut. He craned to kiss me, the change in angle intensifying the squeeze around me. I groaned with pleasure. I was trying to hold out, but I was on the edge. I reached for him. He shook his head.

“Let go,” he said. He increased his speed, knowing I was at the point where resistance was impossible. I lifted to meet his down with my up, a relentless tide surging through me, heading for shore, now crashing into the rocks with explosive force. I swam for the surface, gulping for air. I was done.

Adam lifted himself clear, shifting as if to move to my side. I grabbed him, steered him by his dick so that he had to shuffle up the bed, his knees either side of me, coming to a stop under my arms. I lifted my head to collect the clear nectar oozing from his slit. He shifted again, repositioning himself so that he could hold the headboard and fuck my mouth. It lasted no more than thirty seconds, spurts of cum landing in my mouth, on my lips, my cheeks, *in my hair!* A couple more thrusts and he moved away, returning with tissue to wipe me clean, or what was left to wipe away. I was still horny and had licked what I

could reach. He flushed the tissues, returned one last time and flopped down next to me. I rolled into the crook of his arm, and we kissed, gentle pecks interspersed with deeper kisses.

“We should go and do some sightseeing,” he suggested once normality returned. I shrugged indifferently. The sights here were plenty good enough for me, but I went along with his wishes. I washed my hair (not making that mistake twice) and we shaved and dressed so that we could go straight from our day trip to dinner, heading out for a two-hundred-year-old working waterwheel at a long derelict grinding mill, where I bored Adam into a coma with my commentary on how these things worked. He took it like a man. He may even have called me “dear.”

After that, we went to “Ye Olde Tea Room,” which didn’t look especially “olde,” was a warehouse rather than a room, and sold more coffee than the average Starbucks. Adam and I did have tea, though—cream tea, with scones stuffed with whipped cream and strawberries—not the best substitute for our much-missed vanilla cream protein shakes, and delicious for about one bite. I pushed my plate away. Adam’s eyes narrowed disapprovingly.

“Are you going to eat tonight?” he asked.

“Hey! I don’t see you making any progress either.” If I was being defensive, it was because I knew he was right. I’d lost weight since we’d been in England, from being stressed, and not eating, and not being able to work out. Where Adam needed to train to stay slim, I’d always done it to bulk up. Without weight training, I’d have reverted to my former scrawny self. Again, my mind cast itself forward to our future, two contented old men, gone completely to seed because there was no need to impress anymore, toddling around a farmyard, tending chooks, cocoa at bedtime, big, hairy old man ears... I started chuckling to myself. Adam raised an eyebrow.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing. I was just picturing us in our twilight years.”

“Twilight years?”

“You know, growing old together?”

“Together,” Adam repeated.

I peered up at the bare steel rafters. “I think there’s an echo in here.” I returned my gaze to Adam. Those mercury orbs burned right into my mind, my soul.

“Yeah,” he said. “I heard it too.” He sounded like he’d been running.

“Are you all right?” I asked. He nodded and lifted my hand to his lips, his eyes still locked with mine. I could feel his pulse under my fingertips. It was racing.

“Never better,” he said, giving me the most amazing smile. I melted to goo. “You?”

“Never better,” I replied breathlessly.

Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it was the after-effects of the tranquilizers.

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Our dinner date venue was an all-you-can-eat carvery, with a self-service heated counter running half the perimeter of the very large dining room, and a friendly, casual atmosphere. Claire and John had already arrived and were seated in the back left corner. We headed over.

“John, you remember my brother, Sol,” Claire introduced. We’d met once, back in the early days of their relationship, so I didn’t really know the guy. We shook hands. “And this is Sol’s partner, Adam,” my sister finished.

“Good to meet you,” Adam said graciously, also shaking John’s hand, then exchanging an affectionate cheek kiss and embrace with Claire.

“Everything OK?” she asked far too brightly and not directed at me. She and John returned to their seats. Adam and I sat opposite each other, me next to John, Adam next to Claire. I smiled sweetly at her.

“I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

Adam stamped on my foot and tried to pass it off as an accident. I wasn’t going to cause a scene, but I didn’t want them all worrying about me freaking out again. I really was fine, or getting there, anyway.

A waiter came over, took our drinks orders and explained how the food worked—get a plate, pile it on, eat, repeat until you have a coronary. He came back a few minutes later with our parents and our drinks; Dad sat on my right, Mum on Adam’s left. He pulled the same cheek kiss greeting on her. She seemed delighted. OK, maybe I would need to take a rain check on the *not* freaking out. This was beyond weird. How had we gone from only just being civil, to peace, love and harmony in thirty-six hours?

As per the waiter’s instructions, we went and filled our plates at the counter. However, the minute I sat down to eat—surprise, surprise—I wasn’t even the

remotest bit hungry. Still, I made an effort, and listened to the conversations taking place around me. Mum and Claire were talking weddings across Adam, who was in turn telling John about his job. My dad said something. I didn't quite catch it.

"Hm?"

"When are you flying back to Boston?"

"Oh. Erm, Saturday morning." If he was trying to make small talk, something was amiss, and it was probably me. I attempted to reciprocate. "When are you back on the rig?"

"Three weeks Friday."

End of conversation, for us. The others continued for a while, but things were getting a little heated in some quarters. The wedding planning conversation slowly petered out, leaving just one person talking, more's the pity.

"That's not *really* being a teacher, is it?" John said, his tone pompous and more than a little pugnacious. Adam shrugged neutrally.

"No, I suppose it's more lecturing than teaching."

"Of course, there's not much call for actors in the *real* world."

I glanced across at Claire, noticed the pleading look in her eyes. Great. It was down to me to do the bailing out this time. Alas, there was a hole in my bucket and the words dropped out the bottom before I had time to think them through.

"Guess what?" I said. "We're moving back to England."

My mother paused midchew, staring me down. She gently and deliberately set her fork on her plate, resumed masticating, and slowly turned to Adam. Had she reached the point of swallowing before John said what he did, I'm pretty sure she'd have come down on the pair of us like a ton of hypercritical bricks.

"England?" he repeated, as if he'd never heard of such a place. He scoffed. "Well, they've cut *all* the performing arts budgets *here*."

That overstressing certain words thing he did was irritating.

"There's no jobs. It's a shame you're not a *proper* teacher. There's always plenty of supply work."

*Really* irritating.

On the plus side, it looked like my mother was now siding with Adam. My dad, Claire and I kept our heads down, shoveling food into our mouths as if this were the last meal we'd ever eat. Judging by Adam's and my mother's expressions it could well be. My mother was furious, and Adam? He didn't get angry often. Annoyed? Yes. Frustrated? Definitely. Impatient? And then some! But I could see him struggling to keep his breathing under control, his nostrils flaring wide with the effort. His leg jiggled against mine under the table. I reached under and squeezed his knee. He gave me a quick smile.

"You coming for more food, John?" my sister asked.

"Oh, no thanks, *sweet*. I'm fine for now."

Yeah, for now. John's gaze returned to Adam. I had no option but to engage him.

"What is it you teach again, John?"

"Mathematics."

"High school?"

"Yes, that's *right*, Sol."

Well done, clever boy. Have a gold star.

"That must be very rewarding," I said.

"Yes, it is."

Huh. I could have got him to count how many fucks I gave. All none of them. But I persevered, for the sake of peace.

"Do you need a math degree to teach it?" I asked.

"Not necessarily *maths*, but a *relevant* degree. I would think, if you were interested, your degree would *probably* be enough, with a teaching qualification, *obviously*."

Like I'd ever consider teaching high school kids. I'd rather go back to Elise. I wondered what she was doing now, started calculating the time difference...

"...I can email you the link," John finished.

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take a look," I said. "I think I'll, err, get some dessert." I made a quick getaway. Half a minute later my dad joined me.

“He’s a bloody arsy bugger tonight,” he remarked. We both watched our family from a distance. John had resumed his unprovoked, though by now rather benign attack on Adam.

“He’s not normally like that?”

My dad shook his head and chuckled. “Your poor mum.”

I switched my attention from Adam to my mother. She was still seething.

“I think she’s a bit disappointed,” my dad observed. Disappointed, seething—I suppose that’s kind of the same thing. Or not. Lucky my dad worked away as much as he did, really, or we’d be searching under the patio for his remains.

“Why?” I asked, expecting him to say something about how I’d let her down big time, what, with my failed marriage and giving up my career to return to the UK.

“It would’ve been nice to see her future sons-in-law getting along.”

OK. Very much not within expected parameters. Did she really see Adam that way?

“Of course,” my dad continued, completely oblivious to the effect his words had had on me, “John’s having work troubles of his own. Nothing personal. Your Adam’s a decent lad, gets on with everyone...”

Drifting, slowly drifting. There goes my reality.

“Sol?”

“Hm?”

“Fudge cake?”

“Oh. Yeah. Please.” I tuned in again, accepted the large slab of chocolate cake, trying very hard to ignore the crazy. We returned to the table.

“The *other* option...”

Oh God, was he still harping on? That nasal twang was seriously starting to grate on my nerves.

“...is to retrain in something *useful*, like...”

OK. Enough already.

“By the way,” I said, swiveling to face my future-if-he-survives-tonight brother-in-law, “did Adam tell you he turned down a job at *Harvard*?”

Bam! Gotcha!

And the chocolate fudge cake turned out to be rather good after all.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-Four

All the way back to the King's Head, Adam kept doing that head-shaking, eyes to the sky thing that's supposed to signify disapproval, but failed because he was grinning like the Cheshire cat. To give John his due, he did apologize for being obnoxious and ruining our evening. I didn't think it had been that bad. It was actually quite a useful distraction from the fact that, mixed with my previously repressed grief, I was now starting to get cold feet about leaving Boston. I didn't mention any of this to Adam. He was already being overprotective when I really wasn't that fragile.

It was quiz night in the pub and busy, but Yvonne still spotted us through the crowd and held up an empty glass by way of asking if we wanted a drink. I confirmed we did as we passed on our way upstairs to exchange our shirts for T-shirts.

Or that was our intention.

Adam turned the key and frowned. "We mustn't have locked it."

The door opened on a dark room, which was odd, as it was still light outside, and we hadn't closed the curtains. He walked across to the window and pulled them open. I stepped in, stopped dead. Adam turned back, saw what I saw.

I knew for certain that we'd made the bed before we left, but it wasn't made now. The duvet was pulled right back, the sheet creased as if someone had been lying on it. And there, in the middle of the mattress, was a big, stinking pile of shit, with a knife jammed through it.

I moved closer, holding my nose and squinting to see what was underneath it.

"Sol, don't..."

Too late.

It was a copy of the photo from James's headstone.

I crossed the room, shoved Adam to one side, yanked the window open, looked down, saw *him* sitting there, looking right back at me. Fucking smiling. I flew from the room and down the stairs, tripped, kept going, straight through the pub out into the beer garden, grabbed him round the throat with one hand

and lifted him out of his chair by his neck. His pint glass fell, smashing on the concrete slabs.

“You filthy, murderous, piece of shit!”

He spat in my face. I squeezed harder, moved in, my nose squashed against his.

“I’ll fucking rip you apart for what you did.”

“You’re bloody mental,” he said, laughing like he didn’t know what I was talking about. He looked past me, I don’t know what for. Likely allies, maybe. That just made me madder. He stamped on my foot, grabbed my arm with both hands, trying to pull me off. I was going to kill him. Strangle the bastard, make him suffer the way he’d made us suffer. He was choking, turning blue. His nails dug into my wrist, and I let go, punched him in the face, in the stomach. He raised his arms to protect himself. I knocked them away. He came at me. I backed off, kicked him in the balls, brought my knee up into his face, saw blood and spit arc through the air, got hold of his hair and slammed his head into the table, lifted it to do it again. The scum-sucking bastard was still calling me. Why wouldn’t he just shut the fuck up? He had his hands inside his jacket, scrabbling around. I slammed him against the table again, yanked his head up and right back, saw a glint of reflected light. Another fucking knife. I couldn’t move my arm.

“Sol! Stop!”

The knife lunged. I tried to grab the hand holding it to stop it, but I wasn’t quick enough. I heard a yelp, turned, saw Adam stagger backwards.

“No!”

I picked up part of the broken glass, raised it, ready to strike. Someone got me in a headlock, pulled me away.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.” I tried to fight them off, but there were two of them in front of me, faces I almost recognized, one still behind, dragging me away, sirens wailing, blue lights...

“Adam!”

Blood. So much fucking blood.

“Adam!”

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“Mr. Brooks.”

The voices, like the faces, were familiar.

“Solomon?”

“Hm?”

“I need to clean your cuts.”

“Oh.” I looked up and smiled an apology. The nurse held out her gloved hand. I offered my bloodied one. She smiled back at me as she wiped over my palm with gauze. It was cold and wet. I watched it turn pink.

“Do you remember me?” she asked. I nodded.

“You went to school with Claire.”

“That’s right.”

She continued to clean my hand, her mascara-lengthened lashes obscuring her eyes. I wanted to ask about Adam. I knew he was alive. They’d told me that much.

“OK. That’s not too bad,” she said, twisting my hand this way and that. “I’ll get it dressed for you and—”

“Is Adam all right?”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks.”

She covered the cuts across my palm with a large square dressing, securing it with a bandage. It seemed to be taking forever.

“There’s a police officer waiting to talk to you. Do you feel up to it?”

Not really, but there was little point in delaying the inevitable.

“Sure,” I said.

She left, pulling the curtain closed behind her. I leaned back against the wall, shut my eyes and focused on the white noise of hospital comings and goings, trying not to think about... anything. The curtain runners rattled. I opened my eyes again.

“Mr. Brooks?”

“Yes?”

The police officer remained on his feet next to the bed on which I was sitting. I'd seen him before—small town, small police force.

"We're going to leave your statement for now," he said, sounding sympathetic, which struck me as strange. "However, if you could confirm for me whether the man who assaulted you is the same person who sent the text messages, that would be very helpful."

The man who assaulted me? That wasn't how it happened.

Misinterpreting my lack of response, the officer continued, "He's been implicated in another case we're investigating."

Another case.

"Look, Sol," the officer put his hand on my shoulder, and that was when I remembered. He had been at James's funeral.

"Off the record? The other three individually named him. He's going down for this. I'll make damned sure of it."

"You... you..." I couldn't find the right words to ask what I suspected I already knew—that he was the first officer at the scene of the attack on James. He answered anyway.

"He wouldn't have felt much. He was drunk and they hit him from behind."

Whether it was the truth, or a lie intended to comfort me, I didn't care. I nodded.

"Yes. He sent the text messages."

"Good man. That's all we needed to know. The hospital's discharging him into police custody. We have plenty of witnesses who saw him attack you, and the lab got the little gift he left. We've got him, Sol. You can rest easy."

I put my head in my hands, forgetting about the gashes across my palm. It hurt like hell.

"Thanks," I uttered through my hands and the tears. He lightly squeezed my shoulder. The curtain swished. I was alone again.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Hello, Mr. Brooks."

The voice startled me. I hadn't heard the doctor arrive. He smiled and came closer. From his expression there was no way of telling what kind of news he brought.

“Adam had a collapsed lung, from the force of hitting the table, not from the stab wound, which is good. He’s having a little trouble breathing, and he’s on oxygen and fluids, but the injury was superficial.”

“He’s OK?”

“He’s fine, but we’ll admit him for observation overnight, just to make sure. He’s more worried about you than himself.” He addressed the nurse, Claire’s classmate: “Can you take Mr. Brooks over?”

“Of course, Doctor,” she said. He smiled again and left. I took a deep breath, felt myself sag in relief. I was so unbelievably tired.

The nurse gave me a moment to get my head together, and then stood nearby as I slid off the bed. I was a little unsteady, but not too bad, all things considered. As we walked across the accident and emergency department, I noticed two police officers outside one of the side rooms. The nurse leaned close to me and said quietly, “They’ve just read him his rights.”

I was too numb to respond. I still wanted to kill him, but it was no longer red mist. It was cold-blooded, calculated. I could picture him tied to a chair while I beat the shit out of him, almost knocking him unconscious, then hitting him over and over again, until he was black with bruises and sobbing for mercy. I wanted to slash him open. I wanted to throttle him. Sure, I wanted to see the other three rot in hell too, but he had rubbed it in our faces, drinking in the King’s Head—Yvonne and Jimmy’s home, James’s home. He deserved to suffer, to die slowly, begging for his life.

A door opened ahead of me, and I stepped into the room, frozen to the spot by the vision of Adam, in a hospital gown, drip in his arm, oxygen tubes clipped to his septum. He was lying on top of the bed covers and still wearing his socks. Black and yellow socks. He looked quite ridiculous. He was snoozing and hadn’t heard me arrive. I walked over and kissed him on the forehead, just as he’d been doing to me for the past few days. He opened his eyes, screwed them up a little to focus and smiled his lopsided smile.

“Hey,” he whispered, husky and dry-lipped.

“Hey,” I whispered back. I smoothed his hair with my hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore, but OK.”

I blinked back tears.

“I love you,” I said. He nodded.

"I know." He reached up, grimacing with the pain. He brushed his palm against my cheek. "I love you too. It's over now."

His eyes closed again, and at first I thought he'd drifted off to sleep, but then he grabbed me and pulled me tight to him. He tried not to cry because it was clearly hurting him to do so, and ended up laughing at himself, which also hurt. I was crying too, and laughing with him, and we were giggling, interspersed with him gasping, "Ouch!" which just made us do it more—all this with James's murderer a few feet down the corridor. We got it under control again, and I helped Adam sip some water. The pain in his chest was making it hard for him to use his arms.

"I need to pee," he said.

There was a urine bottle on the locker next to the bed. I reached across for it.

"I'm not using that."

"I don't think you've got any choice."

"Drop that cot side for me?"

"Adam..."

"I'm going to piss myself!"

I sighed in exasperation and lowered the cot side. He used me to pull himself up, swearing as he slowly swung his legs off the bed, already struggling to catch his breath.

"No," I said very firmly. "You're using the bottle."

He relented and took it from me. I looked away to give him some privacy. There was a thud as the bottle dropped to the floor. "Fuck's sake," he muttered. I picked up the bottle, passed it to him again, and saw his hands shaking.

"Do you want me to hold it?"

He started to laugh, and I daresay blushed a little.

Between us we freed him from his boxers and he positioned himself, while I held the bottle. I met his gaze. After half a minute or so of trying to relax, the slow stream started. I studied the ceiling, faking modesty, glanced back at him. The peeing stopped.

"I seriously can't do this if you're looking at me," he said.

"I'm not."

"No, but I'm looking at you."

"Well don't. Just concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing."

He shook his head, closed his eyes. Started peeing again. I kissed his cheek.

"Pack it in!"

I grinned, but stopped teasing. He finished for real.

"Thank you," he said.

"Welcome," I replied, holding the three-quarters full bottle at arm's length, not really sure what to do with it.

"Sol?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you marry me?"

Could it have waited for a better time? When we weren't in a hospital, with me holding a cardboard bottle of his piss, him in stylish NHS gown and bumble bee socks, oxygen tubes stuffed up his nose, IV in his arm? Probably.

If it were anyone but my Captain Impatient.

I shrugged. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

\*\*\*\*

The following morning, Adam was discharged into my care, which was laughable, considering he'd spent the first half of the week looking after me through my mini breakdown. Given his generally excellent health, the doctor said we'd be OK to fly back to Boston on Saturday, as planned, and the police came early to take my statement, giving us two more days to get some rest and recuperate.

Yeah, because that was totally going to happen once people found out we were getting married.

"Married?" my mother said.

I was waiting for, "What, like Elton John?" or some such.

"Yes, Mum."

"Well, I suppose that means you won't catch AIDS."

"Very true," said I. "Wedding rings are more than adequate protection..."

"There's no need to be facetious, Solomon."

I shouldn't mock my poor mother. She adored Freddie Mercury and was devastated when he died of "The AIDS," but for a woman of above average intelligence she could be quite dense at times.

When Adam called his family to tell them, I could hear the shrieks and screams from right across the bar, where I was sitting with Yvonne, stupidly worrying that they wouldn't be pleased for us. Adam hung up and rubbed his ear.

"Dad said, if we want them there, we need to get hitched before 'Siptimba' as he's already got a job lined up."

That gave us less than two months. I really couldn't see how we were going to do it.

Adam continued, "So if we go see the registrar now..."

"Now?"

And that was as much protesting as I got to do, because Adam had a trick up his sleeve, and I do mean exactly that.

"You need to check me out," he said, rolling his T-shirt sleeve up to his shoulder, revealing the tattoo I had noticed the first time we met, when he tried to jump the queue at the store.

"What?"

"Check me out!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Scan me."

"Why?"

"Do it!"

"The police have got my phone."

He reached into his back pocket. I thought he was going to give me his phone, but no. This one was brand new.

"I'll need to download an app," I said, taking the phone from him.

"It's on there already."

I tutted and unlocked the screen. By now we had an audience, and it was more than a little embarrassing. I held up the phone, trying to keep the tattooed QR code inside the box on-screen. It wasn't the easiest thing, with Yvonne,

Jimmy and the King's Head regulars watching, but after a few failed attempts, the phone bleeped. The browser opened.

"You know overseas data charges..."

"UK network," he pointed out smugly. I was about to argue back that buying me a new phone was still an unnecessary expense, as it might be months before we returned to England for good, but I bit my tongue. I was being obstructive and he was getting impatient—with due cause, admittedly. Even so, did he really want all these smalltown Yorkshire folk seeing his naked ass on Grindr? I mean, it was a nice ass, and everything...

Oh, but this wasn't Grindr. It was—well, I wasn't really sure what it was.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a receipt."

"For?"

"Read it."

I read it. It said:

On demand, I promise to pay Solomon Brooks the sum of:

- My love forever
- My lips in his constant service
- My body for as long as he desires it
- My support in everything he does
- My heart for it is already his
- My life

Signed: *Adam Ashton*

Love of your *new* life, Captain of your Heart

p.s. Sorry for pushing in.

As George would say, *what a sap!*

"On your knees," I said.

"Huh?"

"You missed something."

He smiled. "You want me to do that here?"

I pretended to weigh it up, laughed and kissed him.  
“Let’s go blow those clouds away.”

\*\*\*\*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Epilogue

My birthday. Thirty-two. Not special, but I was maybe a little more up for celebrating this time around.

Also, James's birthday.

We'd intended to leave home early to avoid hitting rush hour traffic, but Noah and Matty "slept in"—must've been some pretty energetic dreams they were having, the way the bed was squeaking.

Noah peered through the car's rear window into the trunk—how strange to call it that after six months in England.

"What's with the flower pots?" he asked. Adam shot him a warning glance.

"It's OK," I said. "They're for James's grave, Noah."

"Right." He nodded. "Why?"

Matty lightly slapped Noah's arm.

"I think it's a lovely idea," he said.

Huh. Yeah, well, of course you do.

Adam and I had already done the whole personality analysis on Matty. He was gushy and flamboyant, and reminded me of James. He was overemotional and dependent, and reminded Adam of Bobby. Physically, he was slightly built, around five eight, so incredibly blond that his body fuzz gave him a golden aura, and he wore eyeliner and mascara. He loved romcoms, days spent at the beach or window shopping. And he loved Noah. Possibly Noah loved him, but the jury was still out on that one.

Actually, after seeing Matty without mascara a couple of times, I could understand why he thought it necessary. He looked like he had no eyelashes and his eyes were huge—huge still today, as he was wearing his glasses. Pretty geek. Cute, if you liked that sort of thing, which I may have done, once upon a time...

"You OK, handsome?"

"Yep. You, Cap'n?"

Adam grinned and "accidentally" tried to use my knee to put the car in gear.

“Aww,” Matty gushed. Noah huffed. “We should totally have pet names for each other.”

“Don’t think so.”

Yep, that was my brother-in-law, all stoic, masculine and... dismissive. Reminded me of someone I used to know. I’ll admit, dredging through it all in my bereavement therapy sessions was tough. All that getting it out in the open bull—it really wasn’t me. But I was healing OK, and it helped having Noah around, to remind me of how crappy life was before I faced up to everything. Not that Noah was having to deal with anything close to the hell I’d been through. For that, I was eternally grateful—to James, especially, and to people like Calvin. Looking back now, I could more readily appreciate how much fun it was being with Cal. I’d kind of forgotten that, and it was all down to the timing. Cal left, and then James died, and somehow my brain mashed it all together, so that my grief for James transformed into hate for Calvin. Or so my therapist tells me. Whatever, we were young, and maybe in his own way, Cal loved me, but politics was always his real passion. In fact, I’d seen him on TV a while back, as spokesperson for a charity protesting the FDA ban on organ donation by gay men. He did a great interview—calm, assertive, to the point—I guess we all find our place in the world eventually. Even the stubborn bastards, like me and Noah. Maybe he’d grow out of it. Maybe Matty would stay around long enough to help him, but they were only nineteen. Plenty of life ahead of them yet.

We set off on the three and a half hour drive from Norfolk to Yorkshire (like it was going to take anywhere near that long with who was behind the wheel), and I tuned out from Matty’s chattering, listening instead to the radio, thinking ahead to the party. James had died the summer before we turned twenty-one—the real reason I’d gone to the States and decided to stay there—and I’d never celebrated a birthday since. Until the ton of daffodils Adam had filled my office with last year, the only way I knew it was my birthday at all was the annual phone call from my mother and gift from Elise—always cufflinks. Last year’s were plain black with white lettering, both bearing the words, “Thirty something.” In my collection I also had: “Trust me/I’m an engineer,” “CTRL/ESC,” “If found/return to wife,” as well as X-wing fighters and a miniature protractor and set square. Predictable, yes, but both functional and gift-like—perfect for someone like me, not to mention giving Elise the chance to make her point, while also crippling my defense by turning it into ingratitude. Oh, she wasn’t that bad really, and she had sent me love and best wishes.

So a birthday party, then, of sorts. It was actually more a celebration of James's life, and of justice finally being served, with the four men who killed him sentenced to life imprisonment. To my mind it was nowhere near enough, and in my darker moments the vengeful demon would rise from deep within, bringing with him heinous twisted visions of cruel retribution that frankly made me no better than them. Hate is bleak, and it destroys you. Whenever it threatened to take me over, I'd remind myself of what Yvonne said—about it fading eventually. I found some solace in that. But mostly I chose not to think about them. These days, I'd only realize I was thinking about them because I hadn't been, if that makes any sense at all. Probably not. It had been a crazy year—in a good way. The best of my life, so far... We'd moved back to England, into that big old farmhouse. And it really was way too big for just the three of us, so, we thought, why not rent out a couple of rooms to students? It worked right up to the point of, "Matty, this is Noah."

And we'd got married last summer. George flew over for the wedding, stayed at the King's Head, along with the Ashtons, which was also where we had our reception. George thought it was quaint. George thought everything "British" was quaint, including my mother, whom she patted on the arm at frequent intervals, telling her she was "a hoot." She took it well.

"Is everyone in Boston gay, Solomon?"

"No, Mum. Why?"

"She keeps touching me."

"She's just being friendly."

"And she has a man's name."

Conclusive, no?

I zoned back in to the sound of Freddie Mercury's soaring vocals coming through the car speakers. Adam and I glanced at each other, held our laughter right through to the opera section, at which point it exploded from us, leaving our backseat companions somewhat bemused. Sorry guys, private joke.

\*\*\*\*

The bitter blast from the North Sea speared our faces like shards of ice as we made our way through the cemetery. In spite of the cold, it was beautiful, with mounds of snowdrops huddling in the shelter of willows, bare but for the green floret shoots of new leaves. Purple, white and yellow crocuses brashly lined the path ahead, quivering rows of tiny hot air balloons readying for take-

off. And there were daffodils, of course, various and abundant. Adam squeezed my hand, that unspoken, *You OK?* I squeezed back. *Yes.* I was.

Today, as always, James's grave was adorned with seasonal flowers of every color. I set down the pot I was carrying. Adam did the same.

"Don't you feel a bit weird, digging in a grave?" Matty asked, passing me the trowel. I smiled.

"He's buried a bit deeper, Matt," I said. He rolled those huge eyes of his.

"You know what I mean."

I did, and he was right. I was feeling very uneasy, standing over the place where James lay at rest, moving aside other people's floral offerings. A random and wholly inappropriate thought entered my head—Donny's question. I peered down at the space I'd just cleared. *Definitely a top today, what with you all the way down there.*

I knelt on the cold earth and prodded into it with my trowel, removing a tiny mound of soil, recalling the countless times I'd seen my mother preparing our garden for new plants.

"The compost is still in the car."

"I'll go get it," Adam said. He left. Noah and Matty loitered. I carried on digging.

*"Hey there, blue skies. How's heaven treating you?"*

*"Oh, you know. It's OK."*

*"Only OK?"*

*"It's a bit boring. I mean, look at the place, won't you? There's no bedrooms to tidy, no chores to do, no parents hassling..."*

*"But you're free."*

*"I can do whatever I like, go wherever I choose, be here, there, and everywhere, all at once. But it's not quite being alive, is it?"*

*"Don't say that."*

*"It's true. Living is better. But you don't need me dragging you down, not today. It's our birthday. And I hear you got married."*

*"I did. His name's Adam. I think you'd like him."*

*"He makes you happy."*

*"Yeah."*

*"Then I already do."*

*"I wish you could've met him."*

*"Me too."*

*"I'm sorry I let you down. I hope you can forgive me."*

*"You didn't let me down, sunshine, but if you need it, my forgiveness is yours. Just be happy and forgive yourself."*

*"I'm getting there."*

*"Yeah, you are. Hey, guess what? Your husband's back."*

Adam crouched beside me and tipped a little of the compost into the two holes I had made. I carefully removed the soil plugs from each plant pot and positioned them, patting the earth flat around the new shoots of daffodils. A little gasp sounded behind us. Adam chuckled.

"Matty?" I guessed.

"How did you know?"

Adam held out his hand to me, helping me to my feet. The knees of my jeans were soaked wet through, yet I didn't feel cold, with my captain's warm strong arms around me, holding me close, holding me together. We stepped back to admire the daffodils we had planted, that would return each spring, to bloom for James's and my birthday. I snuggled up to Adam.

"You ready?" he asked. I nodded, took one last look at James's photo.

"Happy birthday, blues skies," I whispered.

And the wind whispered back.

*"Happy birthday, my sweet sunshine."*

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Debbie McGowan is an author and publisher based in a semi-rural corner of Lancashire, England. She writes character-driven fiction, covering life, love, relationships—the whole shazam. A working class girl, she ‘ran away’ to London at 17, was homeless, unemployed and then homeless again, interspersed with animal rights activism (all legal, honest ;) ) and volunteer work as a mental health advocate. At 25, she went back to college to study social science—tough with two toddlers, but they had a ‘stay at home’ dad, so it worked itself out. These days, the toddlers are young women (much to their chagrin), and Debbie teaches undergraduate students, writes novels and runs an independent publishing company, occasionally grabbing an hour of sleep where she can!*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



# *Missing Piece*

A Love's Landscapes Story  
*by*  
Riina Y.T.

# MISSING PIECE

By Riina Y.T.

## Photo Description

The photograph shows a close-up of two young men from behind. Both are wearing white tank tops. One of them is holding the other close to his chest, kissing the back of his neck.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He'd lost everything dear to him in one devastating moment. His family turned their backs on him; his friends no longer took his calls. It was the one moment that he was totally true to himself, the moment he told them that he was in love with another man.*

*With all of that loss you'd think the universe would be at least a little nice to him... no, the man he loved so dearly and risked everything for was on his couch with the twink from downstairs.*

*Is it bad that I had a hard time holding in my elation? I have wanted him from the moment I saw him. Could it finally be my time? Could he ever really want me?*

*Please give us our HEA.*

Sincerely,

Raevyn

*P.S. Contemporary, please. Some angst is good, but not necessary. I'd like them to work for their love, just not too hard. :)*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** businessmen, friends to lovers, slow burn/UST, cookie addiction, sweet romance, hurt/comfort, angst

**Content Warning:** infidelity/cheating of secondary character

**Word Count:** 65,237

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

*Dedication*

Raevyn, big hugs and a story *just* for you! :)

We've only known each other for a very short time, but I can tell you are doing an amazing job for the M/M Romance community and this wonderful event. I appreciate your help on my other writing, and I hope you will have a little fun with this one.

More hugs!

# **MISSING PIECE**

**By Riina Y.T.**

## Chapter One

### *Untouchable*

With an inward groan, Mattia let himself sink into the rather uncomfortable metal chair behind the small glass table, as he gave the slowly filling conference room a quick, all-around glance. He should have gotten here the day before; the early flight had been a lot more hectic, the traffic terrible, and everything just far more exhausting than he had anticipated.

*At last, some room to breathe.* Today, he decided, would be a good day for a change, despite the irritating start. Mattia wanted to leave those recent cumulative *bad* days behind him; he'd had enough of downs lately; he *needed* positive, wanted *exciting*.

Unintentionally, Mattia's gaze locked on a young woman with short honey-blond hair, wearing a black suit and white blouse, standing near the window with a cell phone pressed to her ear. A gentle smile played on her lipstick-red lips. Mattia imagined her making one last call to her husband, perhaps telling him how much she would miss him this weekend, probably wishing him a good day at work, saying she can't wait until they are reunited. Maybe she isn't married; instead, she might be calling her family. Her mother perhaps, living in another state, Texas maybe, wishing her a happy birthday, or calling to see if she was doing okay. Mattia couldn't help but remember the last phone call he made to his mother. How he wished that one call, and the many unanswered that followed, would have made him smile a warm smile like hers; instead, it only brought him tears.

*I just want to forget. Everything.*

The lady finished her phone call, which probably was nothing like he pictured. She most likely just checked in on some last minute changes with a client or something along those lines. After a long moment of bittersweet memories from the past, Mattia's eyes caught sight of a brunet mop of unruly curls, and his stomach tensed, the feeling unfamiliar and far from comfortable. Mattia studied the man's wavy, hazelnut-colored, somewhat perfectly styled hair. If Mattia had to guess, he probably used pomade along the hairline, to give it that sexy, sophisticated, half-slicked-back look.

All of a sudden, nearly forgotten images of Leo, hot summer days, and the freedom of being sixteen years old appeared before his mind's eye. For no reason at all, his lips curved into a thoughtful smile.

*Leo.*

With a closer look, Mattia quickly noted that the rest of the man looked quite familiar as well, the soft and gentle features of his face were similar to Leo's, even his skin was as fair and appeared to be just as smooth. Mattia could tell he looked quite delicate, yet definitely masculine. His body must be slim, perhaps strong at the same time. Well, he couldn't really see what was going on underneath the man's dark suit, plus he was seated and—Mattia scolded himself, he really shouldn't be staring at anyone, especially not at this very moment.

*It couldn't be Leo.*

*Impossible.*

What were the odds to ever run into Leo again, not to mention out here in Philadelphia of all places?

Mattia dismissed those ridiculous thoughts and returned all of his attention to the people in charge of this weekend. Honey & Sugar, the company he last worked with developing one of his most successful projects to date, hosted a large conference and trade show from Friday afternoon through Monday evening at a ritzy hotel in downtown Philadelphia.

He gave a curt nod toward his easygoing business partner of one year, Mr. Fisher. Next to him stood the rather strict head of the creative division, Paul Sanders, and his friendly assistants, Donna and Clark, whom he'd miss working with the most. They had been highly pleasing clients, and it was rather sad to see their partnership come to an end.

The presentation he had planned for today would *kick ass*, he was certain. This would also be the perfect crowd to find a new project he could lose himself in. After all, he had quite a large array of recently developed applications and software to show off. Mattia hoped his good reputation would precede him. As a self-employed freelancer, he could only invest so much time in each project.

Many of the companies that came to him often had a certain deadline he wouldn't always be able to meet, hence he couldn't take on every job he liked. Some were just too complex, too time consuming; it would be impossible for him to carry them out by himself.

Mattia often thought of expanding, finding a business partner maybe, or starting his own company.

One day he would really like that.

\*\*\*\*

“Morning Leo, taking notes already?”

The familiar voice, rich and deep, tore him out of his daydreams. *Gee*, he hadn't realized he'd been drifting off again. The conference had already begun, but he failed to concentrate on anything; the hotel coffee was way too weak and tasted like hot water over gravel. *Yuck*. Perhaps he should get his hands on a snack or better coffee soon, before that taste made him sick. Maybe he could ask Miguel if he had any gum on him. The dark-haired man who sneaked up behind him, and was now seated comfortably next to Leo, nudged his shoulder.

Leo turned and forced a smile. “Hey, Miguel.” He greeted his colleague as chipper as he could muster. For some odd reason, he felt anything but awake, and his usual cheerfulness wasn't anywhere to be found today. *Ugh*. Talk about bad days.

Miguel leaned in closer. “D’you wanna get together after dinner tonight?” he whispered, as close as he dared without touching, a seductive smile playing on his full lips. His hand rested on Leo’s thigh, feeling warm and oddly soothing.

*Oh, he wants us to get together again.*

Leo considered the handsome Puerto Rican, with his expressive eyes and neatly trimmed beard. *Mh-hm*. Miguel sure was gorgeous, sort of his type as well, so it really didn't make a lot of sense that Leo hadn't been anticipating spending the night, any night, with Miguel recently. He was nice enough company for one night of *no-strings-attached* distraction. But, to be honest, Leo knew very little of the man, other than his position in the company they shared and what *position* he preferred in the bedroom. Come to think of it, Leo wasn't even sure how old Miguel was.

*Ah, what the hell.*

“Yeah, of course,” Leo assured Miguel with a small smile. He wondered briefly how he would get through today without his typical amount of strong coffee and sugar. What he'd give for a Mars Bar or some chocolate cookies. Hell, a handful of Smarties would do right now. But the thought of that caramel had his mouth watering. Having a serious sugar addiction, most days Leo would get cranky if he didn't have his fill. Leo was surprised he could be awake, but then, he wasn't really sure he even left the bed this morning. This might be a dream for all he knew.

Thinking about Miguel's offer, considering this was not a dream, maybe getting together wasn't all that bad an idea. A few shared hours together sounded better than being by himself the entire weekend, after all. Hotels tended to make Leo feel a little uneasy. God knew why.

Miguel nodded, satisfied, and beamed at him with a wicked grin. "Maybe we can have a few drinks at the bar after dinner. I heard they serve a *dirty* martini." He punctuated his last words with a squeeze of Leo's thigh.

What really got Leo's attention were those distracting deep-brown eyes. The way they glowed right back at Leo felt soothing, just like the man's touch. Miguel's eyes, he had to admit, really were beautiful. Leo could drown in them. They were a good shade darker than his own, and while Leo had a lot of green in the mix, Miguel's were just dark brown like sixty percent cacao-chocolate.

"Martinis sure sound good," agreed Leo. His heart felt a little lighter at the prospect of someone's company, after all. He remembered the night they met, during Leo's second Christmas party with MetalWarez. With Miguel being relatively new at the time and in marketing, while Leo was with the department for basic-preliminary development, they hadn't really crossed paths before. Miguel's obvious interest, as he'd brought him a martini and a plate with a few pieces of sushi, had flattered Leo.

Since then, they had been hooking up once a month, give or take, for almost a year now. It was something that hadn't happened before with anyone else, and it wasn't so much because he *liked* Miguel. Sure, Leo liked him all right, but it was just so convenient to have someone you could call up when you felt like it. They were both on the same page on that, and Leo simply didn't do relationships, never had. Random sex encounters were quite enough for him to satisfy his needs whenever he felt like he wanted closer contact with another human being. In his eyes, most guys were simply not worth the hassle, and no one ever got his heart beating faster. Leo was probably just a bit too messed up in the *love* department.

There once had been someone. Someone mysterious and interesting, someone who had pushed all his buttons without trying. It was all kinds of ridiculous to think he was still in love with a guy he never even got a chance to kiss. Leo had only been a kid back then, and yet, the other boy had been all Leo could think of for years afterward. He'd been much too hung up over pointless wishes, fruitless hopes, and dreams he knew would never come true.

What did that say about him? Exactly! He was all kinds of messed up in regards to love, and he didn't feel like trying much anymore. Leo shook his

head as if it would actually stop his brain from thinking any further about that. He hadn't thought about *him* in a long time. Leo didn't want to go down that road again.

"I take consulting very seriously as there are many very important features to consider depending on device features, offline functioning, discoverability, speed, installation, maintenance, platform independence, and of course, development costs and user interfaces."

The confident voice echoing from the small podium up front drew Leo's attention back to the conference and the reason he was here. Leo was supposed to watch, pay attention, and gather as much information on everyone and everything as he could. Lifting his head in the direction of the speaker, he saw who that gorgeous voice belonged to. There was no way Leo could miss the man's obvious attractiveness. The gelled back, short, midnight-black hair, his tall and lean posture and, *oh*, did he mention the incredibly sexy voice?

The man looked striking in his neat, blue, pinstriped suit. His gaze appeared to be piercing, but that sweet, confident smile gave him a somewhat likable touch. Leo felt like melting inside.

*Geez*, he hadn't seen anyone that gorgeous in a very long time, not outside TV land, at least. If Leo wanted to keep his job, he'd have to do his best and try hard to listen to what the man up front was delivering. It might just be the guy they were looking for. Who knew?

Leo had been working with MetalWarez for the last two years, give or take a few months. He looked forward to continuing for a while longer, if possible. The trade show tomorrow would be perfect to show off some of their recent products, and in addition to that, they were hoping to discover a possible business partner for one of their future products.

The speaker's deep, manly voice sounded somewhat familiar, but Leo couldn't put his finger on it. He wished he had caught the man's name. Now, he might have to wait until they handed out papers, or he got a closer look at him. Leo sat too far in the back to read his name tag.

Leo sighed, watching the handsome man as he continued his speech, operating the PowerPoint presentation all the while. Besides his good looks, he also seemed quite competent and sounded confident. This might actually be a rather fruitful conference after all.

*Just, pay attention, Leo.*

“To summarize, native apps, hybrid apps, or web apps are all ways to cater to the needs of the mobile user. There is no unique best solution: each of these has their strengths and weaknesses.”

Mattia pressed the little button on his remote and paused long enough for the slide to move on while taking another short moment to breathe in and out. His stomach was fluttering a little, but the satisfied looks on the conference attendees calmed his nerves whenever he caught their smiles.

“The choice of one versus the other depends on each company’s unique needs.”

He paused long enough for his final words to sink in as he waited for questions he knew were coming. Mattia answered them all with his brightest, most reassuring smile, adding a good amount of confidence.

*Shit, my cheeks are already hurting.*

The only thing that had kept him slightly off balance was that curly-haired stranger’s eyes on him. It wasn’t a look of disapproval, judgment, or anything indecent. He seemed to be genuinely interested, considering Mattia’s services for his company, perhaps? It felt as if he watched Mattia’s every move, though, as if his gaze was suddenly glued to him.

*Stop looking at him, man.*

*But he looks so familiar, I can’t help it.*

As he hoped, his well-thought-out presentation earned Mattia satisfied and approving looks, welcoming smiles, and a round of applause. He would have to make sure to hand out pamphlets and business cards and thank everyone personally later. Maybe Mattia would be lucky today and someone would consider working with him in the future. He looked forward to doing business with many of the participating companies from all across the country. Many of them probably had small branches in the area, or perhaps, they could meet somewhere in between to discuss their interest in him. He’d done that before. Mattia had also done many Skype conferences in the past. It seemed to be quite a trend lately and always went smoothly for him and everyone involved.

Mattia had to be realistic, though, since he wasn’t able to do magic, and he didn’t know code that couldn’t easily be figured out. Most of his business contacts were within driving distance to his home and office in Chicago. After all, developers were scattered all around the country, and he wasn’t anyone special.

At half past two, the conference took a late lunch break, and people started to scatter in all directions. Some formed clusters here and there, getting themselves a snack and coffee, but many headed out for the restroom or fresh air.

Mattia took a quick look around, and instantly he spotted the curly-haired guy he'd seen earlier. He appeared to be quite popular, being surrounded by two tall Asian businessmen in sleek suits and three rather chatty women, all trying to engage him in conversation. The poor fellow seemed to be undecided which of them he should answer first or perhaps whether or not he should excuse himself.

Mattia almost felt sorry for him. He knew how tiring those kinds of gatherings could be.

The morning had been good, but now he really needed a break for fresh air and decent coffee. Mattia nodded to a short, gray-haired man handing Mattia his business card. Making his way toward the exit, he waved his good-bye to the friendly couple he'd given his business card to earlier, and as fast as he dared, without appearing to be in a hurry, disappeared through the glass doors. From there, he headed straight for the stairs and outside toward the nearby Starbucks one block away.

As soon as he'd satisfied his caffeine needs, Mattia slowly strolled back to the building, and once inside, headed directly for the conference room.

*Thank God for decent, non-hotel coffee.*

Cradling his silver Starbucks tumbler, still half-filled with the delicious hot brew, he immediately spotted the brunet man from earlier, now seated behind one of the many tables in the far back of the room. Mattia smiled, watching him fuss with papers, an engrossed look on his face.

Why was that man so intriguing?

Mattia never felt quite so drawn to any other man like that. When he'd met his boyfriend, Richard, they hadn't hit it off right from the start, but eventually grew fond of each other. It had been all that he knew, really, and this was so badly unsettling that he wanted to observe the man's every move.

Mattia was in a happy relationship and therefore definitely not *looking*, so why did he feel like he couldn't take his eyes off this guy?

And why did that guy have to remind him so much of Leo?

After studying the stranger for a few long moments, the guy eventually looked up, as if he sensed Mattia's curious gaze on him. Their eyes met, and in that instant, a strange, unfamiliar fuzziness began to boil low in his belly. Mattia immediately turned around, certain he was flushed, and he was just in time to see the telltale smirk on his colleague's face. Mattia groaned inwardly. Had she been watching him, watching the cute stranger?

"What's with the look, hun? And who is that pretty guy over there?" Her voice, as she spoke, rose and fell in a musical way that always made him cringe a little inside.

As expected, Shirley didn't beat about the bush, and despite him being someone who enjoyed keeping most things private, he found it extremely easy to talk to her. They had hit it off from the day they met. Her lively persona kept their work environment light and fresh, and a few times, it saved him from drowning in charts, numbers and code. Mattia loved his software and programming, but even he needed a reminder, every now and then, that there was the possibility of working yourself to death.

"What guy?" Mattia tried to come across as nonchalant as he knew how, encouraging her with subtle hand movements to walk away. She wouldn't budge.

"Oh, don't try to fool me. You've been checking him out all day," Shirley said in a chiding tone, moving closer to where he stood.

*Crap.* She knew him too well already. They'd only met a few months ago, when Shirley replaced Harald Stone, who had been his closest contact during his last project with Honey & Sugar. She went out of her way to assist him with tasks she wasn't even meant to know about. Mattia *almost* considered her a friend. But because they would soon go their separate ways, having successfully completed the application development just a few weeks ago, he didn't want to get too attached to her.

"I haven't," Mattia insisted. "And I really don't know who he is."

"Hm. Interesting." She eyed him closely then looked over his shoulder to study *Curly Hair* once again before nudging his shoulder, a wicked smile on her full, lipstick-red lips. "I approve of this one. He is pretty cute."

"What are you talking about, Shirley?" Mattia muttered, "I wasn't looking. I am in a serious relationship. You know that."

"Pah. Richard. That douche." She rolled her faded-green eyes dramatically, like she so often did. "Seriously Mattia, you can do so much better than him."

“Shirley! For chrissake. Richard is great,” he hissed under his breath. “How often do I have to tell you that I love him?”

Shirley made a noise that told him she was unimpressed.

“Just because he had a bad day when we all got together doesn’t mean he’s always like that.” Mattia sighed. It was probably useless to convince her that Richard could be nice and loving.

“Whatever, Mattia.” She shook her beautiful hair a little, pointing at the man in question. “Take cutie over there for example, I bet he’s a really sweet kid. You deserve someone who treats you nice, hun,” she encouraged with a pat on his shoulder.

He knew she only meant well, but he really did love Richard.

Mattia took a chance and looked over his shoulder to see the cute stranger’s face again. Just a quick look. Won’t hurt right?

*Yeah, he is cute, all right.*

But he was definitely no teenager. “Kid?” Mattia regarded her. “He’s gotta be at least twenty something. Twenty-four, maybe? Definitely not a kid. And Richard does treat me nice,” he complained, still trying to get Shirley to move and stop talking about that guy or Richard.

Mattia wanted to pout and, more than anything, just be finished with today. Somehow, this scene was irritating the hell out of him. Not only was the urge to check on *Curly Hair* too strong, Shirley also began to slightly annoy him. She always found a way to remind him of that day all three of them went out to dinner, when Richard had been rather unfriendly and acted all spoiled and made a drama out of everything. It hadn’t been his best move, Mattia had to agree.

Shirley just loved to bring it up again and again and tell him that he deserved someone better, someone who would cheer him up and fix his grumpy moments, instead of enhancing his moodiness with spoiled actions or ruin what should have been a fun night out. Her words, not his. As if Richard always behaved like that. He didn’t, really. Only sometimes. And it hadn’t been all *that* bad; everyone went home with clean clothes and a smile, more or less. Richard just could be a little... complicated.

“No, seriously, Mattia, he *is* pretty. Just look at those lovely, chestnut-brown locks, the porcelain skin, and those cheekbones!” She swooned. “He totally gives off that *boy-next-door* vibe, don’t you think? Not like you, Mattia dear.” She gave a loud, mocking sigh, and he rolled his eyes.

“Don’t give me that look! You act more thirty-six than twenty-six, Mister. Always so grumpy. You know that doesn’t do you any favors.” Shirley grinned and punched him for emphasis.

“Okay, okay. Enough of that.” He put an arm around Shirley’s slender shoulder and tugged her toward the door. “We have about twenty minutes until the last round. Let’s get some fresh air, shall we?”

“Don’t you wanna ask cutie over there to go with you, instead?” she whispered teasingly, and Mattia thought he felt his stomach drop at the thought of them—*Curly Hair* and him—talking.

What a strange day.

“Maybe you should go and talk to him, Shirl.” He squeezed her a little and finally got her moving. “If he is obviously your type, you might hit it off. Who knows?”

Mattia thought Shirley was one of the prettiest and sweetest women he’d had the pleasure to meet. Tall and curvy in all the right places, always dressed fashionably, with shoulder-length, wavy, butterscotch-colored hair, and always a smile on her lips. She was charming and caring, bubbly, and just a bit feisty. A little too much for him, he had to admit at times, as he preferred quiet and conservative over lively and happy-go-lucky. But she was a wonderful person to be with.

Mattia was certain they would make a pretty pair, *Curly Hair* and her, as they appeared to both have the same energetic and charming aura.

“Puh-leeze, darling.” Shirley slipped out from his hold while turning her body toward him, her girly curves almost touching him in places he’d rather not have them touch. She gave him one more of her overly dramatic eye rolls and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow instead, pulling him along towards the glass doors. “Just so you know, *Pretty Guy* so checked *you* out, not me.”

*Huh? Had he really?*

With one final look over his shoulder, he saw the cute stranger watching them walk away.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Two

### *Memories of a Long Ago Summer*

“We are looking forward to hearing from you again.”

Leo let out a deep breath as he watched yet another satisfied visitor walk away with a handful of pamphlets. It was only midday, but Leo felt exhausted to the bone; he just wanted to sit down for a while, somewhere tucked away from everyone's eyes. Leo's cheeks were already hurting from having to smile all morning. He would give anything right now for the bottle of aspirin that stood on his nightstand in his hotel room.

The trade show had been in full swing since the early morning and, so far, a big success. The booth Leo and his colleagues were hosting still buzzed with visitors. He hardly had any time to take a breath or gather his thoughts for a moment or two. Of course, it thrilled Leo that he could contribute to their success, but he'd like it very much if he could get out of here in one piece, preferably sane.

Just when Leo thought he could sneak out for a moment and have one of his colleagues cover for him while he took his break, Leo caught sight of a tall, handsome, raven-haired man walking straight toward his company's stand.

*Oh, it's him.*

It had totally slipped his mind to check the man's name yesterday after the conference. The evening before was too busy, with everyone needing something from him, and pulling him here and there before he could get away for his evening with Miguel. And on top of everything else, Leo had hardly managed to get a good night's sleep. Something had been nagging at the back of his mind, and it drove him crazy not knowing what it was that kept him awake.

Watching the stranger's features as he approached, Leo stood there frozen to the spot behind his tall white table. There was a confident, self-assured air about the man; surely he'd remember seeing someone as breathtaking as him. Try as he might, Leo just couldn't shake that feeling that he knew the guy from somewhere other than yesterday's conference.

With each step the man took, his heart pounded faster. The closer he came, the lower Leo's gaze fell, as if it would make him invisible. Something in the man's eyes made him want to crawl under the table and disappear.

“Leo?”

The gravelly voice stopped him from completely making a fool of himself by ignoring the visitor. It would only earn him an earful from his colleagues.

Leo swallowed hard.

He lifted his head when the man spoke, “Leo? It’s you, right?”

When Leo looked up at the slightly taller man’s face to make eye contact, his eyes collided with the deepest pools of pale gray-blue he’d ever seen. That very moment Leo’s stomach dropped low into his belly.

*Oh shit.*

He *really* did know that face, that strong jawline and... those mysterious gray-blue eyes. They reminded him of the ocean right before a storm. Leo once knew someone with the same intimidating eyes. Now that he thought about it, it was amazing how much the guy looked like Mattia. How could he not have realized it earlier? But, no, it couldn’t possibly be him. *The universe doesn’t work that way, right?*

“I thought it couldn’t be you, but it is.” The guy shook his head as if he didn’t believe what or who he was seeing was real. “It’s you, Leo, isn’t it?”

Leo started. The handsome stranger gave him a warm, funny smile. It irritated him slightly, yet felt somewhat comforting, calming even. Leo had watched the man during the conference the day before, most of all, wondering why he appeared to be so familiar. He’d never been to Philadelphia before; they couldn’t have met anywhere else; that would have been pretty crazy, right? Talk about coincidences.

Just how did the man know his name?

*This is starting to freak me out a little.*

“I couldn’t sleep until I figured out where I know you from. And I know it sounds insane, but I am pretty sure it’s *you*,” he said with firm insistence. The man lowered his gaze and rubbed a hand across his temple, looking at Leo intently.

Leo concentrated and studied the stranger before him. The man’s gray-blue eyes locked on his own, as if he tried to make him *see* something telepathically. Not moving an inch from behind the tall white table, Leo admired his strong, masculine features. His clothing didn’t give too much away, but he imagined that underneath that business suit the man must be well built, with a muscular chest and well-defined torso.

Leo loved how his skin seemed to shimmer an interesting shade of olive under the artificial lights. Definitely Italian or Spanish heritage, he thought. There was no denying it, he was drop-dead gorgeous from up close, and Leo just couldn't shake that feeling of familiarity. It was irritating as hell.

"Oklahoma? Summer 2004. Your grandma." The man before him sighed. "Don't you... remember me?"

*Shit. Oklahoma.*

He'd only been to Oklahoma one time in his life.

That could only mean one thing. No way. That was impossible!

But then, suddenly, it all came back to him in a rush. *Mattia*. The guy with the icy-cold gaze of a polar bear and a heart as warm as the summer-like sun. Tall and lean body and hair black like a raven's. He now wore it short and sophisticated, but in his memory, it went down to his shoulders, unruly, and full of wild curls. A lot like it was right now, only much longer.

Leo caught his breath, and his vision blurred for a short moment. It was really him. *Mattia*. The most irritating and intoxicating guy Leo had ever come across. The boy who now was a man, whom he'd tried to forget so badly it almost worked. Apparently, Leo hadn't managed to erase *Mattia* from his memories completely; instead, those images had only been pushed far, far back.

"Tia." Leo's voice came out in a whisper. "Huh. It's been a while."

Leo could never forget his first and only crush. *Never*. At some point it had become too difficult to remember, so he just had to *forget*.

*And just look at him now!*

"You do remember."

*Mattia* smiled, obviously pleased. Leo liked how the simple words lit up *Mattia's* face like a fireworks display, causing his eyes to glitter like snow melting in the sun, rather than icicles ready to stab you in the heart. The hard wall Leo had built around his memory was momentarily gone, and his look of satisfaction made Leo feel weak-kneed. With his hands reaching for the white table in front of him, Leo gripped it hard, trying not to tremble as all kinds of emotions overcame him.

*He is still so damn beautiful.*

Leo felt blinded, his heart racing fast as if the revelation just made *Mattia* all the more stunning and breathtaking. He let out a nervous chuckle and had to

look away for a moment. It was ridiculous how the guy could affect him now that he knew it was his old friend. Just like back then, during their last week together, Leo felt dizzy just from standing too close. It had totally thrown him last evening, as they passed each other in the restaurant hallway, and their arms brushed by accident. Miguel had pulled and hurried Leo along, but he'd looked up anyway and gazed right into those deep, cold eyes. He almost tripped over his own feet. Now it all made sense. Mattia used to have that effect on him when they first met.

*Mattia.*

Geez, he'd seriously thought he would never see him again.

Leo never fully understood what made him want to be around that guy so much that he hadn't cared about anything else but a single chance to see and talk to him. It had been foolish all those years ago, but his heart seemed to have taken over at the time, and it probably would again if given the chance to befriend Mattia this second time around.

Leo shouldn't have liked Mattia that much; he never should have hoped and dreamed and fantasized. But he had, and Leo knew now, he still would. All the old memories came rushing back, filling his head with both the good and the bad that had happened, leaving him dizzy and just a little breathless.

They were silent for long moments and just stared at each other. Leo felt awkward, and tried to think of something to say, like, *how have you been?* Or, *what are you doing here?* But Leo had seen him yesterday, and from the way he'd held that presentation in front of all those companies, it was obvious that Mattia had been doing very well; and from what he heard, it was also obvious just what he was doing here—making business contacts—as simple as that.

It was Mattia who pulled him out of his thoughts like he used to when Leo would fall into the bad habit of daydreaming or plotting out all kinds of plans as they sat by the lake.

"I almost didn't recognize you without your baggy pants and colorful hair," Mattia said with a shaky laugh.

*Really?*

Leo wanted to roll his eyes. He thought the ten years that passed since they'd seen each other might have a little more to do with it. He could hardly contain a snicker. Leo used to be all skater-boy and rebellious, never wearing anything other than brown baggy pants or ripped blue jeans. His closet

consisted of all sorts of crazy T-shirts with cartoon characters or funny quotes. Back then, he also had blue and purple streaks in his hair, which he always straightened with his grandma's flat iron. How he had hated those curls! And, oh boy, there used to be that ridiculous piercing in his nose!

"Well, *you* certainly don't look much like you used to ten years ago," Leo replied with a bittersweet smile.

Sometimes Leo missed those carefree days.

"So, what happened to your style?" Mattia asked curiously, running a hand through his thick hair. Leo couldn't help but watch the slender digits disappear in his black strands. They were so dark and silky. What would it feel like to brush his own fingers through them?

Leo swallowed hard, his mouth going suddenly very dry.

"College happened, and I guess I grew up." He shrugged. "Had to eventually, you know, to make a living, support myself and all that." The words may have left his lips a little unsteadily, despite making a great effort to appear casually calm and relaxed. As a rule, he never managed nonchalant when he was nervous, and today wasn't an exception.

Mattia nodded thoughtfully, and Leo couldn't help but smile just looking at him. It felt great to see him again after all, and maybe just a little less awkward with each minute that passed. Maybe. He couldn't fully wrap his brain around the fact that they were practically standing across from each other, ten years later.

"I'm sorry about your grandma." Mattia regarded him with a sincere smile. "I never got the chance to tell you after you left."

"Thanks." Leo gave him an appreciative smile. For a moment, he remembered the last time he'd seen her. They hadn't been that close since they only saw each other once a year, but Leo remembered her as a loving woman who always did her best to make him feel happy, welcome, and safe. She had been a lot like his mother, whom he loved and adored to bits. Sadly, his grandma passed away the winter of the same year he spent the summer in Oklahoma, while his parents went through a divorce. That summer he also met Mattia.

Their eyes locked over the table, and Mattia shook his head, a gentle smile on his lips. "Man, I can't believe it." His voice was warm and soothing. "It's so good to see you, Leo."

Huh, now *that* was a surprise.

Despite everything, Leo didn't quite understand why Mattia was smiling at him as if he had just found his long lost kitten. He looked genuinely pleased. Well, if that wasn't just a *little* weird. Back then, for days, the guy hadn't spared him as much as a second look, always giving Leo the cold shoulder and avoiding him like the plague. He blew hot and cold like nobody he had ever met before or since then.

One day, when he finally gave in to Leo's persistence, they instantly hit it off and then spent four extraordinary weeks together, doing all kinds of stuff, like playing video games or basketball. They often went fishing and swimming at a nearby river, and sometimes just watched TV, while his grandma napped. Most of the time, Leo would ride his beat-up skateboard while Mattia rode on his cool, silver mountain bike next to him. It had been four pretty amazing and eventful weeks.

When Leo kept quiet for a long while, wondering just where they would go from here, Mattia broke the silence once again.

"You disappeared one day, and then you were just gone." He cleared his throat. "I didn't even know your last name, or where your family lived." There was a strange eagerness evident in his voice.

*Yeah well, you wanted me gone, remember?*

Leo shook his head; it didn't matter now. "My mother. I stayed with my mother after I returned home." His throat was so dry, he barely got out the words. "Virginia. I grew up in Virginia."

Why did his voice feel so shaky?

"Well..." Leo began, hoping he could get away for a while to gather his wits. "I was just about to take my lunch break, so if you'll excuse me," he said, fussing with the pamphlets in front of him as he turned to his colleague, a tall, slim and quite beautiful blonde woman in a fitted, white suit, giving him her brightest smile. "Kelly dear, would you please take over for me? I need a few minutes outside."

*Air, I need air.*

"Of course, Leo. I was wondering if you weren't taking your break at all."

She patted his shoulder and turned to Mattia who was still a stranger to her, beaming him the same thousand watt smile. "How may I help you, sir?"

“Uh. Thanks. I’m good. If you’ll excuse me.”

Leo heard the stumbled apologetic voice fade into the background as he wove his way through the throng of people, heading for the staircase at the far end of the ground floor.

“Wait. Leo! Just wait.” Mattia sounded a little breathless and looked somewhat nervous as he came up beside Leo, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him. Leo stared up at him and, for a long moment, forgot where he was. That intense icy gaze made him shiver, and it threw him right back to that one summer ten years ago.

That summer they had shared a lot of laughs and wonderful afternoons in each other’s company. Friends. They had been really good friends for four weeks. It was ridiculous how much those days had meant to Leo.

*He remembered it clearly as if it happened yesterday. Leo had been intrigued by the guy from the moment he’d laid eyes on him from across the street of his grandma’s house. That day, when he spotted the tall boy with the long raven hair, taking off his red T-shirt, Leo had picked up his skateboard and headed for their front lawn. Standing there uninvited, Leo then watched the boy intently from the other side of the neat, white picket fence. The boy was taller than Leo, but not by much, and Leo guessed he was also probably a little older than him. The boy’s black, wavy hair reached his shoulders, and his skin was a good shade darker than Leo’s. And those eyes were absolutely breathtaking and so intense; he’d never experienced a look from eyes like those.*

*The unknown boy stood a few feet away from where Leo was, kneeling down in the freshly mown grass and petting a beautiful black Labrador retriever. Leo kicked his skateboard and caught it in his hand, their eyes never unlocking, not even for a second.*

“You better get away from my house, stranger, or my dog will eat you.”

*The handsome raven-haired boy across from him glared at Leo, and at that moment he fell hard and fast. Leo wanted to get to know him, wanted to be friends. Worse yet, he wanted to kiss him. It had been a funny feeling, low in his stomach, a tingling on his skin, and for a moment that stretched too long, he thought he was going to throw up.*

*He had thought about kissing a boy before, many times in fact, but Leo was certain he wouldn’t get to kiss that boy any time soon, and that was fine. Leo*

*only wanted to be friends, get to know him, and explore those weird feelings, ideas, and possibilities.*

*Somewhat excited and motivated, Leo chuckled, rolled his eyes at the two—dog and boy—in the grass beyond the picket fence. Then he rode away on his skateboard.*

*For the next ten days, the same scenario repeated itself. Every day, Leo would observe the house across the street, and whenever he caught sight of the handsome boy and his dog, he would grab his skateboard, dash toward the house, and watch them until he was told to leave. Again and again. The first few times, Leo went away with a smile, and perhaps a bit of regret. Soon, he'd sworn, he wouldn't give up that easily any longer.*

*Leo had promised himself he'd get it right, that they would become friends. Being alone with his grandma hadn't made for the most thrilling summer vacation, and he was dying for company around his own age. But, he only wanted the mysterious boy from next door.*

*One morning, not too early, after Leo had a quick breakfast and talked to his grandma for a little while, he heard someone screaming, laughing perhaps, and it sounded a lot like it had been coming from across the street. Not many people lived close enough for them to be heard from a distance.*

*Leo had grabbed his skateboard, dashed out the front door, and immediately spotted his mystery boy and his dog running around in their garden, the boy throwing a small red ball. When Leo reached the house, the kid and dog stopped their game, and their usual staring contest began.*

*Eventually, Leo couldn't take it any longer and asked, "What's your dog's name?"*

*"What do you care?" the boy replied defensively, sitting in the grass and studying him curiously.*

*Leo took a step toward the white fence, placed both hands on the fancy wood, and leaned forward, studying both the boy and his dog closely.*

*"He looks like a Rex," Leo said cheerfully, giving them his brightest smile.*

*"Jupiter." The handsome boy rolled his eyes, and said firmly, "His name is Jupiter."*

*"Cool." Leo grinned, excited that he got the boy to talk to him. "You and Jupiter wanna come throw some balls with me?"*

*The boy crossed his denim-clad legs and regarded Leo for a long, quiet moment before he answered, "Not really."*

*His voice sounded rather disinterested, and Leo didn't like it one bit. He really wanted to hang out with the kid. It'd been a while since he had anyone fun to be around, and he was becoming restless in his grandmother's house all day.*

*"Oh, come on. I'm bored," Leo pleaded. He reached for his skateboard and placed it on the ground so that he could sit down on it. The raven-haired boy stared at him for a long moment and watched him closely through the bars of the fence before he eventually broke eye contact.*

*He looked over Leo's shoulder and back at him. "You live across the street? I haven't seen you around before," he asked rather curiously, his voice sounding friendlier with every word. Thinking that maybe he would get his new friend soon, Leo felt oddly cheerful.*

*"Just for the summer," Leo answered. He looked around the neighborhood, noticing that it was strangely quiet and mind-numbingly boring so he jumped off his board and walked up to the fence again, staring down at the boy and his dog. "I'm staying with my grandma until school starts."*

*The cute boy nodded, but looked up at him from where he sat in the grass, cross-legged and still petting Jupiter, who lay curled up next to him.*

*"Do you know if there is a skate park anywhere?"*

*Leo smiled to himself, thinking they could take turns on his board, and if the kid didn't know how to skate, Leo could teach him.*

*"No idea." The boy shrugged. "We just moved here this past Christmas."*

*Oh well, he could think of at least sixty-four other things they could be doing instead. "Never mind." Leo chuckled and leaned further across the fence. "Let's find some place to hang out then," he said brightly, and pointed at the black dog. "And bring Juup."*

*"His name is Jupiter," the boy muttered, which made Leo smile even brighter. Unexpectedly, the kid then nudged the dog. Jupiter quickly jumped to his feet and sniffed at a squeaky toy duck lying in the grass. It looked a lot like they were going to play, after all. Leo thought he was going to burst with excitement. He'd never played with such a big dog.*

*"I like Juup better," Leo exclaimed with a smirk.*

*The boy rolled his eyes and stood up, smiling at Leo, and nudging his dog to come along. Leo reached for the animal with the tender eyes and soft-looking fur, patting Jupiter on his rump and smiling at the mad wagging of his tail when he joined them on their first mission together.*

*Suddenly, everything changed as fast as it began. One week before Leo was about to leave Oklahoma to return to live with his mother, Mattia suddenly gave him the cold shoulder and went straight back to ignoring him. First, he'd say something like, "Sorry I can't hang out today", then the next day he told Leo outright to leave him alone. He said that he was busy and didn't want to waste his free time with him anymore.*

*The upset look on his face had bothered Leo, and it hurt to be sent away like that, after they had had so much fun during the previous weeks. Two days later, he'd almost gotten his new friend to come out from hiding, but then his father had called Mattia back inside, and that had been the end of it. Leo only saw him one last time—the day he was leaving and came to say good-bye.*

*Leo could tell something had been bothering Mattia, and for whatever reason, he chose to be an ass. He accepted it and tried not to let Mattia's frustrated last words get to him.*

*But they did, and the fierce anger in his friend's usually so cool, gray-blue eyes had hurt.*

*"Don't ever come near me again. Don't. Don't even look at me. I don't want to see you again, Leo. Just go!"*

Even today, those words still echoed in his mind, and memories of a time that appeared to have never happened continued to haunt him, all these years later. Leo had tried, but had never completely gotten over it.

He had genuinely liked Mattia.

Images of a sixteen-year-old Mattia faded when irritating, strange noises became louder, and Leo's head was swimming, feeling like freshly squeezed mush. For a moment, he thought someone was moving him, shoving and pushing him gently back and forth, carefully stirring him awake. Had he been sleeping?

"Leo?"

The deep, gravelly voice made his stomach churn. He blinked a couple of times, but his eyes were just so heavy, it seemed better to keep them shut. Feeling soft fabric beneath his fingers, and something firm hitting his back, Leo

realized he was indeed being moved. In fact, Mattia's hand still lingered on his shoulder. The strong fingers holding on to him made Leo feel a little shivery.

"Can you hear me, Leo?"

A soft, unexpected pinch to his side encouraged him to force his eyes open. *Why is it so bright in here?* When his sight finally adjusted, Leo was greeted by a pair of pale gray-blue eyes, twinkling slightly blue in the light, and a worried look on Mattia's face.

*Crap.* Leo let out a low groan. His brain was disturbingly foggy, and it felt a lot like someone had wiped his memory clean. *How did I get here?*

Leo took a look around and started when he found himself sitting on a large, red satin couch in the hotel lobby. For long moments, he wondered why he was on a sofa in the middle of the frigging hotel lobby when he'd been... oh God, what had he been doing? Leo couldn't remember a thing.

*What just happened?*

"Good God, Leo," Mattia said, with a note of relief. "You scared the crap out of me."

Leo couldn't remember anything except those sad gray-blue eyes and Mattia staring angrily at him when he was sixteen years old.

"Are you feeling all right? You're still as white as a sheet." Mattia considered him. "Didn't you eat anything?" he asked, concerned, and his expression told Leo that he was truthfully worried.

"Did I pass out?" Leo said in a small, panicky voice. "Oh God, I did, didn't I?"

Dammit, he should have eaten something a long time ago.

"Yeah. I thought you had a seizure or a heart attack, or something." Mattia glared at him as if he had lost consciousness for fun. Leo couldn't suppress a low chuckle, studying the worried look on Mattia's face, his full lips pursing together, and those dangerous eyes unblinking. It was sorta cute.

"You think that's funny?" Mattia growled at him. His face was glazed for a split second, and then he frowned. Fury flashed through his normally calm and pleasant demeanor, but Leo wouldn't be intimidated by that.

"No. I'm sorry," Leo said sincerely. "Thank you, for eh, rescuing me?" He beamed an amused smile at Mattia, knowing very well there wasn't anything to

be amused at, but he just couldn't help it. For a moment, he forgot all about the embarrassment he should be feeling right now.

"You can send Mr. Watt a *thank you card*," Mattia suggested with a smirk, all of the anger from a moment ago seeming to have left him as well. "Or better yet, you can buy something from his booth." Mattia winked at him, and Leo liked how it made his eyes crinkle.

*Watt?* Leo couldn't remember meeting anyone by that name. The slight confusion must have been evident on his face, because a heartbeat later, Mattia cleared that up as well.

"The kind man who helped me carry you," he answered Leo's unvoiced question.

*Oh.*

He had passed out for real, hadn't he?

Mattia reached in the chest pocket of his navy blue suit and pulled out a business card, which Leo guessed had Mr. Watt's details on it. For long moments, Leo admired Mattia's tall, lean body, acknowledging how incredibly good he looked in a suit, especially in that velvety-soft, shiny fabric which would probably feel terribly nice to cuddle up against. Naked. *Mh-hm.*

"Uh. Yeah, right." Leo dismissed those thoughts as fast as possible. "I will say my thanks for certain," he croaked, and then shoved the business card into the pocket of his gray slacks. When he looked back at Mattia, those gray-blue eyes filled with concern, Leo felt momentarily taken aback.

Then, slowly, the memories of the day returned one by one, and Leo recalled where he was, and that he'd talked to Mattia before he must have lost consciousness. Quickly, he felt the embarrassment return full force. How disconcerting to pass out in front of all those businessmen and women. That could have only happened to him.

"May I take you to lunch?"

Mattia's deep voice interrupted his thoughts, sounding almost cheerful which startled Leo. Ever since Mattia had come up to him earlier, something about him had baffled him. Maybe it was just the frustrating memory of how things ended between them the last time.

"I don't know. We aren't really friends or anything," Leo replied with a gloomy sigh.

*Don't you remember what your last words were to me?*

"It's just lunch, Leo," Mattia pointed out. "I think you need to eat something, and I am starving, myself," he said matter-of-factly, holding his hand out to Leo. "So, let's go."

Leo considered him for a moment or two. He didn't want to have lunch with Mattia, not right now at least. Knowing that he had to eat, Leo eventually gave in and nodded. Mattia's company might not be that bad. After all, they had a lot to talk about.

"Okay," he whispered with a sigh of irritation, taking the offered hand, letting Mattia reluctantly pull him off the sofa. He followed Mattia's lead, almost shoulder to shoulder as they moved off.

If nothing else, Leo could get outside into the welcome fresh air so he could clear his mind.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Three

### *Second Chances*

“Room service,” Mattia called out a second time, followed by another knock. He tried to smile casually when he finally heard movement behind the closed door. Holding up two plastic bags of Chinese takeout boxes made him feel rather silly. Maybe he should have gotten pizza instead. Or better yet, stayed in his room.

After today's quick and quiet lunch with Leo, they had gone their separate ways. He'd hoped they would meet again at the official dinner party at six o'clock in one of the many ballrooms, only Leo was missing. So, here he was now, two hours later, with some randomly chosen takeout, hoping Leo would actually be in his room, preferably alone and awake.

The door cracked open.

“I haven't ordered... Oh, Mattia?” Leo's eyes went wide as he saw him. Clutching his white bathrobe tightly against his chest, Leo made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded just a bit funny. He let his gaze travel quickly up and down Mattia's frame, then suddenly burst out laughing. “Boy, this feels like a pretty lousy porn scene.”

Mattia rolled his eyes, but he didn't feel like commenting on that. He already had difficulties remembering why this had been a good idea in the first place; he didn't need to think about porn or anything like that.

“What are you doing here?”

“You didn't come to dinner tonight, so I brought you something.”

Leo chuckled, “Are you spying on me?” he teased softly, lifting an eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest to make sure the robe wouldn't fall open.

Mattia forced his eyes away from looking at Leo's fingers where they gripped the soft robe, tightly. Catching the guy straight out of the shower hadn't been his intention. Mattia hadn't even considered the possibility. All he wanted was to see Leo, and maybe get a chance to apologize for being an ass all those years ago. Each time he had thought of bringing it up during lunch, he just chickened out. Looking at Leo made him feel like he was sixteen again and just a little lost and discouraged. He wanted to make it right, and eventually make Leo understand why he had done what he did.

Mattia coughed awkwardly. “Not really, just checked with the hotel staff and your company. Nobody had seen you so—I worried a little.”

“You did what?” Leo asked with a hint of surprise that kinda stung Mattia. Did he really come across as such a jerk? Did others see him as coldhearted, like his father had called him?

His mother even accused him of being selfish and arrogant, and Richard sometimes teased him about not being able to show real emotion. He never wanted anyone to think of him like that. Maybe he wasn't used to expressing himself openly, but that didn't mean he had never cared about anyone. In fact, Mattia cared a lot about the people he loved. Even if they didn't love him back anymore.

“Do I look like I'm joking?” Mattia tried to sound playful. “I never joke.”

He smiled, hoping to make light of the situation, even though it was most definitely not one of his specialties. He never thought of himself as coldhearted, though, and it hurt whenever someone else did. It wasn't his fault that he didn't give a damn about every person he met.

Still, he did care and worry about his family, whether they loved him or not, and he always gave a damn about the few friends he had, or used to have. Most people simply mistook his reserved behavior for him being an ass. He wasn't really, and only very few could see through the icy wall he involuntarily presented to the world.

“I know.” Leo laughed wholeheartedly, waggling his eyebrows. “I think that does count as spying on me, nonetheless.”

Leo spoke rather teasingly, in a quiet way, with a beautiful smile that reached his eyes. Mattia somehow liked the sound of his voice just then. Leo seemed to get him, he always had. Despite the short time they spent together when they were young, in the beginning, nothing Mattia said or did could offend or annoy him. How things ended, of course, that's another story.

Back then, he felt mostly perplexed by people's reactions to him. All the other kids found him pretty snobby and didn't want to have anything to do with him. As Mattia got older, he learned quickly to treasure and acknowledge the few people who seemed to genuinely like him. It wasn't easy for him to let someone in, especially if he'd just met that person. Most of the time, Mattia didn't even get the chance to know someone well enough for them to see his personality behind the mask. Nobody was drawn to him like they were to

Shirley, for example. She was the kind of person everyone loved and adored. Mattia was not.

“It’s not spying if one has good intentions, then it’s called caring,” Mattia said with a swift smile he hoped would go unnoticed. “So, can I come in?”

Leo just shook his head and moved back. “Sure, come on in.” He clutched his robe again and waved for Mattia to move inside. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right with you.”

*Now who sounds like a bad porn actor?*

Mattia chuckled, watching Leo disappear into the bathroom, the door swiftly closing behind him. He let himself further in, taking stock of what he saw. The room was quite large, a cozy looking queen-sized bed in the center. Boring white hotel sheets but *a lot* of pillows. Did he have more than two pillows in his room? Mattia didn’t think so. The beige curtains were drawn, and the otherwise dark space was lit by only two small lamps, one on each side of the bed.

When he spotted a silver tray, probably left behind by actual room service, Mattia picked it up with a grin, set it on a small wooden table close to one side of the wall, and unpacked their takeout dinner onto it. *Perfect*. Slipping out of his shoes, Mattia crawled into the bed and made himself comfortable, taking the tray of food with him.

“Sorry, I didn’t get anything to drink, since I don’t know what you like,” Mattia called into the room, once he heard the bathroom door crack open, and the unmistakable noises of someone opening and closing cupboards could be heard. He picked up the remote control and quickly found something that looked good enough to entertain him until Leo was finished.

“No problem, I’ve got ginger ale and water,” Leo shouted back, his voice muffled by the distance. “If you’d like something else, we’ll have to call the actual room service,” Leo chuckled.

Leo popped his head around the corner of the open door in the suite to where, Mattia guessed, was an adjoining room. He probably kept his clothes and suitcase there, since everything was tidy and neat here in the room where Mattia sat. He told Leo he’d like a ginger ale, and waited patiently, while watching the latest tennis news on the sports channel. Not that he paid much attention to it. His heart was beating unexpectedly fast, and he couldn’t stop from fidgeting.

When the noises in the other room quieted, Mattia turned in time to see Leo come through the doorway, two drinks and paper towels in hand. His hair was still wet and wavy, making Mattia think of warm summer days and vanilla ice cream by the beach. He didn't even try holding back that smile.

"You look mighty comfortable there." Leo's lips curved into a smile.

He noted Leo had slipped into a pair of black tracksuit bottoms and a white T-shirt, showing a black-and-white print on its front. Mattia squinted his eyes and made out the face of a man in a large black square, some stars and anchors and, well, that was all he could see.

"I am." Mattia couldn't help but grin, patting the spot beside him in invitation. "Food's getting cold."

Leo handed him a tall glass and set his own drink on top of the bedside table. Mattia watched Leo carefully crawl into bed with him, a bright smile plastered on Leo's face. He really had the easiest smile Mattia had ever seen. When they were both sixteen, it had surprised him just how much Leo could, and would, smile at him. That smile was always carefree and full of life. Mattia wasn't one of the funny guys; he had never wanted to make others laugh on purpose, telling jokes and such. It just wasn't his thing, but he appreciated it in Leo.

The moment he watched Leo walk out of his life, he'd realized how different Leo had always made him feel. Normal and accepted. For the first time, Mattia had felt free and unrestrained, like Leo didn't see him the way everyone else did.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Four

### *Forgive and Forget*

With a content smile, Leo sat back against the soft hotel pillow and took in the scene before him. Mattia was stretched out next to him on the bed, hands behind his head, and his jeans-clad legs half-covered by the thick white blanket. Leo would have to be a fool not to notice just how gorgeous Mattia looked in jeans and a plain sweater, one as black as his raven hair. It somehow brought out his unique gray-blue eyes. Leo also noted how relaxed Mattia appeared, and the thought of them being together again, maybe even managing a future friendship, or more, warmed his heart. He had dreamed of a second chance for a long time.

When they were kids, there had been no obvious sign from Mattia, whatsoever, that would indicate that he might like Leo in the same way Leo liked and adored Mattia.

Even now, Mattia gave off the very same “*Don’t touch me*” vibe while, at the same time, his eyes would soften whenever he looked at Leo. It made Leo feel welcome and liked now, not like that one day, long ago, when Mattia sent him away. As the years passed, Leo had forgiven him because he couldn’t hold a grudge if he tried; he was too fond of the idiot.

The uneasiness he had felt in Mattia’s company earlier today seemed to have faded, and what had kept him on edge all afternoon was the constant thought nagging him about whether or not there could finally be more between them. The few hours he’d spent with Mattia made it obvious to Leo that he was still completely and utterly drawn to the handsome man. Leo wanted him, in whatever way possible.

Could Mattia see them together, as more than friends, this time around?

When they were teenagers, Mattia had fascinated him in a way nobody else had. Everyone he met simply had to measure up to Mattia, only nobody ever did. Not on any level, and certainly not where it counted. Mattia somehow managed to crawl under his skin that summer.

Would Mattia now be able to return the feelings Leo had for him?

*What would he do, if I told him?*

Leo gazed at Mattia, his lips forming a smile he couldn't hold back, yet he felt uneasy and frightened at the possibility that they would never get a chance to be more. That he would never get his desired kiss, his friendship and love. Leo took a deep breath. He wanted more, so much more. It would slowly drive him crazy, being that close without knowing if he even had the slightest chance. For all he knew, Mattia could be as straight as they come.

Maybe he should finally find out...

"Tia," Leo whispered, carefully, afraid to startle his friend who seemed to be engrossed in watching some show Leo hadn't paid any attention to at all. The adorable, sleepy look on Mattia's face, as he turned and acknowledged Leo, tugged at his poor, lovesick heart. "Why are you doing this?" he finally asked.

He studied Mattia's surprised expression as Mattia reached for the pillow, adjusting it under his head, so he could look at Leo from a more comfortable angle, he guessed. Due to their lounging on the bed, Mattia's previously perfectly groomed raven hair appeared to be rather disheveled now, and that just made him look all the more adorable. Mattia's eyes softened, and Leo smiled, feeling a little more relaxed. Mattia would probably hurt him if he ever said that out loud.

"Doing what?" Mattia gave him a puzzled look, sounding as if he was trying to feign innocence, but Leo was almost certain he knew what Leo was getting at. He *really* did look adorable, though, all mussed, cozy, and serene in bed, framed by pillows and blankets. Leo's chest began to swell and his heart ache just a little more. How he wished he could freeze that moment in time, even if all he could do was to look at Mattia for all eternity.

He blinked a few times, trying not to be overly sentimental.

"This." He waved a hand toward the tray that held the now empty Chinese noodle boxes. "Bringing me food, sitting on my bed, and watching TV. Just... *This*," he emphasized. "All this... friendly, stuff?" Leo asked, a little baffled himself, hoping Mattia would note that there was no judgment in his words, only pure curiosity.

Mattia squinted at him, and something told Leo that perhaps Mattia wasn't sure, himself, why he was doing it. Was it weird that the thought of that alone made him feel good? Maybe Mattia subconsciously liked him more than he thought? But, they hadn't seen each other in years, so surely Leo didn't mean anything to him anymore, if he ever actually had.

“Well, you fainted on me today, Leo,” Mattia said with a hint of concern. “I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

Mattia's words made Leo feel unexpectedly warm and fuzzy inside. Did he mean it?

The thought that he might be able to reach the guy somewhere deep inside felt pretty damn good.

“And I appreciate it. I really do.” Leo watched Mattia closely, searching his face for any sign of... he didn't know what. “It's just...” He sighed and chewed on his bottom lip. “I don't know.”

Leo had only gotten to know Mattia over the course of four weeks that one summer, but he knew Mattia wasn't likely to just show up unannounced at anyone's door. He wasn't the outgoing kind. Leo had always liked that about him. It made him a little mysterious and safe to be friends with. Like a scared, stray kitten, wanting nothing to do with you, but it would always come back for warmth and food.

It had been almost some sort of challenge, trying to coax the boy with the cold eyes into being his friend. Leo had always enjoyed a good challenge, and something about Mattia back then told him it would be a rewarding experience. As it turned out, his gut feeling had been right. Mattia was all kinds of awesome, fast becoming the best person to hang out with.

Now, seeing how Mattia had practically made himself at home in Leo's hotel room was completely unexpected. Sure, they hung out in his grandma's house, but they were all grown up now—adults. That they would fall back into their old friendship so easily was too good to be true.

Leo felt frustrated; why couldn't he say what was on his mind?

His chest felt suddenly so tight, it was utterly painful. With their eyes locked, Mattia spoke with concern, “I'm sorry, Leo. I didn't realize.” He averted his gaze, directing all his attention at the TV they both had been ignoring for the last ten minutes or so. “I must be bothering you.”

*He's getting it all wrong.*

“No, not at all.” Leo studied him, watching his profile, unsure of how to word what he was feeling. He reached out and touched the back of Mattia's hand, the slightly chilled skin feeling nice and exciting under his fingers.

“It's just, I guess, a little weird is all.”

It suddenly tingled where his fingertips met Mattia's skin, and Leo sighed. He could feel the goose bumps rising on his neck. Mattia turned back to him, lifting his head completely off the pillow as he moved. With a better view, looking directly at Leo, he asked, "Weird?"

Then he sat up straight, slipping his arm from beneath Leo's touch. The confusion on his face was unmistakable.

*Gee*, Leo knew calling it weird might have been a bit *weird* in itself, but right then he just had no idea how to express his thoughts clearly. All afternoon, he'd been wondering when, or if, they would manage to see each other again to talk properly. After today's ridiculous events, especially the slight fact that he had fainted out in public for the world to witness, Leo hadn't been too motivated to look Mattia in the eye over the conference dinner, so he had skipped the whole affair.

Their brief lunch together had been the most awkward experience Leo could remember, well, right after fainting in front of his biggest crush. And now? They were having a lovely evening together, no doubt about that. Even the worst takeout tasted better in Mattia's silent, but comfortable, company. Leo wasn't sure what to make of all this.

Until now, they hadn't talked about how their friendship had ended that summer. Leo couldn't deny that Mattia's rejection had hurt, but he wouldn't let it stand in the way between them now. He could *forgive and forget* if it meant they would have a chance at a friendship again. Still, a part of him would at least like to know what had caused Mattia's sudden change of heart back then.

Leo felt pretty self-conscious now, as he finally dared to ask, "Well, you do remember how our summer ended, right?"

It had been nagging at the back of his mind all this time. He propped himself up on one elbow and steadied his upper body by reaching around with his other hand, resting it merely inches away from Mattia.

"I do." Mattia nodded, his expression changing from puzzled to wary and something between sadness and embarrassment, perhaps. It was hard to tell, really, but Leo could see that it actually mattered to him, and that alone tugged at his heart.

Leo could hardly breathe.

"What..." He swallowed a huge lump in his throat. "What happened that last day?"

There. He said it. Now, did he honestly want to know the answer? Whatever Mattia's reply was, Leo knew it wouldn't change a thing, and somehow, that was okay. It had been ten years, after all.

"It's complicated, Leo." Mattia sighed, tore his gaze from Leo's and let his head fall onto the pillow. He let out a low groan that tugged even more at Leo's heart, before speaking again. "I'm... really, so sorry for what I said to you. It wasn't right and I've wanted to apologize ever since I realized you'd left for good."

Leo nodded, even though he knew Mattia wasn't looking at him, instead, he stared at the ceiling. Leo's throat felt dry; his heart pounded hard within the confines of his chest. After a long moment of silence, Leo cleared his throat, but all he managed to get out was a weak, "Okay."

Funny, it looked like he wouldn't be getting any answers after all now, would he?

Maybe it was for the best. The past couldn't be changed, and Mattia must have had his reasons. If not, he'd just been a dumb teenager, and that was okay too. Leo had had those moments himself, those times when he'd said or done things he'd regretted afterward, especially toward his mom, who never deserved any of his preteen stupidity.

"Is that it?" Leo tried to sound as nonchalant as he could. "Your apology, I mean."

He didn't want Mattia to hear the confusion he still felt. Perhaps it really didn't matter. If Mattia held any regret whatsoever, it would be enough, and Leo would accept whatever apology he'd get. He just couldn't hold a grudge.

"Yes," Mattia told him firmly and turned to look at him again. Their eyes met, breathtaking gray-blue collided with odd brown, and whatever pain Leo had felt inside slowly dissolved. "I can repeat it as often as you like, Leo. I really mean it," he said, his eyes glittering with what appeared to be unshed tears. "I'm sorry, and I hope you can forgive me."

"I already did." Leo gave him a small smile. "It was a lifetime ago. I'm glad if we can move on."

"Move on. Yes, I'd like that." Mattia mirrored his smile, and he was sure it was a hundred percent more breathtaking than his own. He absentmindedly licked those plump lips that Leo wanted to brush his thumb over. "I'd really like that."

Mattia didn't smile as often as Leo, but whenever he did, it was the most beautiful sight in the world. Leo loved the way a simple smile could make Mattia's face appear all warm and gentle, and his eyes look so molten gray-blue.

After all these years, Leo couldn't believe they had finally met again. He had given up any hope a long time ago. He'd done all he could to forget about Mattia, the beautiful, quiet boy he fell in love with over one random summer.

It scared the shit out of him, just how much he wanted to hold on to Mattia this time. Keep him in his life. And worse, how badly he wanted to reach out and touch that silky, tan skin, wrap his fingers around his firm bicep, and just *feel*.

Leo would probably never be one of the few people Mattia loved, but that didn't stop him from feeling the terrifying need to become friends with him again. It was probably going to be better if they would take it slow, one moment at a time.

Only one thing was crystal clear: letting Mattia just walk out of his life, after all this time, was simply not an option.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Five

### *Life is Like a Puzzle*

Mattia tore his gaze from his MacBook Air and tiredly rubbed his eyes, stifled a yawn, and kicked back his rolling chair. God, it had been a long day, and the afternoon just seemed to have passed in the blink of an eye. Mattia swiveled around and looked out the third floor window of his office building. The way the bright, colorful city lights from outside illuminated the room never failed to amaze him. All those intense greens and yellows, beautiful oranges and reds—he loved the city life, especially on a rainy day like today. Chicago's North Side was quite different from his hometown in Ohio. Most of all, Mattia appreciated the liveliness of the area.

A long yawn escaped him. “Uh. Crap.” He hadn't noticed the time passing that fast today. Mattia rubbed his eyes once more and stretched in his chair, trying to decide whether he'd get the rest of the macaroni salad from the fridge, or head down the street to that new Indian restaurant, he'd been planning to check out every day since it had opened. He hadn't gotten around to doing just that yet.

Mattia turned around when the smartphone next to his MacBook *pinged* with a reminder to pick up Shirley's clothes from the dry cleaner. Mattia quickly dismissed it; he'd already gotten them this morning after meeting a potential client at the nearby coffee shop. Shirley was moving to New York soon, since she had been promoted, and Mattia had promised her to help wherever he could, considering it a small payback for everything she had done the past six months.

Just as he was about to get up to fill his empty stomach, Mattia remembered he had one last email to reply to before he could call it a night.

*Shit, the guy from T&W is still waiting for my quote.* Good thing he'd already worked it out and only needed to send the file. It would only take five minutes at the most.

As expected, the trade show had brought a few interested companies and possible clients his way, hence, the emails, telephone calls and appointment scheduling kept him occupied all week. The guy he was seeing tomorrow morning promised to offer a pretty interesting deal, and Mattia looked forward to getting all the details on that project. It was a hybrid app for an interactive

cookbook that would play videos, like the tutorials found on YouTube these days. The book, or rather the person in the video, would actually talk to you, instead of you having to read the recipe the old-fashioned way. Mattia had to be honest, it sounded pretty interesting.

It was just a shame that Leo's company hadn't gotten in touch with him at all. He would have loved to have had the chance to work for them. But then again, they seemed to only manufacture and sell cutlery, cookware, and coffee machines, so Mattia wondered what they could need an app for, seeing as they already maintained an online shopping application.

Well, that talking cookbook thing would probably be quite fun to do.

A persistent meow caught Mattia's attention, and he looked down to find Prince rubbing just as persistently against his leg. "Are you hungry, little man?" He purred back mockingly and reached down to scratch his beloved cat behind its ears, earning him another loud meow.

"Give me a second." Mattia attached the files needed to his email draft. "Just let me get this out here," he said absentmindedly and clicked *send*.

With a louder and more persistent meow, Prince jumped up into his lap and started pawing the metal-framed display of the MacBook.

"Your highness? What can I do for you?" Mattia asked his cat, teasingly poking his belly.

"Meow."

Mattia chuckled. "Are you telling me it's time to be done already?"

Prince meowed again.

"You are right, buddy, it's too late to still be working, isn't it?"

Mattia yawned and closed his applications. "Let's get some food then, shall we?"

Prince followed him around the office and to the small makeshift kitchenette where he kept his cat's favorite saucy dish. He poured the intense-smelling *CAPTAIN'S CATCH™ With Crab in Sauce* into Prince's silver food bowl and served his furry friend.

As they had so often this week, Mattia's thoughts drifted back to Leo while he watched his cat munch on its dinner. He couldn't believe how easily Leo had forgiven him, and he hadn't even explained anything yet. He'd really wanted to, but he'd chickened out at the last minute. Mattia was afraid if he knew the

truth, Leo would turn his back on him like everyone else. Of course, Mattia was thankful that they had gotten it all sorted out and all—he just didn't know how to do this “friends stuff” right. And he *really* wanted to get it right this time.

The few friends he had were from his neighborhood back in Oklahoma. Maybe a handful of kids he grew up with couldn't be called friends, but they were the closest he'd ever gotten to having friends, and they used to be there for him. But since his coming out, none of them wanted anything to do with him anymore. It had been two years, but sometimes the loss still hurt. After moving to Chicago, Mattia had also soon lost touch with everyone he knew from college. For the past year, Mattia hadn't had any contact with anyone who hadn't been business-related, other than Richard. Not that he minded much. Richard was all that he needed, and besides, Shirley had kept him occupied more than any friend ever had.

Mattia wondered whether *he* should take that first step and get in touch with Leo. It was like a blessing having run into him at that trade show; he couldn't just *not* do anything about it.

Maybe he could send him an email. Although he'd much rather call him instead, Mattia didn't have the courage to pick up his phone and dial his number. He had never been the kind of person who was comfortable calling someone, unless it was business-related. Mattia could talk business; he just didn't do personal too well. He knew that there was no reason to feel nervous, but he couldn't help it.

Mattia didn't even know if Leo honestly wanted to do anything together. They had parted after the trade show with a friendly “*see you around*” and “*yeah, please call me*”, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, did it?

Leo had left quite the impression on him. Mattia couldn't deny that he'd been instantly attracted to the boy and his rebellious attitude. From the start, he'd been truly impressed by his persistence and that incredibly cool “*I don't care what you think, but I am going to be your friend*” thing he'd been doing for two solid weeks until Mattia caved and eventually gave in to Leo's game. They had then quickly become good friends. Leo had probably been the only person, besides Richard, that Mattia had let in.

The first couple of days had been quite difficult and a bit challenging. Dealing with someone as energetic and exciting as Leo up close had been quite a new experience for him. There had never been a younger or older sibling, and when he hadn't been by himself, Mattia spent most of his time with Jupiter, his

Labrador retriever. Sport clubs had been out of the picture too, since he never felt athletically inclined whatsoever. Being outdoors, doing stupid boy's stuff with Leo all summer had been exhausting at times, but also inspiring and mood-boosting. It had freed his mind and made him see how much fun he could be having if he just gave others a chance.

Mattia used to think he was better off alone, but Leo had shown him how much fun having a good friend could be.

A persistent knock on his office door, followed by the bell, took him back to the here and now.

*Huh, who could it be this late?*

Mattia gave Prince a pat on his small head and moved across the room. He opened the door and was startled to look into a familiar face. There he stood, his old friend, the man he had just been thinking about, dressed neatly in a brown suit, matching messenger bag slung around his shoulder, and pretty wavy hair, damp and slightly disheveled.

"Leo? What a surprise to see you!"

Sure, they'd exchanged business cards, but he hadn't expected to see Leo again so soon, especially not showing up out of the blue on his doorstep two weeks later.

Leo beamed him a smile. "I think I owe you dinner," he said, holding up a pizza carton and plastic bag. Leo shook his head slightly, as if to get that errant curl of brown hair out of his eyes.

Mattia felt that Leo didn't owe him anything.

When Mattia did things for others, he never wanted something in return.

"Can I come in?" Leo asked, a mischievous expression on his rather pale face. Mattia wondered briefly if he ever got a tan in the summer. Surely in a warmer place like Hawaii, for example, he wouldn't be that pale all the time. Mattia liked that look on him, though.

"Of course."

Gesturing for him to come inside, Mattia watched Leo walk through the threshold, heading straight for the black leather sofa in the corner of his office. Leo dropped his slightly wet messenger bag onto one of the two matching armchairs when Mattia joined him, collecting two glasses and paper towels from the cupboard to their left. With a smile, Leo removed two cans of ginger ale from the plastic bag and opened the pizza box.

A satisfied Prince walked around the table a couple of times before he decided to jump onto the chair with Leo. With a loud meow, the cat made himself comfortable on his guest's lap and almost instantly began to purr.

"Whoa. Hello there, little friend." Leo grinned at the cat, a little surprised by the sudden assault, but obviously extremely pleased, judging by the way he was petting and ruffling Prince's fur.

"God, she is adorable," Leo squealed delightedly, smiling at Mattia while petting the cat laying on his knees.

"You'd better watch what you're saying. You've got one dangerous *man* in your lap." He laughed as he corrected Leo, "Pleased to introduce you to Prince."

"Royalty, huh? I can see how that fits." Leo chuckled. "*He* is gorgeous."

Their gazes met, and Mattia thought he really liked how Leo's eyes crinkled when he smiled—and it was as if Leo constantly wore a genuine smile on his lips. He was one of the most cheerful people Mattia had ever met. Mattia admired the chocolaty brown of Leo's irises sparkling with life and the way his lips would *always* form the loveliest smile. Just like he had that summer, Leo could be hypnotizing whenever he held your attention.

"I didn't peg you for a cat person, Tia. I remember Jupiter and how much you adored that naughty bastard."

Mattia felt a little shiver go down his spine whenever he heard Leo call him by that nickname, one only he had ever come up with. Hearing it now evoked all sorts of memories. Thinking about Jupiter, too, who passed away a few years back, made him feel a little melancholy.

"After Jupiter passed away, I didn't have the heart to replace him. The big city also isn't the best place for a large dog, especially not living in a small apartment and with the hours I work," Mattia said with a hint of regret. "But I absolutely *love* Prince. He is extremely spoiled and does as he pleases, but maybe that's exactly what makes him so lovable." Mattia chuckled.

"I can imagine." Leo scratched Prince's head, gazing down at the feline on his lap. "You are quite a handful, aren't you?"

Prince appeared to be content where he was, which surprised Mattia a little, considering his cat only ever enjoyed his company. Prince and Richard had never been successful at bonding. The little devil honestly hated his boyfriend and loved to hand out scratches and bite marks wherever, and whenever, he could. Sometimes, it was funny to watch Richard frequently piss off Prince on

purpose, which would always earn him a growl and either a hole in his shirt, or bite mark on his shoes. Mattia cheered for the small feline, though. Their fights weren't always fair, considering the difference in size, but nevertheless, Prince always strutted away as the winner.

"Mmm. Leo, where did you get that pizza?" Mattia asked with a mouthful. "It's really *good*. You could stop by more often."

Mattia tried to be as playful as he knew how to be. He wouldn't mind seeing Leo more often, with or without pizza.

"Maybe I could."

The lightness in Leo's voice didn't surprise him, and neither did his statement. Unlike Mattia, he was known for his outgoing, playful attitude, something he'd always admired about Leo.

Mattia shook his head. "I was kidding, Leo." He didn't want him to think he needed the excuse of bringing him pizza just to hang out, and probably his office wasn't the best of places for their bonding. Maybe he should invite him to lunch this weekend. They could do Thai or Indian.

"I wasn't," Leo said after swallowing his bite of pizza. "Actually, I'm here to talk some business with you."

"Is that so?" Mattia asked curiously, leaning back in the chair.

"My bosses were quite impressed with your presentation at the conference, and we would like to present you with one of our current developments. It's something new and innovative, and we have a pretty decent company working for us. All we need is to find someone competent to give us the needed app for it."

Mattia nodded, interested in hearing more.

Leo went on, "Good thing is we are not under time pressure just yet, so I could show you all we've got up until now, and you'd have enough time to get accustomed to the product, if you were willing to work with us."

"Sure thing. Please show me." Mattia grinned excitedly. "I'm curious."

Mattia was glad that he hadn't decided on what would be his next big project yet. The idea that there might be a chance to work with Leo on something thrilled him. There were still two small side projects he currently had running, but they were almost finished, and Mattia was more than ready for something big again. He didn't have any hard feelings about ditching the

talking cookbook thing, not for anything Leo wanted, although the guy from *Waterfall and Rhonda's* might be okay with rescheduling. Maybe Mattia could work with them once Leo's application was successfully finished.

All of that aside, Mattia felt oddly disappointed that Leo only came to talk about a possible business deal, and not to get together over pizza.

Mattia studied Leo closely as he explained what this project would involve, and he was impressed by how thoroughly they had thought it out, as well as by Leo's competence in making a smooth presentation.

"...As you can imagine, the process will involve various tests with the actual steam cooker that we will also provide. We will also need you to update the software every now and then, therefore this deal will entail further contracts, shorter in duration, of course, where we will ask you for your services. You just have to ensure that you can be available whenever we would need such an update."

Mmm. Mattia really liked that prospect of extending their business deal whenever updates were needed. Leo's proposal would take a lot of Mattia's time, and he was happy to contract for it.

Closing the notepad in his lap, Leo gazed at him with a nervous smile. "So, Mr. D'Amore, what do you say?" he asked hopefully.

"It's definitely interesting." Mattia laughed. "I'd be honored to be of help to you and your company."

An application that would literally cook for you? Well, why not? He'd just heard about a talking cookbook, why not an app that tells you when and how to add each ingredient. He was all for innovation and making people's lives easier.

"Are you mocking me?" Leo stared at him with an arched eyebrow and a teasing smile, clutching a notepad to his chest.

Mattia just shook his head. "Of course not," he said, leaning back in his chair, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It is a grand idea, a little, uh, different, but definitely interesting."

"Geez, Tia. You really grew up didn't you?" Leo laughed, and shook his head. "I will need to learn how to read you again."

Mattia rolled his eyes at his friend and awkwardly searched for something to say to divert the attention away from him.

"Let me get my tablet. I'll show you some of my stuff."

When he was about to get up to get said tablet from his table, the office door flew open and a cheerful woman strolled inside like she owned the place—two cups of coffee in a brown paper tray in one hand, a black-and-gold leather purse in the other.

“Boy, oh boy, you won’t believe the guy at the coffee shop—”

Shirley stopped midsentence on one of her rants that Mattia was sure would be about how annoying the barista next door could be, chatting her up whenever she went there, which was too often. Old news. Mattia thought the kid looked pretty sweet and seemed like a decent guy. He had no idea why she fussed about him all the time. Mattia’d told her to just let the barista buy her coffee, if nothing else.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had company.”

Mattia could hear the smirk in her voice. Without looking at his former colleague, he guessed she most likely recognized Leo from the conference, and God knows what thoughts were playing in her head at that very moment. He hadn’t felt the need to fill her in on his and Leo’s relationship from ten years ago, and definitely had not anticipated this kind of get-together anytime soon, if at all.

“We are talking business, if you don’t mind. He’s pretty interested in my services.”

“Oh, I am sure he is, sweetie.” She chuckled.

“Shirl, what have I told you about calling me names at work? Please,” Mattia said with a grimace. He never understood why some people felt the need to address others with ridiculous names. Shirley did it all the time.

“All right, all right.” Shirley waved her hand through the air. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, *Mattia*.”

She came over and set the cups of coffee in the center of the glass table and crouched down next to Mattia on the *too-small-for-two-people* chair. He nudged her side, hoping to make her get up, though she annoyingly refused. Instead, she smiled and held out her hand for Leo to shake.

“Shirley Temple—pleased to meet you. And no, my mother was not a big fan of black-and-white movies. Well, she recently got into those weird *Marvel* films, but that’s about it. God knows how they came up with that name.”

The amusement in Leo’s face was unmistakable; the guy couldn’t hold back any emotion if he tried.

“Leo Brooks—the pleasure is all mine.” He beamed a smile at her, and as always, it looked good on him. Mattia could tell Shirley was already smitten with him, but who wouldn’t be? The guy could cheer up the dead with one look and one look only.

Shirley turned to Mattia, a teasing smile tugging on her lips. “I’ll be on my way then. Please enjoy the coffee, Leo.” She smiled at Leo and winked at Mattia as she got to her feet and rounded the sofa.

“Oh no, Shirley, please. I’d feel terrible accepting that.”

“I insist.” She beamed at Leo. “I shouldn’t be consuming caffeine at this time of the night anyway.” She then returned all her attention to Mattia. “And I will talk to you tonight, mister.”

“Sure, Shirl,” Mattia said dismissively. “Don’t forget the stuff I picked up for you from the dry cleaners. It’s on the table.”

Mattia watched her out of the corner of his eye.

“Ah yes, thank you, hun.”

She winked at Mattia and blew him a kiss.

“Enjoy it while it lasts. There’ll be no next time, *sweetheart*.”

Mattia rolled his eyes at her, but Shirley just chuckled, oblivious to his glare, and left without another word. Geez, that woman was exhausting. But, he could hardly say no to her, she had worked many hours overtime just to help him finish his work by the deadline. He had been so grateful for every second she invested in their project, and she always knew what she was doing. A real talent.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Six

### *I Try to Walk Away*

“She seems great,” Leo said low-voiced, absently gathering his writing utensils that lay scattered on the small glass table. A black tail wagged back and forth between his legs and the furniture he sat on. A weak smile crept onto his lips when the cat meowed. Prince was a real cutie; he’d love to see more of the little cat.

“Oh yeah, Shirley’s wonderful.” Mattia coughed awkwardly. “I could show you my latest projects now if you like? Some were pretty fun, but most are quite basic, fashion shop’s apps and a bunch of random games I assisted developing—”

“Actually, I think I should go,” Leo said apologetically, and gathered the rest of his things, stuffing them unceremoniously into his brown messenger bag. “It’s getting kinda late.”

Just what had he been thinking, coming here, proposing a business deal in the hopes of setting another date for lunch or dinner. A real date. Yeah, right... So not going to happen. Of course, Mattia had to be taken, and of course, he was straight. Of fucking course. All those years he’d hoped and wished and dreamed of a reunion, *of fucking course*, it always ended differently in his head. Leo should have known better than to get his hopes up.

“Oh, right,” Mattia said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to keep you here all night.”

Mattia regarded him, his face reflecting confusion and disappointment, maybe. Leo still hoped they could discuss their business deal in greater detail next week. After all, the business part was just as important to him as Mattia’s friendship. Well, not exactly of the same value but still important. And they could still be friends, even if Mattia couldn’t love him.

Leo only wished it wouldn’t sting so much.

“Do you mind waiting for me? I’ll walk you out.”

Mattia’s deep voice broke through his thoughts. He closed his bag, secured the lock into place, and lifted his head to look at Mattia. A sudden chill ran down his spine.

*Everything will be fine, you’ll see.*

Leo forced a smile, trying to calm himself. "You don't have to do that. It's only three floors down to the garage," he said mockingly.

"I know." Mattia rolled his eyes at him. "I planned on going home as well, so please allow me to see you to your car."

*You should walk away while you can.*

"All right." Leo shrugged. "Whatever."

*Coward. Can't turn your back on the man, can you?*

Leo really had to cut the crap right now. Sounding so pissed off would be rude to Mattia. Leo had absolutely no right to be upset.

"Thank you for the pizza, Leo." Mattia collected the empty pizza box and cleared the table of everything else while Leo washed his hands and headed for the door. "And for considering me to work on your new product."

The happy sound in Mattia's voice made Leo feel guilty; the guy really seemed to have enjoyed their lousy pizza while talking over business. He wasn't being fair by throwing a hissy fit just because Mattia obviously had a wonderful girlfriend.

*And you don't do boyfriends anyway, remember?*

But only because they weren't Mattia, he thought grumpily. To be honest, Leo didn't know whether he could be anyone's boyfriend, but he'd be more than willing to try for Mattia if given the chance.

Walking up to him, Leo waited until Mattia's eyes met his. Looking at that pool of pale blue and gray, Leo felt a sudden kick to his stomach. *For heaven's sake. This man will be the death of me.*

"No need to thank me, Tia. I had to eat anyway." Leo winked at him. "And I think you're quite brilliant, Mattia Luca D'Amore," he whispered, aching with the desire to reach out and touch the man, badly. "It'll be a pleasure to work with you."

"And with you," Mattia croaked. "I will be thrilled if your bosses agree with you."

Quickly, Mattia averted his eyes and looked around the small office space, searching for something. Or someone? Mattia grimaced as he spotted the black cat curled up in a ball on his rolling chair and headed for him.

"Oh don't worry, they already agreed," Leo said. "I meant it, you *are* brilliant. I just needed to confirm with you that you're willing to work for us."

For a long moment, time seemed to stand still, as Leo watched Mattia listen to him with one ear as he spoke sweet nothings to his cat while trying to gather the ball of fur in his arms. Prince resisted a bit and meowed his complaint of being disturbed in his napping.

Leo shook his head. Gods they were adorable together.

Then, Mattia summoned a black leash out of thin air and fastened it on Prince when he wasn't looking. Mattia gathered the cat in his arms and threw a quick look out of the window, even though he most likely couldn't make out anything from where he stood. It wouldn't be very helpful anyway, as it was already dark as night out there.

"You think it's still raining outside?" Mattia eventually asked, smiling triumphantly while petting the little cat in his arms.

"No, I don't think so." Leo looked at him questioningly. "Why?"

"Good." Mattia picked up a black silk scarf that matched his hair and the cat's fur. It was adorably funny in a way. Leo watched him wind it around his neck one-handed, Prince dangling and protesting off his other. "He's *not* very fond of the rain, as you can imagine," Mattia said with a chuckle.

Having slipped on his brown blazer, Leo now stood by the door all dressed up and ready to go. "What are you doing?" he barked at him incredulously. "Oh God, don't tell me you are taking your cat on a walk?"

"Of course not." Mattia laughed. "But I have to get him home *somehow*. I don't like to put him in a box, and I'd really hate for him to run away."

"Yeah, but being treated like a dog?" Leo gave him an amused smile. "It doesn't look like Prince is enjoying it much."

"He will be fine once we are outside." Mattia hugged his cat affectionately, which earned him a low growl from the small animal. It made Leo laugh as he walked up to them both. He couldn't express how much he enjoyed this scene, if he tried.

"You are not doing this every day, are you?" Leo asked curiously, as he patted Prince's head and scratched him behind the ears. The sudden urge to ruffle Mattia's slicked-back hair was hard to control, but he had to. Standing this close, the intriguing scent of Mattia's cologne tickled his nose.

"It's not a regular thing, I assure you." He shook his head and smiled a small smile. "I would be crazy to deal with this scenario on a daily basis. I just had to take him to the vet today to get his regular vaccinations."

“Good.” Leo chuckled and beamed him a wide grin. “I thought I might have to worry about your well-being, Mr. D’Amore.”

For a moment, Leo was transfixed by the beauty of the vision before him when Mattia laughed and said, “Thank God, I haven’t gone that crazy yet.”

He felt himself getting lost in those eyes again. They appeared to be darker just now, but still pale and mostly blue under the dim light. Mattia still wore a fond smile that showed his tiny dimples just slightly. They didn’t often appear on his handsome face. Leo wondered briefly why.

“Hey, since it is Saturday tomorrow, I thought we could have lunch together.” Leo sounded a bit too croaky to his own ears. Mattia smiled at him nonetheless, and he took it as reassurance. “You could show me your latest projects, and we catch up on everything else.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” Mattia nodded and gestured for Leo to go ahead. “How about one o’clock at Devil Dawgs? You know how to get there?” He opened the door with his free hand and led the way.

“Absolutely. I love that place.”

Devil Dawgs was located close to his office and home. They had kick-ass steak burgers, the craziest and most awesome hot dogs, and delicious fresh-cut fries. Real devil’s food. He hadn’t gone there often, but it was well known and recommended by his friends.

“Don’t tell anyone.” Mattia’s gravelly voice rang off the walls in the empty hallway. The unexpected strength it carried made Leo stop dead in his tracks, causing Mattia to almost bump into him. Their shoulders brushed as they both turned toward each other; Leo grinned.

Mattia leaned in, whispering close to Leo’s ear, “Sometimes, when I have that persistent night craving... that’s the place I go.”

Leo laughed wholeheartedly, the sound of his cheerful voice vibrating off the walls in the corridor.

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

A sudden warmth filled Leo’s chest, realizing they were now officially friends again, even if they hadn’t carved it into stone. They also had a lunch date and, perhaps, a regular place to hang out.

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## Chapter Seven

### *Day by Day*

“What are you listening to?” Mattia asked curiously when the sound from Leo’s video chat window came to life. He could hear an odd piano tune playing faintly in the background, something a lot like Mozart or Bach.

On the other side of the computer screen, Leo shuffled about at his desk. “Huh?” He gave Mattia a puzzled look, before quickly gazing around as if he’d expected to find someone standing behind him in the dark of his living room.

“Oh that. It’s nothing...” Leo trailed off when he caught his eye. “I’ll turn it off. Just a sec,” he added hurriedly and turned to get up. Mattia watched the computer screen, smiling to himself as he studied his friend fumbling with the stereo.

They were well into their second month of working with MetalWare’s cooking app. Their last meeting with Andrew Summers, the head of Product Management/New Product Categories, went astoundingly well. As Mattia had learned, Leo was in charge of all preliminary development for consumer goods, and boy, was he ever convincing in what he did! Mattia thought it fascinating to watch Leo work and talk with his colleagues.

He was smart and a born businessman. Leo also looked extremely good in his suits. Gone was the wild boy with the colorful hair and skateboard.

Sometimes, Mattia felt a funny sensation while thinking about the visible changes in Leo. For many years, that particular image of this cute rebel who used to play with him back then had remained in the back of his head. Just thinking about Leo had been encouraging enough for him to try new things like talking to people and being more open. Mattia had hoped that one day, maybe, he would find someone like Leo again, someone who made him feel alive and excited about life.

Richard was a good boyfriend, who made him feel safe and part of something important, but Mattia never could recreate what he’d had with Leo. Richard and Leo were simply too different in so many ways.

Years before he’d met Richard, thoughts of Leo had continued to inspire him for a long time, especially when he hadn’t felt like being part of whatever social gathering his parents pushed him into. Leo had been some sort of hero,

someone Mattia had looked up to. Despite the fact that he was only a teenager himself, Mattia had always admired Leo's easiness and joy for life.

Leo was everything he was not.

The first thing Mattia noticed tonight was Leo's thick black-rimmed glasses. He hadn't seen him wear any kind of glasses before. It suited him, he decided. Leo had his hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, a few errant curls falling over the dark frames. Leo also wore what he'd call a rather fashionable, black T-shirt with rhinestones, the image of a music band, he guessed, in black-and-white adorned its front.

Mattia liked that casual, homey look on Leo. He briefly wondered why those little things mattered, or why he even took note of details that shouldn't concern him even as a friend. *Or especially as only a friend.* Mattia didn't feel like pondering it much, instead, he couldn't help but tease his friend a little.

"That dorky hairstyle looks good on you."

"What? No. It's not dorky!" Leo complained with a playful grin on his lips. "It's... Well, it's *not* dorky."

Despite his efforts to keep a straight face, Leo ended up laughing, his eyes beaming and crinkling in the corners. Mattia couldn't help but return the smile. As always, it was just so easy to talk to him.

"Oh, wait until you hear this. I've got a fabulous story to tell!" Leo began and quickly fell into his rambling. Even through the small screen he could see the glittering smile on his friend's face.

"You just won't believe what happened today," Leo exclaimed with great enthusiasm.

He then told Mattia all about the quirky client that had been ringing him up on almost a regular basis for two weeks now, confiding in him on all of his canary's illnesses, his neighbor's overflowing mail box, and other strange but funny things. It was great to just listen to Leo talk. Just like when they were young, Mattia still liked the sound of his voice a lot. The sounds Leo made were indescribable—always warm and rich but not deep or gravelly like his own. Yet unmistakably manly, just in a light, sweet way that made him think of apples and honey.

To assure that their app development would be successful, MetalWarez basically sent Leo on weekly meetings with Mattia. They would usually spend the entire day at his office and break for lunch down at one of the many

restaurants in the area. So far, all their meetings proved to be quite productive and highly enjoyable as well. Mattia felt blessed. Being able to work with Leo in such close a relationship made even the times he had to have other people's input more pleasant. Working with strangers had never been one of his most anticipated tasks. Working with Leo, on the other hand, fast became the one thing he looked forward to the most.

More often than not, he needed Leo to verify their current status, and they had to discuss the application's involvement on a regular basis to keep bugs at bay. It was always best to eliminate them as soon as possible and have only a few changes within each update. At least, that had worked best for him in the past. Basically, it was inevitable that they maintained close contact via regular phone calls and email. It had been Leo's idea that they also use Skype on days when they were at home, which turned out to be more often than he'd have thought. They always had a lot of business-related topics to discuss in detail, and it kept Mattia quite busy, taking up more time and effort than most of his previous projects. They both wanted to make sure the application would meet everyone's expectations; and a few late night Skype sessions with his friend definitely didn't hurt.

After Mattia listened to stories of Leo's wonderful day, and a lot of other topics as well, they ended up discussing the application's latest version in greater detail. Once again, time slipped away like sand between his fingers.

*He's just as restless and bubbly as back then,* Mattia mused. It was obvious that they were quite the opposite in so many ways. It made him wonder just how they could be friends. He feared that one day Leo and his cheerfulness would drive him crazy. Mattia was sure his opposite, guarded personality and inability to joke around the same way Leo could, would eventually drive him away, just like it drove away almost anyone else.

Anyone except Richard, he thought. Richard seemed to be the only person who loved him for who he was. His parents certainly never did. Mattia's heart still ached, just thinking about his last phone call with his father all those months ago.

*Will it ever stop hurting?*

Thoughts of Richard brought him back to the here and now, as he remembered their plans for tonight. Mattia glanced at the right corner of his computer screen and realized they had just chatted away for almost two hours.

"Gonna have to sign out now, Leo." Mattia gave the camera a rueful smile. "Maybe we can catch up more this weekend. I'll have a new build by then as

well, and we could maybe do some more tests before our meeting with Mr. Summers next week.”

Leo nodded. “Sure.” A wide smile spread across his lips. “We’ve got to do some actual cooking with that thing, you know?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing all week?” Mattia laughed and shook his head. “We’ll talk tomorrow then.”

“Goodnight, Tia.”

Warmth pooled in his chest, and he looked forward to their next chat, phone call, or lunch. He waved stupidly into the camera and watched the small window go black. Leo was the first to cut the connection. Mattia stared into his computer screen for a while, not moving, only thinking, pondering their unexpected close friendship.

When he heard the familiar sound of a key in the door, Mattia quickly closed down Skype and maximized a random icon on his task bar. A second later the calendar opened and filled the screen as Richard’s voice echoed through the apartment.

“Honey, I’m back. Where are you?”

Mattia got up to greet his boyfriend. Richard moved fast, threw his arms around Mattia and squeezed him tight. A rough tug on his short hair and an almost equally rough kiss to his neck followed. Mattia loved being able to let go and sink into the other man’s strong and tight embrace. It never failed to make him feel safe and loved in a way he hadn’t experienced with anyone else. Then again, Richard had been the only person he’d been serious with, ever since he knew what he wanted.

“Mmh. I didn’t expect you here so early.” Mattia gasped when Richard bit his neck. The same lips then quickly closed over his own and kissed him firmly and most thoroughly. “Didn’t your meeting go well?” he asked a little breathlessly, once he got the chance to gasp for air.

“Everything’s fine, babe.” Richard’s baritone voice sent shivers down Mattia’s spine, and Richard’s arms engulfed him further. “It’s Saturday, and you were still working, weren’t you?” Richard firmly tugged him close, holding him against his body possessively.

“So?” Mattia breathed, wanting those lips on his again. “You had a meeting. Why can’t I work too?” Talking never seemed to go over well with Richard; they were better at communicating without words, it seemed. Mattia grinned,

squirming in his boyfriend's tight hold. He didn't feel like talking much right now anyway.

"Fine, whatever." Richard dismissed him with a shake of his head. With a tight grip on his waist, he maneuvered Mattia far away from his desk and toward the living room. "Let's move this to the bedroom, shall we?"

That was fine with Mattia; he couldn't wait to have Richard's exquisite body spread out on his satin sheets, his muscled torso all to himself, preferably hovering close over Mattia, or pressing Richard's hard body into the mattress instead.

Letting go of Mattia's arm, Richard then reached into his slacks. A moment later, he pulled out a plastic bag with what looked a lot like dried sardines in it. "Where is that little monster of yours?"

"Don't call him that," Mattia said in a chiding tone. He hated the way Richard treated Prince. Why couldn't they just get along? Leo seemed to get along just fine with his little friend.

"Whatever." Richard moved around the room until he found Prince lurking underneath a barstool by the small cocktail bar he'd built in a corner of his large living room. Mattia watched his boyfriend pour the sardines into a small glass bowl sitting on the bar table, which had been holding snacks just the other day. Richard beckoned for Prince to follow him. Mattia was surprised to see that once Richard had the black cat's attention, he drew Prince out of his hiding place with very little effort, and quickly got him all the way into his bedroom.

"Richard! I told you not to lock him away all the time."

"Don't worry, honey, he'll be fine." Richard dropped his voice and walked up to him. "We'll be fast, and everyone will be happy. You'll see." Strong hands gathered him in a tight embrace, firm arms encircled his waist, and Mattia loved the way he was crushed against the other man's muscled chest.

"I thought you wanted the bedroom?" he said a little breathlessly. His head was spinning with anticipation, and his entire body would begin to tremble any second now. It just wasn't natural how crazy that man drove him.

"Changed my mind." Richard's deep eyes, as he glared down at him, were determined, but otherwise always hard to read. "You are so sexy sprawled out on that couch, or thrown over it while I fuck your ass," he rasped before leaning down to kiss him hard and skillfully.

"You left your fancy leather shoes in my bedroom yesterday, remember? You might wanna check on them for bite marks, *honey*."

Mattia chuckled at Richard's growl. They both knew he wouldn't stop ravaging him just to save his shoes from Mattia's devil cat, he'd just get a new pair if they were ruined.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eight

### *What If I Told You, It Won't Suffice?*

Soothing, warm steam rose and slowly filled the small shower stall, the ocean-fresh scent of his shower gel bathing his senses, evoking recent memories to the forefront of his mind. Leo closed his eyes, pressing them shut tightly as he enjoyed the *oh so hot* water raining down on him from the faucet, burning his skin until it would soon be too tender and almost numb. Shower-time would always be his favorite time of the day.

*"We can go down that slope closer to the water, if you want. Maybe throw those birds some of your cookies," offered Mattia, smiling at him with a mellow expression. The sun was shining down on both of them with comfortable heat, and the gentle breeze felt refreshing and just plain good. It was a wonderful afternoon after a long day of work in the best company he could wish for.*

*"My cookies?" Leo gaped at his friend, clutching the half-empty bag of his favorite, dark chocolate treat. "They're not to be shared with anyone."*

*Mattia grinned, shaking his head as he reached out to touch Leo's shoulder, resting his hand just there. "You'll leave one for me, won't you?" he asked, the sound of his voice making Leo shiver as if caught by a sudden chill. Naturally, he let Mattia be his guide toward the sea, reveling in the comforting feeling of the warm sand under his bare feet.*

*"I don't know." Leo smiled to himself. "Maybe." Soft snickering filled his ears, soothing, calming warmth expanded within his chest, and Mattia's hand never let go of his.*

A small groan of pleasure escaped his lips as he relished the wonderful feeling of the tight muscles in his neck loosening up some more. His heart ached a little, the memories too bittersweet to fully enjoy. Leo's shoulders, neck, and arms were already super sensitive, stinging from the hot water that continued to wash down his body. *So good.* Eventually, he reached around and turned the silver handle behind him, moving it by instinct until the heat subsided, and the water turned cooler. Reduced in intensity, it now trickled down on him in a gentle flow like the lightest spring rain, still warm enough and feeling incredibly good on his tender skin.

Squeezing a big dollop of shampoo into his palm, Leo reached up to wash his hair. He gathered the wet, longish strands with his soaped hands, relaxing

further as he massaged his scalp, inhaling the comforting scent of summer and sunshine, honey, and flowers. Thoughts from one summer so long ago filled his mind, images of their adventures out in the woods, down by that secluded lake...

*"Come on, Leo. You can't keep a damn squirrel in your pocket!" exclaimed Mattia. "You're being ridiculous."*

*"Of course I can." Leo grinned, his hands covering the long brown trench coat he'd borrowed from his grandma, cradling the captured, tiny animal in his pocket. "Once I have it tamed, it'll love being my pet. You'll see, Tia. And you will be green with envy."*

*Mattia shook his gorgeous silky curls, his raven hair glinting in the late afternoon sun, and threw his hand in the air. "I wonder why I even bother wasting my time with you, Leo. Seriously, let the poor thing go!"*

*"I'll care for it. You'll see." Leo soothed his friend, "I'll be his mommy. Wouldn't that be nice?" He threw Mattia a confident smile. "I won't abandon it now. It'll be eaten by a cat in no time if I put it back there!"*

*"Maybe its real mother will show up..." Mattia shrugged, randomly picking up sticks on their way back home, leaving the river bank where they had found the small, neglected animal behind them. The sun was about to set soon, and Leo needed to find a ride into town.*

*"Its mother hasn't come back all day, and it's hurting. I'll take it to the vet, have them look at it, okay?" Holding the coat close to his chest, Leo picked up his pace and hurried along the dirt road. Mr. Jackson could give him a lift, he thought. He was another neighbor and a friend of his grandma's. She hadn't been doing so well and needed someone who could drive her to the doctor more often lately.*

*Once Mattia caught up with him, they walked side by side through the bushes along the muddy road. "Sure," he muttered.*

*Leo cast his friend a quick glance, bumped his shoulder with Mattia's, and grinned. "Cheer up, man. We'll get the kid fixed and care for it, okay? Then we'll see who else needs saving."*

*"You are insane." Mattia shook his head, Leo watching his long black hair fall into his eyes as he did so. His friend turned to look at him, just a quick glance before he returned his gaze ahead of them. "But I like that, Leo, let's save the world. Together."*

*Leo smiled to himself, feeling happier than he could remember at that point. The way Mattia's cheeks reddened when their eyes met and his lips formed a genuine smile just then felt strangely good. He didn't want to return home to his boring city after the summer was over.*

In his memory, Mattia laughed, the sound warm and tranquilizing as it echoed through his mind.

Leo made quick work of getting himself dry, and dressed in something comfortable. Throwing on his favorite white sweatshirt and gray khakis, before grabbing the book he'd been reading last night off his bed, he headed for the living room. Plopping down on his sofa, he planned on spending a lazy, work-free Saturday.

A sunbeam angled through the slowly darkening living room, and Leo watched the tiny particles of dust float through the air, wondering when he'd last eaten anything other than the small apple he'd snatched off the counter a long time ago. Besides coffee, he hadn't consumed anything satisfying. Again. Leo rose to his feet, closing the fantasy novel he'd been *trying* to read for the last couple of hours. He'd been stuck in the middle of a chapter for God knows how long.

Just as Leo made his way into his small kitchen in search of something edible, thoughts of Mattia and that pretty blonde from the other day made him lose his appetite. Leo dropped the pack of cheese and closed the fridge behind him. Maybe he'd just make some more coffee, instead. Losing his appetite so quickly didn't help; he knew his eating habits were bad and a far cry from healthy. Thankfully, nobody was around to scold him like his mother always did.

His thoughts didn't stay on his eating habits very long, instead bouncing straight back to Mattia. It had been foolish to think a handsome man like Mattia wouldn't be taken and dating a beautiful woman, of course. The truth hurt, but Mattia would be well-suited with a stunning, *female* partner. He deserved to have a wonderful life, a real family, wife and kids and Prince, of course.

Mattia would never be able to look at Leo the same way.

*I couldn't give him all those things he deserves.*

The familiar sound of an incoming text message drew Leo's attention to his messenger bag. With a few steps, he closed the distance between the dining table and kitchen. All attempts at eating or making more coffee long forgotten,

he withdrew his smartphone from his bag's front pocket and clicked through the touch screen until he saw the message that read:

*L@DD? You game?*

After their first lunch together at Devil Dawgs, it had fast become some sort of custom for the two of them to ask each other out to lunch.

A sudden thrill of excitement rushed through him, and despite knowing very well that he shouldn't be keen on having lunch with Mattia again, nevertheless, he was literally psyched. The knowledge that Mattia was probably in a serious relationship might be jumping off the walls of his brain, but his heart didn't understand; it wouldn't just stop beating for someone simply because it wasn't right.

Feelings didn't *do* logical, did they?

Despite feeling like a lovesick teenager, Leo wouldn't pass on a chance to hang out with the man. Not for anything in the world. With a smile he couldn't suppress, Leo swiftly typed his reply.

*Sure! On my way ;)*

Within a second another text message came flying in, reading nothing but a smiley.

:)

He shook his head, a sudden bittersweet taste spreading on his tongue. Mattia wasn't making it easy for him. If he only knew how much his unexpected, adorable friendliness hurt. Nothing in this world could convince Leo to do anything about it, though. He'd be okay, eventually.

Leo considered the weather for a moment before taking the short distance between the dining table and bedroom in strides. Eagerly, he pulled out a black-and-white striped T-shirt from under a pile of freshly washed clothes and grabbed his dark-blue leather jacket from the closet, just in case. It appeared to be sunny outside, but the weather had been rather unpredictable lately. A jacket definitely wouldn't hurt. Remembering Mattia's words of appreciation toward the jacket Leo was so fond of had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Less than thirty minutes later, he met Mattia at Devil Dawgs. When he arrived, Mattia waved him over to one of the long wooden benches in front of the small brick building. You couldn't call it a restaurant, because really, they had only a tiny standing space inside and a row of worn benches and tables

with weathered red-and-white sun umbrellas out front. It wasn't shabby by any means, but definitely of the fast-food variety, where people met after work for a beer and nachos or grabbed a quick lunch before a stroll through the city.

"Glad you could make it!" Mattia said with an honest smile that melted Leo's insides. He rose and made space on the brown bench, Leo squeezing in beside him without a second thought. Only when his knee bumped against Mattia's, and their shoulders brushed, did he realize it would have been smarter to sit across from his friend instead.

"Sure," Leo replied nonchalantly, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. There was no way he could keep a serious face in the other man's company. As always, Mattia looked casually stunning, with his dark hair neatly styled, perhaps with gel, and his white, tooth-flashing smile. His clothes were definitely more laid-back than what Mattia usually wore, yet they still appeared stylish. White button-down shirt and dark jeans never failed to impress.

Leo startled when Mattia touched his arm, and brushed along his fingers to draw his attention downward, moving to slide a filled glass toward Leo. Looking from Mattia to the table and back, he grinned. *Ginger ale.*

"I ordered it less than five minutes ago," Mattia said, patting his arm. "Should be freezing cold without being watery yet." He winked.

"Thanks."

Even though Mattia's hand wasn't resting on his arm, and the heat of his brief touch was long gone, Leo felt like he had been *burned*. On the inside and out. He tried to take off his jacket with grace, but in the confined space he ended up bumping arms and elbows with Mattia, who tried avoiding getting punched too close to his face.

"Food's here!" Mattia exclaimed excitedly, still chuckling in amusement at Leo's embarrassing attempt to undress. "I hope you're hungry, Leo."

Leo grunted unhappily, but Mattia ignored him. The guy always made him eat *tons* of food!

The smiling waitress, a twenty-something brunette with black-rimmed glasses, put down plates filled with burgers, hot dogs, nachos and fries. Leo was in awe; Mattia even ordered food just in time! *But who's going to eat all of this?*

"How many people are we expecting?" Leo asked mockingly, nudging Mattia in the ribs.

“Just you and me.”

The way Mattia said it, his voice all dark and smooth, caused Leo's heart to ache. *I wish it was just you and me, always.*

For a moment, Leo watched his friend rearrange plates, first piling Leo's with a saucy burger and a few scoops of fries, before picking up two hot dogs and nachos for himself.

“Eat up,” Mattia said with a wave of his hand.

“Thanks.” Leo smiled appreciatively. “I'll try.”

“We'll get dessert too.” Mattia winked.

Leo laughed. Of course Mattia would get dessert.

“Not sure I'll have any room left!”

“You're not getting out of dessert, Leo.” Mattia nudged him playfully. “I know you like their cookies-and-cream milkshake.”

Leo groaned inwardly. There was no way he'd be fitting a milkshake into his stomach after all of this.

Mattia being straight was probably the only thing that made their close proximity bearable. Knowing he could never return his interest kept Leo from letting his feelings get too out of hand. Or at least he tried his damn best keeping them at bay. Leo told himself he could eventually live with the unanswered longing, the constant ache in his chest, if it meant they got to be friends.

Seeing that Mattia appeared relaxed when they were together, and almost chatty from time to time, made their friendship all the more enjoyable and important. He felt like Mattia really did need him, even if it was just as a friend.

Halfway through their feast, Mattia brought up the one thing he could rant about nonstop. Bluetooth.

“Did you have any time to test-run the latest update yet? I emailed you the current build yesterday before I left the office. Version 4.0.1 seems quite stable, and all recent bugs should be eliminated. I even fixed the Bluetooth issue. I swear to God, one day...” he trailed off long enough to munch on a handful of fries.

“Bluetooth sucks, doesn't it?”

Leo couldn't hold in the chuckle, but he tried to smother it by taking a long gulp of his ginger ale. Of course, he had no idea what was so troublesome with implementing Bluetooth modules, but Mattia seemed to be vexed by the topic. Leo lost count of how many times he had been going on about it. It was amusing.

"That's one way to put it," Mattia said, with a shake of his head. "You would *not* believe just how many arguments it caused in the last two years alone. People fully believe any device that has a little Bluetooth sticker somewhere can *easily* be paired with whatever device that, supposedly, supports Bluetooth. It's just not that simple, *baby*."

It was priceless how Mattia could lose himself in something like that. The way Mattia would rant about things such as Bluetooth and USB connectors, Wi-Fi troubleshooting, or his cat was unbelievably endearing; it was rather fascinating as well. The fact that Mattia knew all kinds of shit like that amazed him every single time. There had been many times recently when Mattia made Leo laugh and admire him for the things he knew. Just like right now.

Working together with Mattia on his company's cooking application was a true blessing. Leo found he could lose hours just talking with the man. Mattia was a quiet person, but once drawn into conversation, he had so many interesting thoughts that would always lead to endless discussions.

Sometimes it seemed as if the years apart had never been. Other times, it was like he was meeting an entirely new man compared to that shy and reserved boy Leo met that summer so long ago.

Mattia's friendship felt too good, and meant too damn much already, so Leo wouldn't willingly want to jeopardize, or even end it, just because his love would never be returned.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nine

### *Even the Bad Songs Don't Sound So Bad*

Leo invited him to go sailing on Lake Michigan. On his very *own* boat! Mattia had never been sailing before. He'd also never known anyone who owned a sailboat. Leo did. Apparently, it had been a graduation gift from his father, whom he never spoke of. Mattia understood that there could be a time when it just didn't feel good anymore to talk, or even think, about people you'd once thought loved you. It hurt, finding out they didn't feel that way anymore, or perhaps, never really had.

Sure, love was a mystery, but the thing Mattia never understood was how parents could simply stop loving their children. Leo had once mentioned his parents' divorce, and he'd made it clear that his father didn't mean anything to him, so that topic was off the table, and that was fine with Mattia. Not that he liked to think of Leo and either of his parents having an unhappy relationship, but the less they spoke about Leo's family, the less he would have to talk, or think, about his own. Something he avoided at all costs.

Once he arrived at Leo's apartment, his friend was already waiting outside for him.

"I made us a mixed CD!" Leo exclaimed enthusiastically, waving a small square plastic case in front of Mattia's face, so close he thought Leo might accidentally smack his nose with that thing.

"Great," Mattia said, less enthusiastically than he'd meant to, causing him to cringe inwardly. For a moment, he thought the CD had actually touched his chin, so he quickly took a big step back.

"It'll be fun to listen to while we're out on the water," Leo said with a melancholy smile, stepping to the side. "It's beautiful to watch the city skyline go by, but it can also get a little *lonely*."

Leo emphasized the word *lonely*, and Mattia's stomach sank when their eyes met, the unexpected emotion in Leo's gaze startling him. The brief gloom he thought he saw in his usually bright brown eyes was gone as quickly as it appeared. Leo was back to his cheerful blabbering in no time and filled the ride across town with his endless chatter.

Mattia followed Leo as he walked onto the boat, the wood creaking a little under his feet. He was stunned when he first laid eyes on Leo's precious

sailboat; it was simply amazing. It was big and white, with deep brown wood flooring, a bright, navy blue sail, and just plain beautiful. He imagined early mornings on the water, coffee and a book in hand, maybe even doing work on his tablet. Mattia envied him a little. He had no idea how much it cost Leo to keep it safe in storage, but he guessed it would be worth the price. Maybe Leo's father even covered those costs. Hopefully. He might ask him sometime, but right then it hadn't seemed to be the right time to broach that subject again. Perhaps there would never be a right time, after all.

They'd passed a few people Leo seemed to be familiar with on the way from the parking lot down to the pier. There weren't many other boats anywhere nearby, Mattia noted, only a couple of much bigger boats to their left and a handful similar to Leo's in size to the other side.

"Did you name it?" Mattia asked once they were on deck. "Your boat, I mean." He hadn't seen a name on the side visible from the land.

Leo just laughed in response and finished doing whatever was needed for them to get ready. Mattia watched with rapt interest as Leo moved about back and forth, the brown wood creaking under his feet.

Didn't people name their boats? Mattia wasn't familiar with rituals and such, but he'd seen all kinds of ships and boats with a name.

"So, you didn't?" he asked, feeling a little embarrassed when Leo didn't appear as if he'd be giving him a proper reply.

Leo turned toward him and grinned mischievously.

"It's a secret," he smirked. "Maybe one day I'll let you in on it."

With a wink, Leo turned to set up the CD player but didn't start any of the mysterious music he'd brought along. After they put down their bags, Leo made quick work of getting them into motion, startling Mattia by suddenly bringing up his father. Mattia listened carefully, eager to learn more about his friend.

"I thought by accepting his gracious gift I'd make him angry," Leo exclaimed, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I mean, look at it!" he almost shouted, eyes wide and sparkling with admiration. "It's *beautiful*! It must have cost him a fortune."

Leo sighed, leaning back against the railing. "Some part of me, the little monster part I guess, took over my rational thinking and really wanted him to pay—something, anything, really."

"I can see that." Mattia nodded. "I'd probably feel the same."

"Later, I found out he seriously thought he could buy my love with a boat, after years of neglecting his only son." Leo laughed humorlessly. "Well, he'd thought wrong." He let out a low grunt. "Getting me a boat doesn't make him suddenly Dad of the Year. I'm still puzzled how he knew I like sailboats, but well, it would've been a waste not to keep it."

"So you just kept it?" Mattia asked with a grin, maybe with a little understanding of what it was like for Leo to grow up with a father who didn't show his love, as he had experienced that feeling firsthand last year. But then, all through his childhood and teenage years, Mattia's parents had always been there for him. He guessed Leo hadn't had that privilege. So maybe he didn't understand after all.

"I did." Leo grinned. "Anyway, it was the least he could have done, you know, contributing a little to my happiness with a new toy." Leo waved his hand around from one side of the boat to the other and back. "And I do *love* my toy."

Despite his grin, Leo didn't sound all that cheerful; rather, he sounded saddened by the memory of his father. Mattia briefly wondered whether Leo thought about his lost father as often as Mattia thought about his. Feeling little confidence in comforting his friend, Mattia gazed around quickly as if to find something to distract them. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and he had no clue what to say or do!

"Wait until you see the skyline at night. It's magnificent!" Leo eventually continued, sounding a little more cheerful again, while messing with the buttons of the small battery-powered CD player that sat on the wooden planks between them. "I have the perfect song for when the sun is going to set."

A thought occurred to Mattia—he'd brought something that was guaranteed to cheer Leo up, even just a little. Mattia opened his backpack, which he'd bought specifically for their outing because he hadn't owned a backpack since college, and pulled out a plastic bag filled with tiny brown cookies.

"Here, have some," Mattia offered with a smile, handing them to Leo just as the first song began to fill the quiet evening air.

"How did you know that's what I needed?" Leo asked with a chuckle. When his eyes met Leo's, that adorable grin grew even wider.

Mattia laughed. "You looked like you could use some sugar."

Sugar. The magic ingredient. In fact, Leo always welcomed anything sweet, especially cookies. Mattia had noticed quickly that he wasn't a big eater, but he knew Leo loved chocolate chip cookies more than anything. He was absolutely not exaggerating! Mattia made sure to always have them close by when he could.

"Thanks!" Leo exclaimed and took the bag of chocolate chip cookies. "The perfect distraction. You know me well, mister!" Leo laughed, and it was infectious.

Mattia watched Leo dig in, his eyes sparkling, and a satisfied smile on his lips. He was glad he'd baked them last night when Richard had been hogging his TV, engrossed in some nonsense show Mattia had no interest in. Instead, he got out his grandma's recipe and turned on the oven. It wasn't his best talent, but one he enjoyed doing every now and then—and Leo enjoyed the results.

After a few of Leo's more lighthearted stories from the previous days, they fell into companionable silence. Except for the music in the background, and despite being close to the city, everything around them was quiet and seemed peaceful. The last rays of warm sunshine found their way through the white clouds, blue-green water surrounding them, and the occasional boat passing by. Mattia could even see a lighthouse in the distance—white with a red roof and just plain beautiful.

"Hey, can we get closer to that?" he asked, walking up to Leo and pointing toward the lighthouse.

"Sure!" Leo beamed an excited smile at him, causing Mattia to hold his breath in awe. The way his brown eyes sparkled and the wind made his curls fall into his eyes was simply breathtaking. Heat quickly rose to his face, and Mattia had to look away. He shouldn't be affected by his friend's good looks. There was absolutely no reason for his palms to get all sweaty and his heart to beat that fast—his admiration was definitely starting to go too far.

Taking a cautious step to the side, Mattia returned his attention to *scenery watching*. This had to take his mind off of things he didn't want to contemplate. Leo appeared to be content with letting Mattia fall back into silence, making sure they would be sailing in the right direction.

Most of the songs Leo had put together, he noticed, were rather unusual and some even just plain weird. Mattia wasn't even able to honestly tell what languages some of them were. A few songs were only instrumentals and were his favorites, so far. Once again, this showed that the guy was full of surprises.

Sometimes, Mattia couldn't help but wonder where Leo came up with all those things, and he was grateful for not having to find out. It was fun to enjoy his friend's creative, interesting, and sometimes weird side.

There was one song in particular, though, that Mattia really liked. It was something upbeat, full of energy, gripping during the chorus with a raspy male voice singing about hope and love and a bright, laughter-filled future. Somehow it motivated Mattia, touching him in a way he couldn't explain. Closing his eyes, he could see endless green forests, countless colorful birds and sunshine. A lot of sunshine.

Then, suddenly, loud foreign sounds tore him from his thoughts. An obnoxious voice, female perhaps, made his skin crawl for a short moment, before a rather upbeat, silly melody made Mattia want to laugh out loud. Leo had seriously accomplished the weirdest mix tape in history. And who still listened to music CDs anyway?

A wide smile spread on his lips. He had to admit, even the bad songs don't sound so bad.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Ten

### *I Could Have Been Like All the Others*

“What do you say about dinner at that Italian place downtown?” Mattia asked as they walked down the narrow hallway leading from his office toward the elevator.

“Sounds great,” Leo replied, his stomach growling loud enough for Mattia to hear. “I think I’m starving!” He laughed and Mattia joined in.

They had been working all day in Mattia’s office, running some more tests here and there, and discussing the final touches on the recent updates. Mattia already had the schedule for the following two weeks ready. It had been a very productive day, and dinner with Mattia sounded nice. He briefly wondered whether he should invite Shirley along; Leo had been looking forward to getting to know her better. After all, he thought, if they were an item the three of them could go out sometimes.

Once they arrived at Mattia’s awesome apartment—Leo totally loved all its space and comfy but stylish furniture, and that view of the city was simply breathtaking, even from only the fifth floor—a tall, tanned, dark-haired man stood in Mattia’s kitchen, stark naked, sipping on a glass of what appeared to be red wine. When he spoke in his deep baritone voice, greeting Mattia with a sultry, “*Hey babe, you’re back! Would you like some wine?*” Leo thought he might drop dead that very moment, and somehow he wished he had. The guy hadn’t even acknowledged him in any way and probably never heard of the words “decent” or “manners”.

He could only watch, horror-stricken, as Mattia took the distance between the door and his naked boyfriend in a few strides, *shushing* him and moving him into the bedroom, ordering him to get dressed, because they would be going out to eat, and he really would like it if he could be fast. Never had Leo heard Mattia speak with such dominance. The man was still full of surprises. The embarrassed look on his face, cheeks flushed, brows furrowed, when he came back to Leo, apologizing for his boyfriend’s behavior, had almost been heartbreaking.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mattia said when he brought them both a glass of wine. Bumping his shoulder with Leo’s, Mattia then asked, “Everything okay?”

Leo shook his head, unable to form any words; he could only gasp before throwing down half the glass of amber liquid.

"I thought... I thought you and Shirley were an item," Leo eventually managed, then emptied the glass in one more go.

Mattia laughed awkwardly. Leo shuddered at the bitter taste of what probably was very good and very expensive wine trickling down his throat. Leo wished he could have drowned in whiskey instead. A whole bottle, preferably. He'd later apologize for not enjoying the wine in a proper manner.

"I'm sorry, Leo. I should have told you." Mattia regarded him as they both sat on his couch, waiting for Richard to emerge from the bedroom, preferably dressed this time. "I didn't know how you'd take it."

"You were afraid to tell me that you're seeing a man? Is that it?" Leo had difficulty keeping his voice under control, watching Mattia closely. Leo didn't like the way Mattia's expression darkened.

Why would Mattia be afraid to tell him?

*This is ridiculous.*

Leo knew he should have said something as well, told Mattia that he, too, liked men. Maybe even that he liked him, but no, he couldn't have done that. Leo didn't want to take a chance and make Mattia feel awkward now. Leo didn't want to risk that they wouldn't be hanging out as friends anymore. Mattia already had a man, and found his love; he didn't want to get in the way by saying something like "*Hey, but I think I really, really like you too, Mattia. And I was first!*"

Leo would've been a fool to think Mattia would ditch anyone for him; he knew Mattia wouldn't do anything like that. He just *knew*. And what kind of monster would that make him, wanting Mattia to leave his boyfriend only because Leo wanted him too. No, he would never do that.

So Leo kept his mouth shut.

Dinner would have been great if it weren't for the foul mood everyone seemed to have been in during the course of the drive, and the meal. They had amazing pizza at that restaurant Leo knew from previous visits, and normally he would have eaten every slice with a smile on his face, only that night he didn't taste a thing.

It was ridiculous, of course. He had no right to feel hurt and *victimized* by Mattia's sudden revelation that he'd had a boyfriend for months. It wouldn't

have changed much if Leo had known his friend was actually dating a man, but being kept in the dark deeply hurt. And even more so now, knowing the man he'd been in love with for years could have been his for the taking if fate had wanted them to be together.

But fate didn't, and he hated it.

Mattia wasn't straight, but still, he loved someone else instead.

It was like a punch to the gut.

Feeling absolutely miserable, Leo gave them both disapproving looks that might or might not have caused Mattia to feel very uncomfortable, and drink more than he normally would, or should. Richard didn't miss the obvious tension between the three of them, and for whatever reason, the guy had behaved like the last idiot. All night, he'd been complaining about the soup being too hot, the pizza not crisp enough, the pepperoni too thick, and the wine to be just *unbelievable*. The guy's rich baritone voice gave Leo the creeps every time he opened his mouth.

When he came back from the restroom, the man even dared to *order* Mattia to drive him home, simply because he wasn't able to deal with this *shit* any longer. Only Mattia couldn't play his chauffeur that night, for he'd been drinking too much wine and the gin and tonic that he'd been sharing with Leo.

Selfishly satisfied after Richard was sent home by taxi, he and Mattia continued their dinner and quickly fell into their usual comfortable conversations about this and that, work and whatnot.

"Listen, Leo." Mattia suddenly brought up the one topic Leo so badly wanted to forget. "I just want to say that I'm so sorry about the whole, well, *thing*."

"What *exactly* are you apologizing for?" Leo felt a sudden anger build up inside again, fast and furious, bubbling up to the surface. For once, he couldn't control his tongue and said what was on his mind. "That you kept your boyfriend a secret *for months*? Or that he treated you and me like, I don't know, like being nice would've caused him diarrhea or something?"

Mattia cringed at his odd choice of words, he guessed, making Leo feel bad for saying anything at all.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Once the words were out, Leo was reminded that he *still* kept certain things a secret himself. It was definitely not his place to be upset now, was it?

"No. You're right, I had no honest reason to keep it a secret, and he did treat you badly tonight. It wasn't right," Mattia spoke quietly and with downcast eyes. "He tends to do that. I don't know why he acts all screwed up sometimes. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for something you have no control over." Leo reached for Mattia's hand, which fisted the edge of the silky, red tablecloth. "It's absolutely not your fault," he added in a rather low voice, giving his friend's hand a gentle squeeze. Mattia turned his gaze to the half-empty glass of gin and tonic and nodded.

"It's like he hates seeing me with anyone," Mattia almost whispered. "And, you know, I don't have any other friends, really. He was like that too when we were out with Shirley."

Leo wasn't sure how to go on from here; he wanted to come clean and spill his secrets too. More than anything, he wanted to say or do something that would make Mattia feel better about everything. *Comfort*. Leo wanted to give him comfort, but he didn't know how.

"He's good to you, right?" At Leo's words, Mattia lifted his head, and their eyes met. "On any other day, I mean," he added, hoping to convey his concern. It was something Leo had to know, and he was counting on his friend to tell him the truth. He'd kill the guy if he always treated Mattia like shit, or worse.

Mattia nodded, looking down to the table as if he were ashamed of something, opening and folding the red napkin. "Yeah, he's treating me nice. I'm sure he loves me too, you know. We haven't talked about it, but I'd really like for us to get married." Mattia sighed. "He's just a bit out of his mind when we're with friends. I honestly don't know what his problem is with that..."

Mattia slipped his hand from underneath Leo's and reached for the glass in front of them. "The next day, he acts like nothing ever happened." He cast a glance at Leo before taking a long drink.

It was Leo's turn to nod and look away. He couldn't speak, couldn't find the words, any words. *Love*. They were in love. Of course they were, but the thoughts of marriage and losing Mattia to another man, just when he found out that they could have been so much more... God, it made his heart ache more than he'd ever experienced.

"What I meant, before, Leo—I didn't tell you about, you know, because, well, my family didn't really throw me a party when they found out about me and Richard."

They looked at each other, and Leo could see the pain and sadness in his friend's eyes. Could the ache his family caused Mattia possibly hurt Leo more than the thought of never being able to call Mattia his?

Leo's head was spinning when Mattia continued, "They hate me, Leo. They really do. Dad said he never wants me to set foot in their house again and... and Mom, she just broke down crying her eyes out. I never heard from either of them again."

Mattia looked him right in the eyes, the pain still visible, and the impact of his words felt as if they could rip Leo's own chest apart. The thought that his mother would disapprove of him loving a man was unimaginable. His mother loved him dearly, with all his gay bits, and he wished Mattia could have the same.

"Oh, Tia," Leo whispered. "I'm so sorry." He reached for Mattia's hand again, glad that he didn't pull away.

"It's been almost one year, Leo. Can you believe it? Because I can't. They're my parents. I knew they wouldn't be thrilled, but I can't believe that they abandoned me. They won't talk to me. They refuse to see me..." Mattia let out a low groan, startling Leo, as he'd become too focused on watching his friend's pained expression, the way his eyes sparkled with dampness, and his brows furrowed.

When they looked at each other, and their eyes locked, Leo's heart began to race when Mattia continued, "And I was just too scared to think you'd freak out too, that you would leave me again and... well, I just couldn't lose you." Mattia took a deep breath. "You're really important to me, Leo."

"I'm not going anywhere, Tia. I promise."

After a long pause, Leo eventually managed to bring up a more pleasant topic, and they ended up discussing some more work-related issues, while he desperately tried to digest everything he'd just learned. He pondered whether Mattia would have opened up about all this without the intake of quite a nice amount of alcohol, and whether he'd regret saying anything the next day. Mattia might have opened up to him more recently, during their days together at work and on their outings, but he still kept a lot of things close to his heart and wouldn't talk so directly about certain things.

Leo wished it was because he trusted Leo with his secrets and feelings, and maybe he should trust in Mattia more as well. Something inside him just told Leo to wait, and so he would.

They shared tiramisu and another gin and tonic before eventually calling it a night. Since they both drank more than they should have, the kind waiter called them a taxi as well. Leo felt stupidly pleased that Mattia hadn't gone home with Richard, but stayed for another couple of hours with him, instead.

Once back at home, Leo was restless, unable to fall asleep for what seemed hours. He couldn't stop his thoughts from going back to Mattia. Leo had no right to feel jealous, or even hurt, but he still did. He wasn't proud of himself for being so *extremely* jealous of Mattia's relationship with Richard.

Leo sat cross-legged on his white leather couch, loving how the cool texture underneath his bare legs always felt so smooth. The piece of furniture was the only *fancy* thing in his apartment, and besides his sailboat, the only place where he normally could fully *let go*.

Let go of everything and simply *be*.

Not that the rest of his furniture was garbage; he took his time decorating each room with care and love, but his couch would always be special. It was silly, of course, to feel any attachment to a piece of wood and leather, but he loved his couch. He'd paid for it with his first hard-earned money. Leo had always dreamed of having a very comfortable couch right in the center of his living area, where he'd be able to drop down after a long day of work, relax, and forget about everything and everyone for a while.

Leo had done just that for the past year. He'd enjoyed many hours of reading and daydreaming to *Vivaldi's Four Seasons*, following the Doctor through time and space, and assisting Henry Townshend find a way out of his apartment, Room 302, in *Silent Hill Four*.

Leo wasn't having the best of times right now, though. Flipping through his smartphone's image gallery with a frown, he quickly realized he wouldn't get any peace of mind like this. Yet, he couldn't stop his finger from sliding across the small display over and over again.

Next up was a photograph of Mattia on Leo's boat. It showed him sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, a cup of coffee and an opened computer magazine in his hands. His lean body was wrapped up in white shorts and a pale gray V-neck T-shirt, which showed smooth, tanned skin and his *gorgeous* collarbones. Leo bit his lower lip, hard.

Wherever they went, Leo always snapped a picture of either Mattia alone, or both of them together. Every day, Leo would save them on his hard drive; he

wanted to have enough backup in case his phone was broken or stolen. Admittedly, Leo was a little obsessed with his photos, but he liked them a lot. He wasn't that obsessed with Mattia, really; Leo just enjoyed their times together. Mattia was a good friend, and he wanted to keep those memories, preferably in pixels, as well as the mental images.

There was a photograph of them by the Navy Pier having one of those swirly vanilla and strawberry ice cream cones with sprinkles. Then another of his favorites—Mattia standing by a wooden bench, next to a hot dog vendor, happily munching on his lunch—was taken there as well, as many others were. Whenever they went down to the Navy Pier, Mattia would indulge in all kinds of foods. It was almost obscene how much Leo had actually eaten in his friend's company. Dippin' Dots, mixed nuts, donuts, hot dogs, fries, pretzels—dipped in gooey cheese for lunch, or a cinnamon sugar one for dessert—you name it.

Leo once snapped a picture of Mattia crouching down in the mud, helping a little girl who'd tripped close to where they were walking over one of the many bridges downtown. The day had been chilly, and the streets were still wet from the rain that morning. The lights reflecting in the puddles around them looked pretty cool in the photograph. Of course, Leo would have helped, instead of taking photos, if he'd have been needed. Mattia managed fine by himself, though, and the girl was really brave for her five or six years. There were hardly any tears. Her mother also quickly caught up with them. It had been a scene he didn't want to forget.

When he saw the next picture—Mattia in red-and-black-checkered shorts and a casual, white T-shirt, while pushing a shopping cart across the parking lot—Leo let out a frustrated sigh and threw the phone toward the far end of the couch. With a loud plop, it fell off the edge and hit the hard floor below.

So, okay, maybe he was still falling for the guy, harder than Leo had ever thought possible. The way Mattia made him feel was exciting and *wonderful* and so addicting. He always knew he would care a lot for Mattia if he'd just get the chance to be closer, but what he was feeling right now went beyond his wildest imagination. He was dangerously in love with Mattia; there was no doubt about it. And it was as painful as it could be, because Mattia would never be his.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eleven

### *Our Lives Will Go On*

Mattia watched the buildings pass by, one after the other, enjoying the warm summer sun beating down on him and steadily heating up his white Chevy. Today's destination was on a familiar road; who would have thought that he and Leo had been living in the same city for two years? While Mattia lived in Chicago's West Side, Leo resided all the way in North Side. Talk about coincidences. The distance between their apartments was merely a twenty minute ride.

Exactly four months had passed since they reunited at the trade fair in Philadelphia, and it had been almost three weeks since he and Leo went anywhere together. Sure, they talked on the phone and exchanged emails, but they hadn't had any of their lunches or trips down to the Navy Pier.

Lately, Mattia spent most of his free evenings with extra work or his boyfriend. He encountered a few overly persistent bugs in the app which called for more rounds of testing in order not to fall behind schedule at any point. Richard had been around more frequently and had bugged Mattia to join him for some of his business dinners, which Mattia always dreaded. There was just so much social gathering he could deal with. Richard owned an art gallery and was quite popular with everybody of distinction. Mattia hadn't been in the mood to be his boyfriend's accessory at the last gallery opening; he'd much rather have finished the last test-runs on his app.

And as if to pay Mattia back for his lack of time, Leo then canceled their plans for brunch the other day and the following dinner invitations. Three times. He hadn't given it much thought, since they both were a bit busier than before, he guessed. But now he was missing his time with Leo, a lot.

Mattia planned on surprising Leo and take him out to lunch to that Italian place they both liked. He didn't understand why it bothered him so much that Leo had been canceling. Today, he wouldn't take no for an answer. It was Sunday, and he remembered Leo mentioning not having any plans this weekend. Mattia hoped like hell he'd be home after all, or it might complicate things a little.

Once Mattia reached Leo's apartment complex, he brought his car to a halt but didn't turn off the engine. He was rather surprised when he spotted Leo

outside, talking and laughing with two men and a woman. They appeared to be in college, with their bright, colorful tees, shorts, and wild hairstyles. The woman had long, cherry-red hair and a lot of tattoos on her arms and legs. She wore nothing but a black bikini top, combined with a very short, fluttery, white skirt.

Mattia hoped they wouldn't see him as he watched Leo throw the tall blond guy—wearing sunglasses and a smug smile—one of those bright colorful blowup beach balls. Leo then walked around the vehicle and high-fived the other, slightly shorter, dark haired guy.

Leo looked extremely happy.

It was a great scene; everyone appeared to be overly excited, as they all laughed and joked until they finally got into the large truck. Mattia guessed they were probably heading for a day at the beach. It made Mattia's stomach churn a little, and he felt ridiculous for his jealousy.

*Only because you, grumpy old man, don't have many friends, but that doesn't mean that Leo couldn't.*

Mattia knew the tiny voice in his head was right. But, maybe, he just didn't enjoy seeing Leo play around with other people, instead of him.

*Now you sound like Richard.*

When the last door closed, he decided to stick around until they left, only to make sure his appearance would go unnoticed. Just as he thought the car would move, the driver's door flung open, and Leo jumped out, heading for the building. Maybe he forgot something.

*Please don't let him see me.*

Mattia's wish wasn't granted, and Leo suddenly headed straight for his car instead. Mattia turned off the engine as he watched him walk around the front to reach the driver's side and, a second later, knocked on the window of his Chevy. Mattia sighed and reluctantly let down his window.

Looking up into Leo's deep brown eyes, his stomach twisted uncomfortably.

"Hey," he mumbled, feeling a bit ashamed for being caught watching Leo and his friends from the car.

Leo gave him a weak, "Hey you," in return, then studied him closely. "Didn't expect to see you here today."

Leo's face clouded over, and Mattia didn't like how his voice sounded unusually heavy with emotion and a lot more like "*what the hell are you doing here*" instead of the cheerful greeting he usually received.

What had he done to Leo?

He was missing something here, and Mattia felt rather confused and not very happy about it.

"Thought I'd surprise you." Mattia shrugged. "Pick you up for lunch or something."

He felt the heat in his face rise and guessed it wasn't so much from the sun; it was a lot more like he was blushing. He never handled situations well that made him uneasy and nervous.

Mattia swallowed a big-ass lump in his throat.

"But I see you're busy," he added hurriedly, and looked out the front window. When his gaze returned to his friend a heartbeat later, Leo's expression somewhat softened, and he beamed Mattia his usual, lovely smile.

"How about we all head to lunch together, and then you come to the beach with us?" Leo regarded him and nodded toward the truck. "We have one empty seat."

"Nah, I don't want to be a bother." Mattia shook his head, his fingers playing with the hem of his silk shirt. "I don't know your friends."

He didn't feel too excited about meeting Leo's friends, and even less excited about spending the entire day with them. He'd just be in the way...

Leo thumbed the car door. "Gee, you won't be a bother, Tia, and they'd love to meet you." Leo leaned in closer, and when he smiled, Mattia's heart smiled too. "Trust me."

Being this near, he could smell Leo's familiar cologne on the gentle breeze, something light and fresh with a hint of spicy cinnamon. Mattia took a quick look down at himself and shook his head.

"I'm not dressed for the beach." He smiled ruefully at Leo, who threw his head back and laughed. It wasn't even an excuse. Mattia could hardly sit in the sand with his suit pants and silk shirt.

"I can fix that." Leo beamed him a smile and opened the car door. "Get out of that car right now, mister."

How could he say no to Leo?

Mattia succumbed, pulled out the car keys and carefully got out, closing and locking the door, and without another word, followed Leo inside the building and up to his apartment on the second floor.

“Are you sure you want me to go with you, Leo?” Mattia glanced around Leo’s small kitchen; everything was arranged neatly and always appeared to be as tidy as the rest of his apartment. He’d only been here a few times and hadn’t seen all the rooms, but from what he could tell, Leo was either a neat-freak or had a maid who took care of everything. Yeah, probably not the latter.

“Of course, I’m sure.” Leo smiled that easy smile again. “It will be fun.”

He motioned for Mattia to follow him as he disappeared into his bedroom. When Mattia didn’t move, still feeling a bit uneasy and unsure about whether this would honestly be fun for any of them, Leo reappeared a moment later, waving white-and-red-checkered swim trunks at him. “Those should fit you.”

He also threw him an additional white T-shirt which would go better with the trunks than his long sleeved, brown shirt. “You can change in the bathroom to your right.” Leo waved his hand in that direction before turning around towards the fridge.

With a quick glance over his shoulder, Leo grinned. “It’s been a while since we went swimming together.”

Leo watched his face for a moment, then turned around to fully face Mattia, pouring himself a glass of grape juice, their eyes never unlocking.

Oh, yeah, he remembered.

“We used to go to that lake, behind that small forest where nobody would go besides us bored kids,” Mattia said, smiling at the memory of that one summer so long ago. Leo nodded, wiping a drop of purple juice from his lips with the back of his hand. Mattia watched him finish the glass with one long gulp, fascinated as Leo’s Adam’s apple bobbed while he swallowed. Like every time Mattia had seen him, Leo wore a thin silver chain with an anchor charm loosely around his neck, sparkling where the light reflected on it.

He tore his gaze from his friend’s throat when Leo suddenly laughed out loud.

“Oh, oh, remember the time you slipped off that enormous rock?” Leo shook his head and grinned at him. “You screamed like nothing I’d ever heard

before. I thought you'd broken every bone that could be broken! God, you freaked me out."

"You pushed me!" Mattia protested. "That wasn't fair."

"I did not." Leo laughed harder yet. "You slipped! I was merely standing beside you."

*Oh, no.*

"You did push me."

Mattia gave him a playful glare; he remembered it clearly, but Leo looked so happy and alive at that very moment, Mattia couldn't bring himself to be upset or care whether he had slipped or not. Still, he was fairly certain Leo had pushed him to see how far Mattia could fly.

Mattia smiled and headed for the bathroom to finally change. He called over his shoulder, "You were an evil kid, Leo," and enjoyed the sound of Leo's laughter echoing through the apartment.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twelve

### *When I'm With You*

Leo had driven them down to the Oak Street Beach, which was close to the Navy Pier and other familiar sights. Despite the start of school vacation the beach, thankfully, wasn't overflowing with families. It was nothing super fancy, far from any of those beautiful, tropical beaches he saw in travel magazines and on postcards. Although Leo preferred spending his free time on his boat, he enjoyed coming here from time to time when the weather would allow it. The ride had been better than Leo would have expected, knowing Mattia could be pretty closed up, and he hadn't seemed to be in the best of moods, but despite Mattia's introverted nature, he seemed to have gotten along quite well with his friends' insanity. Thank God for that. Leo hadn't been sure if he'd made the right decision to ask Mattia to come along, because he knew his friend too well and throwing him into a fish tank full of strangers could be a death wish.

Perhaps, he didn't know Mattia that well after all, because apparently Sonja and Daniel weren't bad enough to intimidate him. Maybe he'd just mistaken his brooding in the car for a bad mood. Sonja and Daniel could be quite the handful, especially together. They were both super fun to be around, a little crazy in the head, but absolutely lovable. Leo went to college with all three, Sam being the closest he ever had to a best friend. Unlike Mattia, Sam could be a real pain in the ass. Even after years of friendship, the two of them would still argue way too often about the most ridiculous and unimportant things, not to mention Sam's football obsession drove him crazy more often than not. He was a real friend, nonetheless, and Leo could always count on him if he needed something, and without a doubt, Leo would offer his help in return in the blink of an eye.

"Oh wow, Leo," Mattia gasped. "I didn't know you had a tattoo."

He was just about to get out of his clothes when Leo looked up to find Mattia gaping at him. Leo realized that his friend hadn't seen any of his ink yet. He beamed a smile at him. Mattia must have spotted the anchor below his waist when Leo lifted his shirt. Leo remembered the day a few years ago when—on a whim—he'd gotten his first tattoo.

That day, Leo was bored to his bones, jumping into his truck and driving into town in search of some distraction. It took him all day to find a studio that

had an open time slot for walk-ins like him. Luckily, Leo eventually stumbled into a small studio tucked away on a street he'd never been to, where Tucker D., a friendly, rather burly guy, had inked him his very first black-and-white rose on his left side, just below his armpit.

"Well, we haven't gotten naked together much lately, have we?" Leo grinned, then fully chucked his lime green T-shirt, dropping it right onto the pile where everyone had left their clothes.

By now, Leo had a handful of tattoos here and there, where nobody would see them unless he'd take his clothes off. His favorite was the anchor right across his hip bone. It had hurt like a bitch but was worth every second of pain. It was a beautiful piece, the size of his fist, filled in with black-and-gray ink, tiny dots, and bright yellow stars in the background. A brown rope wound around the anchor and it had four differently sized bright pink flowers, with bits of green leaves and yellow stigmas. When wearing trunks, or any kind of pants, only the top half of the tattoo could be seen. Most of the detail, such as the stars and writing underneath was hidden by the clothes.

The line saying, *Find The Horizon*, was his favorite part.

"Not lately, no. We only went swimming together when we were sixteen," Mattia pointed out, then his voice turned up a notch when he saw Leo's chest, now fully exposed. "You've got more! Like, wow!"

Leo chuckled. "Just a few." He waved his hand around in dismissal, looking in one of the bags for his sunscreen. It was always thrilling to see how others would react to his ink, and despite loving them himself, he always felt sort of put on display, awaiting everyone's approval. Thinking Mattia could be turned on by his tattoos was a bit unnerving.

The other one Mattia must have seen started from his shoulder, right below the neckline where most of his T-shirts would begin, weaving itself around his upper arm and back. Leo always chose carefully when it came to buying shirts, making sure his tattoo wouldn't peek out from under his sleeves or collar. The ink showed a sea turtle in greens and blues, surrounded by similar-colored bubbles of water, waves, and tiny colorful fish in the background. He also had a rather large gray skull with black wings and light pink and red roses on his chest, below his collarbone. The tip of its insanely detailed, bony wings reached from one side of his chest to the other.

Once Leo spotted the small orange tube underneath a bunch of green and yellow towels, he bent down to retrieve the sunblock, quickly straightening up

again. When he got the blue cap unscrewed, he squeezed a big dollop of the white cream onto his left shoulder.

Leo smiled fondly at his friend. “Care to help?” he asked. “My back’s sorta sensitive. I better get it covered as much as possible.”

With one big step, Mattia was right in Leo’s personal space, reaching for him, their eyes never unlocking. When he replied in his deep voice, “Turn around?” it was more a question than an order. Leo shivered, nonetheless, wishing he could hear those words in a completely different context someday.

*Don’t kid yourself. That will never happen.*

Leo did as he was asked and turned, with Mattia’s hand lingering on one of his shoulders, squeezing lightly. He then smoothed both his palms across Leo’s shoulders, spreading the lotion over the expanse of his back, massaging him—amazingly so—with both hands. The more Mattia smoothed and rubbed it all over him, and the deeper his fingers dug into his skin, the more goose bumps seemed to rise all the way down his arms and legs. He successfully suppressed a shudder.

Leo hadn’t forgotten that Mattia had a boyfriend. There was no way to forget *that*, but it didn’t stop his body from wanting to be touched or his heart from aching to be loved by the man. Stupid heart. Leo was still upset that Mattia hadn’t told him about the whole *being in love with another man thing*, but could he really hold a grudge? No, most definitely not. Mattia was still Mattia, and Leo felt the same about him as he always had. After ten years of hopeless wishing, Leo should be able to handle their friend-never-lovers situation. His feelings would always have to come in second place.

*I just wanna be your man, see you dance, and watch the fireworks together.*

“Look at you, Leo,” Mattia exclaimed suddenly. “You’re all grown up.”

Leo grinned. “Yep, all big and strong, aren’t I?” He struck a pose and couldn’t help but laugh, which got Sam’s attention. A shiver ran down his spine when his friend’s blue eyes met his.

“Geez, you two, stop flirting already.” Sam’s croaky voice interrupted their moment.

Sam raised an eyebrow, opened a can of Coke and threw back about half of it in one go. Both Leo and Mattia turned to look at Leo’s friend, then at each other. Mattia’s eyes went wide, and for some reason Leo had to laugh even louder. Mattia looked terrified. It should have been a lot more insulting than

amusing, really, but right this instant, it was just too funny, a weirdly *perfect* moment.

“Oh come on, you know what I meant, Leo,” Mattia muttered grumpily, then looked around Leo’s shoulder and gave him a quick glare, but went right back to massaging the rest of the sunscreen onto Leo’s back. When his fingers brushed his lower back where his swim trunks began, Leo’s cock twitched. *Fuck*. Leo shuddered. Having Mattia touch him like that really hadn’t been his best idea.

With a loud smack to his arm, Mattia announced completion of his work and walked around him. “Uh-huh,” Leo said smugly. “I know what you meant.” He wagged his eyebrows, which made Mattia harrumph.

They stood across from each other, Leo watching his friend closely, unsure of what Mattia would be expecting him, or them, to do next. Leo should probably get lotion on his arms and legs himself, before dragging all four of his friends down to play something by the water. Anything. Being in close proximity with Mattia was wonderful, but sadly, a very specific part of him felt way too wonderful at the moment, and wouldn’t that be great to be discovered?

Leo willed his restless cock to behave, but the way Mattia looked him up and down, then held up his hands as if asking for a towel, or more work, didn’t help one bit. Leo groaned inwardly, biting his lower lip. At least the swim trunks were fairly big and concealed his uncomfortable hard-on. Hopefully.

*Ah, what the hell.*

Leo held out both of his arms and tipped his head. “While you’re at it.”

Mattia rolled his eyes, squeezed some more of the white liquid onto Leo’s arm, then took Leo’s left hand in his. “Don’t like to get yourself sticky, huh?” he asked, while spreading sunscreen up and down that arm, then tugging at the other hand and continuing his work. It pleased Leo to see the smile on Mattia’s lips never fading.

“Feet, too,” Leo smirked. “Please.”

Mattia harrumphed, and Leo laughed.

Quickly, he felt the heat rise between their bodies. Standing in such close proximity, shirtless, and with Mattia’s gentle hands on him, was *nice*. Really nice. Too nice. Gee, he felt like a pervert for enjoying the attention and taking advantage of his friend.

*I’m not really, am I?*

He was merely trying to be a little spoiled. The only person who'd ever rubbed lotion on him, or spoiled Leo in any way, was his mother. Now, if that wasn't sad, what was? Maybe Leo ought to find a boyfriend himself; after all, being alone and having to watch Mattia play happy couple with his douche of a man was depressing as hell. He should probably give Miguel a call tomorrow night. They hadn't hooked up since the trade fair in Philadelphia all those months ago. Leo hadn't felt like seeing anyone lately, especially not strangers, but perhaps he'd need to change that now.

At first, Leo had still had his hopes up high, thinking he might get a chance with Mattia, but when those hopes were crushed, he simply hadn't had the energy to bother with Miguel or anyone else. Perhaps Leo was the type who would rather mope and grieve instead of throwing himself into meaningless sex to forget. And he wasn't made for relationships; at least that's what he'd been telling himself.

Nobody would live up to his standards, so why try?

They weren't Mattia.

"You know what I meant, before," Mattia prompted, his fingers gently dancing around Leo's wrist. "Of course you're grown and all but..." he trailed off, searching for the right words. "The tattoos—I just would have never thought you'd get any. And there are so many, and so big."

Leo bit his lip, it was cute to listen to Mattia talk, and he sounded amazed.

"I knew you always *looked* the type to get tattoos." Mattia smeared more sunscreen on Leo's forearm, taking great care in spreading it evenly, making a masterpiece out of getting him all nice and greasy. "...and they do look good, really. I just wouldn't have expected it, with your sophisticated job and professional look and everything. I'm surprised."

Mattia was rambling now, something that almost never happened.

*Please, don't stop talking.*

The sound of his voice was soothing, and the flush across Mattia's cheeks plus the ruffled hair was adorable. Leo felt his own cheeks heat up too, but with the hot sun shining down on them it would, hopefully, go unnoticed. He had to stop gazing up at his friend, though, because the pent-up longing he felt swelling inside his chest became too fast and too difficult to ignore.

*Easy as pie, avert your eyes, Leo. Look out toward the water.*

*Chase the birds across the sky.*

*Count the grains of sand around you.*

Leo swallowed with difficulty. Mattia's gentle hands, those firm fingers on his warm skin, caused his stomach to flutter and the heat to rise and rise. *Feels too nice, have to stop.*

He lowered his gaze, dropping his eyes, and what he saw wasn't helping much. Red-checkered swim trunks. They were his, but seeing them on Mattia made him feel stupidly happy. They looked good on him, he had to admit. And they fit just perfectly. There was no doubt it was the highlight of Leo's day, seeing Mattia in swim trunks without a shirt.

*Heaven help me, how can I resist that man? He's all I ever wanted.*

And so close, it was too tempting to touch.

Suddenly, Mattia's gravelly voice tore him from his thoughts. *Thank you.*

When Mattia prompted him to answer, a death glare in his pale gray-blue eyes, Leo had the sudden revelation that he hadn't been paying attention to anything Mattia might have said for long minutes, though it felt more like hours to him. Anyhow, he couldn't recall what his friend had been saying.

"Er..." He swallowed hard.

But then, Mattia laughed, laughed with his whole heart—it was a goddamned good sound, one Leo had missed for years—and he couldn't help but join him.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Thirteen

### *The Sky Looks Like an Astro Pop*

“Isn’t this just amazing?” Mattia whispered to himself, stunned by how incredible the Chicago skyline looked with the sun setting, painting everything in shades of yellow and orange. It wasn’t the first time he was seeing the sunset in Chicago, but tonight he felt almost speechless at the beauty before their eyes. Mattia shivered slightly and wondered where that gentle breeze tickling his exposed skin came from. Today had come and gone so fast he could hardly believe the day was already turning into night.

To his right, he saw Leo crouching down in the sand next to him, still wearing his lime green swimming trunks and a matching T-shirt. A few feet down the shore were Sonja and Daniel, holding hands and enjoying the quiet of the early evening. Both of them were absolutely insane. Mattia hoped he would not have to see them again too soon. They were incredibly lovable, oh yeah, but too much for him. Simply too much.

Leo’s friends were a noisy bunch, fun but exhausting. Mattia wasn’t used to their free spirits. Despite everyone being around the same age, those four had the energy and wild nature of college kids. He felt a good twenty years older after just one day with them.

From this position, Mattia couldn’t see Sam anywhere but guessed he was chatting up more women, somewhere. He was quite the ladies’ man. It had been amusing to see him with a different woman every time he spotted the guy.

“If you could be any fruit, which fruit would you be?” Leo suddenly asked, his voice sounding closer than he’d been before. When Mattia tore his gaze away from the water and looked up, he was met with his friend’s impish grin. The way Leo’s brown eyes sparkled with joy always caused Mattia’s stomach to do strange things.

Leo’s question caught him off guard. And had he just asked him what *fruit* he wanted to be?

“A moldy strawberry,” Mattia answered sincerely, even though it was the weirdest thing anyone had ever asked him. He wasn’t sure, even now, that he’d heard it right. Even for Leo, this was unexpectedly odd. Mattia smiled.

Scooting closer, Leo looked at him with an unreadable expression that made Mattia shiver. While they both sat cross-legged, merely inches apart from each other, Mattia sensed an unfamiliar air around them.

“Why?” asked Leo, his eyes holding Mattia’s gaze.

With Leo’s dark brown eyes staring at him so expectantly, as if Mattia held all the answers to the universe, surprising emotions welled up inside of him. He suddenly wanted to reach out and draw Leo into his arms, not to comfort him—because, right this moment, it felt strangely like the most natural thing to do. Eventually, Mattia shrugged and replied casually, “So nobody would eat me.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “You’ll have to be moldy all your life,” he whispered, and by the way his lips twitched and his eyes squinted, Mattia could see how hard he tried to sound serious.

“It’s a good price to pay, considering I’ll not be eaten, don’t you think?”

Mattia couldn’t help but crack up as soon as the words left his lips, and not a second later, Leo joined his laughter. For a long while, they sat there laughing and drinking, enjoying each other’s company. It was getting late, but Mattia was unwilling to leave; he hadn’t had that much fun in a long time. It had been exhausting; yes, he wouldn’t change his mind about that, but fun nonetheless.

“You’re right. It’s a fair price to pay,” Leo unexpectedly continued their strange conversation. Mattia watched Leo taking a long swig of the rum and coke which Sam had mixed for them earlier in the back of Leo’s truck. Nobody would guess what they had in their Starbucks tumblers.

“I would still like you, if you were all smelly and rotten,” Leo promised with a fond smile.

Somehow, he knew Leo would.

“What about you?” Mattia asked. “What *fruit* would you want to be?”

And yes, he had no idea why he was keeping their topic alive.

Leo grinned and leaned in so he could whisper close to Mattia’s ear, “Why the hell would I want to be a *fruit*?”

Mattia growled, shoving his friend, playfully punching Leo in the shoulder, drawing a series of giggles from him.

“Nobody in their right mind wants to be a fruit!” Leo burst out laughing and shoved him right back.

“You are an idiot!” Mattia said, shaking his head.

“You knew that before you decided to keep me.” Leo shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant but Mattia could tell the difference in his voice. Something was up with his friend and he didn’t know what.

Mattia’s heart pounded a little faster as he carefully reached out, wrapping his arm around Leo’s shoulders and squeezing him tight. “Not gonna regret keeping you,” Mattia whispered, his voice soft with affection. Leo rested his head on Mattia’s shoulder and sighed heavily. A strange fuzziness unsettled Mattia’s stomach, and he felt the sudden urge to say something, but he was at a loss for words.

*What was going on?*

Leo’s company made him feel happier than he’d been in a long time. The world was seemingly perfect, and yet the heaviness of unexpected emotions was wearing him down. Feeling a sea of anxiety deep within, Mattia’s pulse sped up, and it was as if strong hands were squeezing his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Next to him, Leo nervously wiggled his butt on the ground, wrapping his arms around his pulled up legs, cradling them close to his chest. Considering they were on a public beach, the area around them seemed unusually peaceful and quiet; only the sound of the waves and light traffic in the distance could be heard. Or maybe, Mattia just couldn’t focus on anything but the body leaning against him, soaking up its warmth with every cell of his own. The faint scent of Leo’s sun lotion reached Mattia’s nose, and after having spent all day in his friend’s company, the sweet smell had become quite familiar and comforting.

Long, silent moments passed before Mattia asked, “Hey, what’s on your mind? You’re being awfully quiet.”

When Leo turned and lifted his head to gaze at Mattia, his eyes were soft and a little unfocused, but sparkled with their usual intensity. When Mattia smiled, Leo’s somber expression turned into a cheerful, bright grin. “Uh, nothing really,” Leo replied with a shake of his head and absolutely no conviction whatsoever.

“Liar.” Mattia playfully nudged Leo’s side, causing him to laugh and double over. He was certain that something was bothering Leo, but he didn’t know if he’d be able to bring Leo to talk to him. Hell, it might be best if he didn’t; counseling wasn’t Mattia’s strength. But he would try.

“Maybe I was thinking of moldy strawberries,” Leo said, with a hint of embarrassment when his eyes returned to Mattia’s face. The slight flush on his cheeks gave Leo a bashful look that matched his unsteady voice. Suddenly, Leo looked away, biting his lip, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been doing, or saying.

Mattia felt his stomach flip-flop. He instinctively reached out to lay a hand on Leo’s drawn-up leg. In the distance a car horn honked, and close to where they sat, a group of teenagers were walking toward them, laughing and talking. When his eyes focused back on Leo, Mattia was welcomed by a big, easy smile, and the unmistakable intelligence that lay in those good-natured eyes. The gentle breeze ruffled Leo’s wavy hair, causing the long, brown strands to obscure his vision. Reaching for the errant curl, Leo tucked it behind his ear like he so often did. Mattia didn’t try to fight his eyes, as they enjoyed the sight before him. It was always difficult to look away when the guy smiled at him, so honest and delighted, the action lighting up his whole face. Not for the first time, Mattia couldn’t find a thing about Leo not to like.

Perhaps Leo had a little too much to drink, for he suddenly looked a little loopy. Before Mattia could suggest they get something to eat, Leo reached for Mattia’s arm, resting it there like it belonged. The warmth of Leo’s palm on his skin caused goose bumps to rise, spreading quickly up and down his spine all the way from his neck to his toes. Mattia looked down where Leo’s fingers curled around his lower arm, close to his wrist, and briefly wondered why having Leo touch him felt so strangely good when it really shouldn’t.

“I would kill for some cookies right now,” Leo groaned and Mattia laughed.

“We’ll get you some.”

From underneath a pile of towels somewhere, his phone started ringing. Mattia squeezed Leo’s hand, giving him an apologetic look before he got up to find it. Digging into one of the bags, he quickly found the noisy device. Mattia took a few steps toward the shore before answering the call.

“Hey Rich,” Mattia greeted his boyfriend with an uneasy feeling. He hadn’t even once thought of Richard today. His boyfriend’s impatient voice, as he was asking Mattia why he wasn’t at home when he said he would be, told him that Richard wasn’t the slightest bit pleased with his absence. Which shouldn’t have made Mattia feel guilty, because as far as he recalled, they hadn’t made plans to see each other today. Okay, Mattia remembered *vaguely* that he’d said he’d be home later tonight. But still.

"I'm out with Leo—and some of his friends," Mattia said, glancing over his shoulder to see Leo sitting right where he'd left him, gazing out toward the ocean.

"I can be home in half an hour, give or take," Mattia answered halfheartedly. Richard told him to drive safely and that he'd missed him. "Uh-huh. Me too." Mattia nodded into the phone, old habits dying hard.

*Shit.* Talking about driving, he left his car at Leo's apartment, and Mattia doubted he should be sitting behind a wheel after that rum and coke. Not that he was drunk, but as he always said, better safe than sorry.

Shoving his phone into his borrowed swim trunks, Mattia returned to gather his belongings.

"Sorry, Leo, we'll have to grab dessert another time," Mattia apologized. "I've got to get home."

Leo looked up at him with a curious expression.

"Richard and Prince are missing me." Mattia tried a smirk. "Can't leave them boys alone for too long, you know."

Leo scrambled to his feet and reached for their bags, pulling out the T-shirt Mattia had been wearing today. Mattia noticed the way Leo tried to avoid eye contact when he handed him the piece of clothing.

"I'm sure they do," Leo muttered, his gaze fixated on the bright colorful bags in the sand. The sour tone in his voice didn't go amiss. Mattia could hardly blame him, though. The last, and only, time he'd met Richard didn't go down very well. Truthfully, Mattia hadn't expected Leo to like his boyfriend, but he couldn't deny that it would have been great if they could have gotten along better.

"Thank you for dragging me out here today. It was a lot of fun," Mattia said honestly, while sliding the soft T-shirt over his head. Leo's eyes met his, and a strange, tingling sensation pooled in his stomach, as he realized that he'd really love to stay.

"Of course it was. My guys rock." Leo winked at him and before Mattia could turn around, to see which way he'd have to go to catch a cab, Leo reached for him. Mattia shivered when Leo clutched at his arm, Leo's fingers feeling cold where they touched his skin, causing goose bumps to rise on the back of his neck.

For a moment, Mattia felt paralyzed as Leo gave him a lopsided grin, his dreamy expression sending another chill down Mattia's spine. Leo's eyes appeared melancholy, but he didn't have enough time to fully make sense of it all. He didn't realize his own body was moving until they were only inches apart, directly facing each other—the next thing he felt were Leo's warm lips on his mouth.

At the first touch, Mattia's skin tingled all over, his stomach churning. For a short moment, he was frozen to the spot, his skin slowly, but steadily, catching fire. Leo's mouth was moist and soft on his, moving tentatively, his fingers curling around Mattia's biceps. The kiss was chaste, merely a brush of lips, an exchange of breath. Without a thought, Mattia's hand found its way to Leo's chest, his fingers closing gently on the fabric of Leo's soft T-shirt as he kissed him back.

Mattia felt the hitch in Leo's breath when his lips fell open just slightly, enough for Leo's tongue to poke inside, nudge his own, and deepen the kiss with welcoming ease. Leo tasted good, too good. With shaking hands, Mattia clutched Leo's waist, drawing him in closer. A tiny voice in the back of his fogged brain told him to stop, but he couldn't. Their knees gently bumped each other's, and Leo's fingers brushed up and down the length of Mattia's arms before gripping him by his shoulders and pulling Mattia hard against his chest. In contrast to his tight hold, Leo kissed him slowly, gently, and everything felt just right.

Leo's lips, his scent, and the feeling of his lithe body against his, had Mattia hypnotized. It was everything he once had imagined kissing Leo would be like. Like fire and ice, almost electrifying, and so wonderful. It felt like they should have been doing this all along, and continue doing so forever.

Mattia didn't know what exactly happened, but something in that moment told him that he'd been in love with Leo for quite some time by now. Had he just been too blind to see it? Mattia guessed it hadn't changed the way he felt about Richard, because he really didn't love him any less. One thing was for sure, it was wrong to have similar feelings for another man, but shit, what could he do?

Realizing that his heart was confused, beating too fast for two men at the same time, Mattia slightly panicked. He gasped when Leo's teeth pulled at his lower lip, his gentle fingers squeezing his neck. It was definitely not the right time to ponder this new discovery. Right now, every cell in his body wanted Leo.

With Leo sighing into his mouth, their kiss quickly grew deeper and more possessive. Suddenly, Mattia wanted Leo more than anything, all of him. He wanted to be devoured by Leo's soft lips, consumed by his greedy kiss. But, shit, they had to stop this; it wasn't right. He couldn't kiss Leo while he was with Richard. And besides, Leo was drunk. He might not even want this in a sober state of mind.

"I had the best day in years, Tia," Leo breathed against his dampened lips. Mattia felt him shiver beneath his touch. "Thank you for coming along with us."

Mattia tried to carefully untangle himself from Leo. Bringing his hands to Leo's smooth cheeks, Mattia gently eased him back. The heated skin beneath his fingers made it difficult for him to pull away; instead he wanted to lean in again to claim Leo's mouth in another searing kiss. A frightening chill rolled down his back, and the knowledge that this could never happen again had Mattia move without a second thought, catching Leo's lips with his and kissing him softly. With gentle caresses, he carefully savored his friend's taste one last time, because he knew this had been the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

Unfortunately, the blissful moment didn't last very long. When Mattia eventually broke the kiss, and they let go of one another, reality came rushing back too fast and with full force. At the sound of someone clearing his throat, both took a step back, and Leo turned to find Sam—the tall blond with the shades—standing next to him. *Where the hell did he come from?*

*Shit.* They've been caught kissing like horny teenagers. Mattia felt momentarily relieved when Sam chuckled and quickly pulled Leo close, throwing an arm around his shoulder in a brotherly hug.

Of course, someone had to have seen them making out in public. Perhaps, Leo's other friends and a bunch of strangers had too. Despite feeling mortified about what he'd let happen, he didn't feel embarrassed when Sam studied him closely. He'd probably never see Leo's friends again. Maybe not even Leo after that.

Mattia's stomach twisted in an uncomfortable way when regret tugged Leo's mouth down in an expression that looked so wrong and unnatural for him. Addressing his friend, Leo spoke quietly, "Sam, drive Tia home, will you?"

Mattia felt a pang of guilt when Leo avoided looking at him. "No, it's fine. I'll get a cab," Mattia said. "See you guys," he added hurriedly and waved

good-bye before turning around and running for the main street as fast as he could.

*Oh God, just what have I done?*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Fourteen

### *The Thing About Love*

*Oh God, just what have I done?*

Leo ran a shaky hand through his damp hair. His breath was ragged, his head spun like a damned carousel, and his heart madly pounded away, slowly forcing its way out of his chest.

He'd *really* kissed Mattia. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Leo had never hated himself more than right at this moment. Kissing someone in a committed relationship was low, very low. He couldn't believe he'd seriously done that.

The feel of sweat trickling down his neck made him shiver in disgust, reminding him of how he hated running on the treadmill. Leo resented anyone who worked out effortlessly; it made him sick to just watch someone run, bathed in sweat. Leo thought an hour on the treadmill would be good punishment for his stupidity—he hardly lasted twenty minutes.

*Crap.*

There was no way he could do it—the never-ending sweat, the unbearable heat, the pressure in his chest, and the unimaginable effort to take a proper breath—he just wasn't meant to exercise.

His heart hammered against his heaving chest, his knees too weak to keep him steady any longer.

*I kissed Mattia.*

His knees hurt and were about to turn into pudding at any moment, and crap, he might be one step away from a heart attack. Leo slowed down, trying, but failing, to steady himself. He pressed madly at any blinking button he could reach and tried to calm himself down, but his head just wouldn't stop spinning, and his vision became blurry and *strange*.

*No, please no. I don't want to faint.*

He should have eaten something this morning.

Strong arms gripped him from behind, holding on to his arm and bicep, keeping him from falling facedown. "Take a deep breath." He heard the

unfamiliar voice, sounding distant and almost robotic, but that was probably just his brain not getting enough oxygen.

Leo's chest ached, and it was just so difficult to take a breath, his head continuing to spin as he stepped off the machine and let the stranger guide him far, far away from that evil thing. "Breathe. Calm down, man." The manly voice, now closer and stronger, soothed Leo enough that he managed not to lose consciousness. *Thank heavens.*

His vision was still unclear, slightly blurry, but he found a chair, and strong arms guided him down onto the soft cushion. It wasn't very comfortable, not relaxing him at all. Leo's entire body still shook, just slightly now, but enough to feel concerned.

"Drink some water. You might be dehydrated."

Taking deep breaths and a tiny sip of cold water slowly cleared Leo's foggy brain. He blinked rapidly until he could make out the man's strong, bodybuilder features, his chestnut-brown hair, and—wow—all those muscles.

Leo shook his head. "I've only been on that thing for a few minutes. I just suck at running."

The stranger arched an eyebrow. Thank heavens, Leo was conscious and could see clearly again, his breath coming more easily now too.

"Thank you for your help. I thought I was going to die." Leo shuddered. "Heart failure or something."

His heart surely felt like a failure. *Why couldn't he have fallen in love with someone who could love him back?* Leo's head was still spinning a little, but he probably wouldn't faint now. That was improvement enough, he guessed. What a *terrible* morning.

"I'm Tank." The guy offered Leo his hand. With a nod, he shook it but didn't give his name in return. He felt embarrassed as hell. Leo chanced a glance down his body, and oh boy, he was all sweaty and yucky.

"What happened to you? You wanna talk?" Tank queried and shrugged. "Sometimes it helps and maybe next time you run the treadmill you won't start hyperventilating so fast."

Oh there was absolutely no next time for Leo on that terror machine. Never, ever again. Talking might also not help him in any way right now, but—shit, he might as well spill his guts to a stranger and move on. It couldn't get any more embarrassing anyway.

"I kissed my friend," Leo admitted.

Raising an eyebrow, Tank asked, "And?"

"I'm sure he's gonna be engaged and happily married soon. I knew he was in love with someone, in a committed relationship and all, you know? I still kissed him. I won't even blame the alcohol, even though I was slightly drunk." Leo ran a hand across his face, feeling ashamed and tired. "I've wanted to kiss him since I was sixteen years old, from the very moment I first saw him. We lost touch for years, but his face still haunted me. That's no excuse, I know. I shouldn't have given in to my longing."

Leo took a quick breath, he was rambling now and—crap—his lungs burned. "I love him. I really do. And I thought I respected him and his decisions. I mean, I adore him to bits, and yet... shit, I really am the worst!"

Tank considered him for a long moment then asked, "Does he know how you feel? I mean, did he choose that other fellow over you or something?"

Leo wasn't stupid, he had figured out by now that Mattia liked him, probably not exactly the same way Leo liked and adored him, but Mattia liked him. Despite their harsh parting words ten years ago, they quickly became good friends once again.

"No. I don't think he's got the slightest clue how much he means to me."

And that was probably true. Mattia should know how much he mattered to him as a friend, but that was probably all. Leo thought he'd been able to reach Mattia, but either he was imagining it, or they were just not meant to be, after all. It would have been the perfect time for them to fall in love, except that Mattia was already in love with Richard.

"Well that's good news, isn't it? He might like you too and just needed someone to open his eyes for him. Sometimes we don't see what's right in front of us."

Leo pondered that. It could be possible, why not? Well, maybe because he was head over heels with Richard. That's why not.

Sometimes, he thought Mattia subconsciously flirted with Leo and didn't even realize he was doing it, because his brain was all wrapped around the idea that they were just friends.

Leo shook his head. "I don't know, man. He's in love with someone else, and he's not the kind of guy who would just ditch anyone 'cause he's itching

for a new flavor.” Leo sighed, “He’s the ‘*in it to win it*’ kinda guy, you know. I might as well forget about him. I’ve got no chance here.”

Maybe Leo was just a bit full of himself, thinking he had that effect on Mattia. He hadn’t even tried to find out whether Leo was gay too. Maybe he didn’t need to ask, and it was somehow obvious, but maybe he didn’t bother because he already had Richard and wasn’t looking for someone to love. He wouldn’t care whether Leo was straight or gay or bisexual. Or none of the above.

Leo chuckled. “He probably won’t even think that *I am* interested, anyway.”

“Oh. Mh.” Tank rubbed his chin between two fingers. “Well, the kiss should have finally opened his eyes.” He snickered. “Don’t be too upset, buddy. Fate will find its way. And if he isn’t the one, then someone else will be. Just don’t give up. Have some hope, okay?”

He didn’t think there was anyone for him, but Leo nodded anyway. It wasn’t Tank’s position to pep talk him, but he still took the time to do so. The least Leo could do was to appear as if it helped.

“And stay the hell away from the treadmill. Just some friendly advice.”

“Oh I will gladly follow that.” Leo held out his hand, and Tank gripped it tightly, shaking it, with a nod of his head. “Thank you, Tank. For saving my life, listening to my story, and your great advice.”

“You’re welcome, bud. Now stay right here for another few minutes, relax, gather your thoughts, and stay on track. I’ll get you some more water and a power bar.”

Leo wanted to tell him there was no need to bother with it, but Tank was gone in the blink of an eye, and he honestly could use more water and some sugar.

*Oh, Tia.* Leo sighed. He had always tried to do right by him, but had failed terribly when he drunkenly kissed his friend. Leo groaned. Just how could he make it up to him again?

Leo felt trapped. He knew he messed up, and he didn’t deserve Mattia’s forgiveness, but giving up on his friendship made his heart ache. *Dammit.*

For all he knew, Mattia wouldn’t even want to see him again after that stunt.

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## Chapter Fifteen

### *Like Smoke in the Mirror*

*Stay.*

*Leo, please, don't go!*

*Don't leave me.*

*Leo.*

*Come back, please, stay.*

For the third time this week, Mattia woke up dizzy and confused, tossing and turning on his silky sheets until he realized he was awake—it had only been a dream. A dream in which Mattia had been desperately clutching Leo's T-shirt, begging him to stay. Feeling hot and sweaty, Mattia pulled down the covers, shivering the instant the chilly air hit his exposed skin. For a moment he thought he could go back to sleep, but when he closed his eyes he saw vivid images of a sixteen-year-old Leo *kissing* him like there was no tomorrow. Mattia shuddered, his throat thick and dry, his pulse racing. He could still hear himself shout at Leo like he did ten years ago, and thinking of his friend's hurt expression made his chest ache.

*Fucking nightmare.*

With a long yawn, Mattia stretched, his neck and lower back hurting like hell. When he reached to his left, he was glad to find the space next to him empty. Richard hadn't been pleased about the wake-up call at four in the morning the other day. Deciding that it was impossible to fall asleep now, Mattia crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

He'd had that dream of Leo walking out of his life that summer over a million times since he was sixteen. Recently, the ending altered in a way he'd have never thought could feel so real and frightening. He hadn't had that nightmare for a long time, so when it returned the other night, it scared the life out of him.

After relieving himself, Mattia stepped out of his loose gray boxer shorts and threw his white T-shirt into the sink to his left. He took a quick look into the mirror above and groaned. The red-rimmed eyes and black circles underneath made him look like a zombie. One with a slight tan he thought, a

little amused despite it all. He wasn't as pale as Leo, but healthy sure looked different. Mattia stepped into the small shower cabin and closed his eyes as the gentle spray of warm water slowly, but effectively, helped him to relax. The way his muscles loosened felt good, but instead of cleansing his mind as he'd hoped, the sounds of water drizzling down on him only reawakened recent memories of the other night by the beach when Leo kissed him so sweetly, and yet demanding, to a background music of mellow waves in the distance.

*How could this one time leave him so confused and aching for more?*

All week he'd pushed those images of Leo's soft lips, his loopy smile and that addicting taste of their kiss out of his mind. Mattia had tried all he could do to ban the memory of Leo's scent and how it made his skin tingle when they touched—skin to skin—the moment their lips collided. Mattia groaned. This wasn't right; Leo was only a friend, no matter what he might or might not be feeling for him. Mattia had given up on Leo a long time ago. He'd made his decision to be with Richard when he fell in love with him.

Leo only kissed him because he had too much to drink anyway. Leo knew he and Richard were serious. He'd said so himself—that their kiss was an accident, a mistake even. Those were Leo's words when he called him the next morning, his sleep-laden voice full of regret and sorrow. He apologized and hung up on Mattia as if he couldn't bear talking to him for a second longer.

The mere thought of Leo being disgusted by their kiss hurt.

It shouldn't matter, really, because he loved Richard. Not Leo, no, he didn't love Leo. Leo might have been drunk, but he'd kissed him back. *Shit*. He didn't want to love Leo. Not now. He couldn't.

*Can't those feelings just go away as suddenly as they appeared?*

When he was sixteen, he thought that he had the biggest crush on the rebel with the skateboard who lived across the street. It was new to him, confusing, scary. Mattia didn't know what it all meant, but he loved that summer, loved everything they did together and dreamed they could always do those things in the future. Together. Even years later, Mattia had hoped, wished, and prayed that they would be able to find their way back to each other and love one another like he thought they could.

Since Richard came into his life, Leo had only lived in his distant memory, and for years, he'd accepted that things would never be the way he once dreamed they could be. He had been the only person who made Mattia feel wanted, needed, accepted, and loved in his own way.

With Richard, it had been two satisfying, wonderful years. If it hadn't been, Mattia would have never risked coming out to his family and friends. He had always known deep down that they wouldn't accept him, but he owed it to himself and Richard to be true to himself and live the way he wanted.

He only wanted to be happy, loved, and live a peaceful life.

That one moment he'd been completely honest with himself, and told his parents that he was in love with a man, that he wanted to one day get married to that man and live happily ever after; that one moment in time, had destroyed everything he'd once known. His entire world shattered to pieces.

His family had been outraged, telling him to never set foot in their home again. And word had traveled faster than he could. None of his friends were there to support him when he flew back home in hopes of convincing his parents that he was still their son, the one they used to love.

But they didn't; his family *hated* him.

They wouldn't even look at him anymore. If Richard hadn't been there for Mattia, he probably would have lost his mind a long time ago. But with Richard by his side, everything had worked out; he had found love and he promised himself that he'd be able to keep it.

Richard had become his rock and shelter, the one person he could turn to when he felt lonely and missed his family. Richard might not be as chatty and vibrant as Mattia wanted him to be, but Mattia loved him, and he would keep him.

Tomorrow, he would finally ask Richard to marry him.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Sixteen

### *You Know It When You Feel It*

Leo yawned and stretched, his bones cracking and snapping into place. It was early Saturday morning, light filtered through the half opened blinds and his bed was empty as usual. A sudden melancholy overcame him. In the past, he hadn't wanted anyone in his bed, but lately he'd give anything to have a warm and comforting body warming the other side. For once, Leo wanted to wake up to someone talking sweet nothings into his ear, combing gentle fingers through his long, wavy hair, tugging slightly and planting kisses along his neck. He might even welcome morning sex, who knew? Perhaps they could have breakfast in bed—something he'd also never done—followed by a couple of hours watching cartoons, and other nonsense, until it was time for bed again.

Leo groaned. This was dangerous ground he was walking on. Leo couldn't afford to lose his mind over shit like a partner, and he didn't want just any partner, he wanted Mattia. In his bed, as his friend and lover.

Leo just knew he'd make the best boyfriend imaginable. It was not for nothing he used to lose his sleep over the guy. Mattia was so sweet and caring, even when he tried not to show it. It was the little things that gave him away, those smiles and small gestures like remembering that Leo's favorite song was "*Baby Can I Hold You*" by Tracy Chapman, that he preferred grape juice over orange, and gin and tonic over anything else. He'd never know just how much those things meant to Leo.

*I'd better get up.*

Leo groaned and stretched some more, and just before he could decide to let himself fall back into bed, he rolled off the edge and stood, sort of. Feeling a little wobbly and way too tired to move, he dragged his sorry ass into the bathroom which, luckily for him, was only a couple of steps from where he landed after rolling out of his queen-sized bed. He turned and gave said bed one last glance. "*See you tonight,*" he whispered to himself and headed for the shower.

Once the icy cold water revived him, and Leo could feel his heart beating again, he made quick work of getting dressed in his favorite purple Calvin Klein button-down shirt and a pair of comfortable, yet fancy enough, white

pants for a day out. It was Saturday, after all, and he could use the distraction of a shopping spree or something equally as interesting.

Pouring himself a big cup of the strongest coffee, Leo then headed for the small balcony attached to his front room. On the way through the sparsely decorated living area, Leo grabbed his messenger bag off the sofa and retrieved his second smartphone, one Leo only used for private matters. Switching it on, Leo braced himself—it was time to face reality and finally check his messages. When the screen lit up, he was instantly welcomed by various notifications, indicating that he had in fact several new texts and ten missed calls. Three from Sam, two from his mom, and five from Mattia.

Not responding to anyone's calls or messages for almost over a week wasn't his style, but Leo'd needed to avoid talking to anyone important for a while. Good thing he had a work phone and one for private affairs, so it hadn't hurt at all to keep the latter turned off until now.

Leo'd also stubbornly ignored the emails Mattia had sent to his business account, knowing most of them were work-related anyway. He'd thought he could delay reading and answering them for a while, as they were still ahead of schedule. Leo hadn't even taken a peek at those emails, in case Mattia asked to meet in any of them. Leo had to admit, it was cowardly of him to ignore Mattia.

It had been easy to dodge Sam, since his old friend was constantly busy with his teaching job, and he hardly ever came by unannounced. But they were close and often talked on the phone, so Leo was less surprised to find that Sam had called him a few times. Avoiding his mom had been a little trickier. After all, she had a key to his apartment, and could practically blow in with the wind, only she hadn't. At least Leo hadn't noticed whether she had been here while he was out. He was certain, though, that she would have waited for him to return, no matter how long she had to wait.

Leo sighed. He would have to take care of one person first, or else he'd never hear the end of it. With a few quick clicks, he sent a text saying,

*Hey Mom, I'll call you later, okay? Everything's fine here.  
Love you.*

Next was his friend,

Sam, man! How's it going? I'll give you a call tonight.

Scrolling through the small gadget, Leo maneuvered through apps and emails and eventually checked his text messages.

Tuesday, 08:37 AM

*Leo, come on, man. Pick up your phone or call me back.*

Wednesday, 09:19 PM

*Hey, I sent you a new build for the app. Need you to verify some things before I can continue. Will do by next week. Talk soon, okay?*

Friday, 10:47 AM

*Just checking on you. Call me, text me, mail me, something.*

Friday, 08:04 PM

*This is ridiculous. Talk to me, Leo.*

Friday, 11:43 PM

*Don't be a dick and ignore me. You have to talk to me eventually!*

Out on the balcony, the sun was slowly drying the remaining rain drops from last night's shower, leaving ugly water stains on its glass railing. Taking a deep breath of fresh morning air, Leo fought the urge to fall into bed again and pull the blankets over his head. It had been stupid to basically run away from everything. He should have faced Mattia the next day, apologized in person, and moved on. *Mattia was his friend, he would forgive his momentary insanity, right?*

With an inward groan, he flopped down onto the metal chair, reading another text from Mattia, sent less than an hour ago.

Saturday, 09:12 AM

*Get your ass out of bed and fire up Skype, man. Or I'll be outside that damn apartment and knocking on your door within the next half hour.*

Knowing that he couldn't avoid Mattia forever Leo exited the text message app, ready to call his friend when another text flew in. Quickly he touched the small pop up alert on top of the small screen, opening the message.

Saturday, 09:34 AM

*I know you're home, saw your car outside. Don't try to jump off your balcony ;)*

Said text was quickly followed by a harsh knock on his apartment door, and the furious ringing of his bell. "Geez, I'm coming," Leo muttered under his breath, and made his way to the door. The smile that found its way onto Leo's lips at the thought of seeing Mattia crumbled away the moment Leo opened the door. Besides looking damn good in faded jeans, a white button-down shirt and slight flush on his cheeks, Mattia's furrowed brows indicated he was definitely not in the best of moods. There wasn't a trace of a smile on his handsome face when he glared at Leo from the hallway.

"You are still ignoring me," Mattia said accusingly, his angry expression and the harsh tone of his voice making Leo cringe.

"I'm not, well, I was, I guess. I mean," Leo mumbled with a small voice, feeling uneasy and just a little nauseated. He waved Mattia inside. "I'm sorry. We can talk about everything."

"There is not much to talk about, Leo," Mattia said with a firm glare and then let himself inside, heading straight for the living room.

One thing was sure, it couldn't be good if Mattia didn't want to talk.

Leo already said he was sorry for kissing him. Over the phone may have been cowardly, but he'd meant it and wanted to clear the air as soon as possible. Calling the next morning seemed to be the best and fastest option. Perhaps he shouldn't have hung up on Mattia before he could say anything himself, though. It was understandable that his friend was angry with him for a lot of reasons right now, especially for making it impossible to get a hold of him in over a week. Leo should have known better; he should have acted like a grownup man, for crying out loud.

*What the hell is wrong with me?* Leo couldn't do this hormone-crazed teenager phase right now.

Leo hurriedly closed the door behind him and stumbled into the kitchen. Feeling queasy, he tried his best to sort out his thoughts and not let his nerves break down. He opened and closed the fridge a few times, every time wondering just what they were doing. Why was Mattia here to tell him that there was nothing to talk about? Leo absentmindedly grabbed two bottles from the fridge and went to find Mattia.

Kneeling down on the carpet next to his glass table, Leo gazed at his hands to see what he'd brought along. *Ah, not bad.* "I've got some ginger ale and water," he offered with a weak smile, setting both bottles on the table before

them. At least Leo hadn't grabbed the ketchup or the carrot juice his mother always bought for him, despite knowing he didn't like it.

Leo met Mattia's gaze as he pushed to his feet again. The anger in his friend's eyes had already faded, and Mattia appeared to be quite comfortable, leaning back against the neatly arranged throw pillows on his leather couch, both legs lazily stretched out on the length of it.

"Well, I, we, just need some glasses, I guess," Leo mumbled nervously, and before Mattia could speak up, Leo darted back into the kitchen, sweating a little.

"Are you sure we don't need to talk?" Leo asked once he was back with their glasses, biting his lower lip and unable to look at Mattia. He filled one with ginger ale when Mattia took the water, pouring himself a glass.

"Not really," Mattia muttered before taking a drink of his water.

Leo sighed. "I believe there is a lot we should talk about," he added quickly, his eyes fixating on Mattia as he took another big swallow. It was difficult not to watch; Mattia looked sexy as hell even just drinking. Leo felt momentarily hypnotized at the beautiful sight of Mattia's lightly flushed cheeks, his parted lips damp from the water and his Adam's apple bobbing.

Mattia gave him a small smile when he sat the glass aside, but a loud noise coming from the hallway interrupted whatever he was about to say.

Leo's eyes went wide when a tall, slender woman appeared in his kitchen. "Mom?" he asked with surprise. What the hell was she doing here?

"Didn't you get my message?" Leo asked, slightly irritated. "I said I would call you later! You didn't have to come by!"

"Yes, thank you dear, for letting me know you are still breathing," his mother scolded him, dropping her white purse on the kitchen counter, along with a brown shopping bag. "I was at the grocery store so I thought I'd drop by and make you something decent to eat. I know you're not eating well."

Glancing around the one-bedroom apartment, she quickly spotted Mattia who had already gotten up and was now hovering close behind Leo, between the kitchen and living area.

"Oh, look," she squealed excitedly. "Who do we have here?"

Mattia smiled nervously when he saw Leo's mother walking up to them, a much brighter, confident smile on her face. His mother was naturally cheerful

and knew how to draw a laugh out of almost anyone. Leo had wanted for her to meet Mattia for a while now, but never knew how his friend would react to her openness. She could be quite invasive without meaning any harm, and Leo knew how much Mattia valued his privacy.

Politely, Mattia reached out his hand and greeted her respectfully. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs. Brooks." He winked at Leo. "Your son talks about you nonstop."

Leo rolled his eyes dramatically, watching his mother as her face lit up like the sun.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mattia dear," she said, cheerfully greeting Mattia. "And you may call me Barbara, sweetie." Today, she wore a long, red summer dress, her chestnut-brown hair tied back into a pony tail. Leo guessed their hair would be identical if he'd let his grow down to his waist. *No, not happening.*

The surprised expression on Mattia's face as Leo's mother approached him, obviously knowing his name, was priceless. Leo and his mother always had a very close relationship; it might be unusual for men at his age, perhaps, but he loved his mother dearly and they'd always shared each other's secrets. She knew everything about Mattia there was to know. From the fact that Leo had been hopelessly in love with him for ten years, right down to the embarrassing moment when he'd once, as far as he had been told at least, whispered Mattia's name during sex with some random guy who'd picked him up at a café one lonely afternoon many years ago.

Just the other day, before he went into hiding, Leo had shown her some of the pictures they had taken at the Navy Pier, both smiling and eating ice cream. His mother often came to visit Leo on weekends, bringing homemade jam, bread, and his favorite cake that they had while drinking coffee out on his tiny balcony. When she wasn't here to gossip, his mom would often tidy up and do his laundry, despite his constant complaint that he was old enough to do it himself. In the end, he was thankful for her help; it never hurt to be spoiled a little.

"It's wonderful to finally meet the infamous Mattia," His mother chirped, giving Leo a sideways glance.

"Mom!" Leo groaned, willing her to shut up and mind her own business for once. He'd not live it down if she said anything. Anything at all. *Please don't, Mom.*

“Just ignore her, Tia.” Leo regarded his friend who was looking rather uncomfortable and perhaps nervous. “Didn’t you say you were going to cook, Mom?” he prompted impatiently.

“See how he treats me, Mattia? That kid can be so ungrateful.” Leo’s mother shook her head and straightened her silky dress. “Nowadays, I’m just his cook and cleaning lady,” she raised her voice exaggeratedly.

Leo cringed. “Mom...” he pleaded, thinking of a way to get rid of his mother without hurting her feelings. He needed to talk to Mattia in private, and this didn’t look like it was not going to have a good ending if she was scaring him away. Or worse.

“I’m just kidding, dear. Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” She smiled and reached to pat his shoulder. “Now you boys go do something fun while I am making you a casserole you will tell your grandkids about.”

Instead of running for his life, Mattia suddenly smiled a tentative smile as he followed Leo’s mom into the kitchen. Leo was at a loss for words as he watched Mattia help his mother unpack groceries without being asked to do so. Mattia’s politeness didn’t surprise him, but the content smile on his face did, a little. Leo didn’t want to interfere with their silent activity. With a heavy heart, Leo stood back and observed the scene until his mother eventually told Mattia that she could handle it from there.

While she prepared her favorite casserole, Mattia dragged Leo out to his balcony, with the coffee and cookies he’d brought along. Despite everything, they fast fell into their comfortable camaraderie, not mentioning their kiss the other day. Instead, they talked about what Leo had missed the last week, especially regarding their application that still needed the verification only Leo could do. The tense air from earlier was gone too, leaving Leo just a little confused but glad about the fact that he hadn’t lost his friend.

Later, they gathered around the small dining table and ate his mother’s fantastic lunch in enjoyable silence. With their plates empty and their stomachs full, they picked up where they left off from their last conversation. His mom, for once, appeared to be showing her best side, and Leo was grateful that she hadn’t mentioned anything embarrassing from his past.

Occasionally, Mattia would ask his mother about her work at the law firm, or he’d want to know little things about Leo’s childhood. Thankfully, his mom only replied vaguely, but honestly, keeping the embarrassing details to herself. Growing up, there had been days when he wished they’d lived in a better place,

with more money and a father who cared for them. His mom never had it easy with Leo or her husband, and Leo resented his father for treating her badly.

Years later, Leo still felt deeply embarrassed for all the heartache he'd caused his mom by being an irresponsible, chaotic, and ungrateful teenager. She had assured him that he hadn't been as bad as he always said he was, but Leo would still feel terrible for his behavior. Until now, he couldn't tell exactly what gave him the needed push to get his shit together and be the son his mother deserved, but he was grateful that it happened. He loved his mom more than anything in this world.

A loud clink of porcelain brought him back to the here and now. He hadn't realized Mattia and his mom had begun clearing the table. When he was about to get up, Mattia put a hand on his shoulder and told him to stay put.

"You sit down. I will help your mom with the dishes," Mattia said with a genuine smile, looking all handsome and dashing under the yellowish artificial light.

With a thankful nod, Leo sat back and watched them gather the rest of the dirty dishes and clean the small kitchen, once again in companionable silence. It was a scene to behold. He would have never guessed his mother and Mattia would get along that well. They functioned together as if they'd been doing this simple duty of washing dishes all their lives. Leo's heart filled with an indescribable love for both people at his kitchen sink; there was no need to feel jealous that Mattia had taken his place, not at all.

After his mother said her good-bye, Mattia caught him by surprise as he gripped Leo's arm and pulled him closer. "Just so you know, we are good," Mattia whispered reassuringly, with a dangerously sexy twinkle in his eyes.

Leo could only nod and look at Mattia with a feeling of unease in his stomach. Mattia sounded calm, but his piercing eyes were an intense stormy gray-blue, filled with unfamiliar emotions—unlike anything Leo recalled seeing before. It was as if Mattia was saying one thing with words, and something completely different with his look.

The intense glare he received from Mattia, accompanied by the strong hold on his arm and Mattia's body too close to his, sent shivers down Leo's spine. He wasn't so sure whether they were the good kind or far from it; his body felt shockingly confused, reacting in the weirdest ways. His blood was suddenly boiling, his cock stirring, and his heart racing—anticipation and disappointment pooling inside of him. There was no reason to feel hopeful in any way, Mattia had forgiven him, and their kiss had been a mistake.

“We’re good?” Leo asked, eager to at least apologize once more before they moved on. He wanted Mattia to see that he’d never intended to cause him and his boyfriend trouble, despite his earnest dislike for Richard. “You know, it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done—”

Mattia cut him off with an intent glare and a firm nod. “We’re good,” he muttered. He then carefully let go of Leo’s arms. That piercing stare unlocked from his eyes and looked away. “I had to tell Richard, you know. He’s not upset or anything. It’s all fine, so let’s just forget about it.” Mattia’s voice lost all its previous power as it trailed off, and he slowly made his way toward Leo’s couch.

Leo quickly followed and sat down next to him on the sofa. Mattia’s words echoed in his mind, making him feel queasy and more upset than before. Richard knew, and he also, very likely, hated his guts. Not that it mattered to Leo what that douche thought, but he was ashamed of his uncontrolled behavior.

*This time you really messed up, man.*

Leo reached for the remote control that lay on the table and turned on his TV. From the corner of his eyes he saw Mattia watching him as he browsed through the afternoon program lineup, before settling on his favorite, the SyFy channel. Leo glanced over his shoulder and wondered what he could do to have Mattia relax again; he’d become so tense all of a sudden, once Leo’s mother left.

When Mattia’s eyes locked on his, Leo felt his cheeks heat up. Mattia’s unexpected smile caused his insides to feel funny, and the urge to kiss the man was so strong that he had to look away.

“Is it okay if I stay a while longer?” Mattia asked, sounding a little unsure. “I wouldn’t want to keep you from doing something more important.”

Watching Mattia chew on his bottom lip, Leo pulled his legs up and hugged them loosely. “You can stay as long as you like, always,” he said sincerely, meaning every word.

“Thanks.” Mattia smiled, holding his gaze for another long moment before they both returned their eyes to Leo’s flat screen TV on the opposite side of the room.

After watching an episode of Continuum, and halfway through a movie he couldn’t remember the title of, Leo worried about Mattia’s silence. His friend

hadn't said a single word for way too long. Any time they fell into silence in the past it was usually comfortable; it hadn't ever felt awkward before. Mattia's earlier tension had been obvious, but even he wasn't this quiet when they were watching TV, especially not something they both liked.

"You're still a little cold with me. We've got to change that," Leo said, playfully pinching Mattia's arm, causing him to look at Leo. "Loosen up a little okay? It'll do wonders. I promise," he added teasingly.

Leo couldn't help it. They were *good*, so Mattia said. And there was no way he could keep his sour mood when Mattia was with him. He might not be able to have him in the way he wanted, but that couldn't be the cause for their friendship to go as sour as he'd been feeling all week.

"Oh, shut up," Mattia muttered, his gray-blue eyes twinkling with humor. "I'm *not* cold," he pouted, looking way too adorable with his lower lip jutting out just slightly and his dark hair in disarray.

"Yes you are, mister." Leo grinned, poking his arm firmly. "It hurts my feelings, you know," he said with mock hurt, and Mattia rolled his eyes at him, leaning in closer.

"Am not." Mattia's brows furrowed when he mock-glared at him, barely looking as annoyed as he tried to sound. In one swift movement, Mattia threw his arms around Leo, hugging him tight and whispering close to his ear, "See?" He gave Leo a full body squeeze. "Not cold."

For one moment too long, Leo's heart stopped.

"I take it back," Leo whispered. "You're not cold. You're..."

*Incredibly hot. Cuddly. Absolutely gorgeous. And I love you.*

*Please hold me a little while longer.*

*Just hold me, Mattia.*

Leo knew it was wrong but it felt so *right*, and he just wanted Mattia to hold him.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Best Thing You Never Had*

He'd wanted to ask Richard the big question for a long time now, and even though he decided he'd finally do it, Mattia stalled again and again. Last week was supposed to be *it*, then again four days ago, and then yesterday—he always backed out at the last minute. There just never seemed to be the *right* time for something as important as that one little question that would change his life.

At first, Mattia had thought about going away for the weekend, spending some time at a nice hotel. He could go all out and fill the tub with champagne and roses and shit like that. Maybe have pralines and strawberries in bed. But then he remembered Richard was allergic to roses, hated pralines, and wouldn't, for the life of him, sit in a tub filled with anything but lukewarm water. He was a little spoiled with anything that went either on, or in, his body. Mattia always had to remember little things like Richard's hatred for onions, cheap wine and everything he was *allergic* to.

Come what may, today would be *the* day. Mattia would finally ask him, no matter what. Maybe he didn't need a special moment; he'd make it special. After only two hours of work, Mattia gave himself the rest of the day off, knowing Richard would be at his apartment today until the early afternoon—it would be the perfect time for a surprise visit.

There was no backing down now; he would do it. Mattia told himself that there was no reason to be nervous as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. Once standing in front of his door, he took a deep breath, unlocked it with shaking hands, and stepped inside, Richard's favorite cheesecake wrapped in a plastic box in hand and a smile on his face.

The moment he saw his boyfriend naked on the couch, his heart stopped, the cake fell to the floor, and the smile was wiped from his face as he watched Richard vigorously fucking some kid who was shouting his name in ecstasy.

This was worse than his deepest, darkest nightmare.

When Richard looked over his shoulder, his voice producing a trembling, "*Oh hey, honey, you're home early,*" Mattia freaked, and was—*oh God, oh God, oh God*—hyperventilating, when Richard made no attempt at stopping what he was doing.

*This can't be happening.*

"Will you stop fucking, for chrissake!" he shouted, and yes, he was as furious as ever.

Eventually, after yelling a couple more times, they stopped their disgusting activity, and Mattia watched them with bleary eyes as they hastily got dressed, scampering around the room to collect their clothes.

*His very own living room.*

Mattia's stomach turned at the thought that this might not have been the first time they'd done their filthy dance on his couch. Perhaps, even in his bed?

*Oh, God.*

*I'm so going to kill him!*

Eventually, Richard shoved the young kid, who looked mortified, out the door, then turned and smiled. Fuck, Mattia had greeted that kid a hundred times in the hallways and elevator; he only lived three floors below. Mattia was about to lose it.

"I thought you loved me," he yelled at Richard, who stood across from him, buttoning up his expensive, red satin shirt after having slipped into his tight, black designer jeans.

Mattia knew he sounded fucking cliché. He might have whined too, a little, but heaven help him if he cared what he sounded like at that moment. And of course, Mattia thought Richard loved him, truly loved him. *He* loved Richard. Yes, he fucking *loved* Richard. Mattia had been sure of it, until now.

"Matt, babe," Richard cooed, his damp black hair falling into his eyes. "Come on, don't be grouchy, honey."

*Don't be grouchy?*

He had the right to be a little more than just grouchy.

*I will show you grouchy!*

"What the hell is going on here, Richard? Why were you fucking that, that *twink!*?" Mattia said hoarsely. "Am I *not* fucking enough anymore?" He paused. "Don't you love me?"

*Fuck.* His throat hurt. Mattia shook his head when Richard didn't say a word in response.

*Good answer.*

In serious need of a drink, he walked across the vast living room toward the bar. There were all kinds of liquors in the cabinets, beer, and the finest red wines you could want. Personally, he really dug his gin and tonic, the apricot brandy, and every now and then, a glass of whiskey.

"Of course I love you, honey." Richard's deep voice was suddenly close behind him. Mattia ignored him until he had himself a glass of rum and coke fixed. With ice. Why not? He felt like it.

"I'm serious here, Rich." Mattia bit his lip to calm down, not wanting this to get out of hand. "I can't believe you'd do that, then say you love me. What were you thinking? There is something wrong with this picture. Don't you see it?"

"I'm sorry?" Richard offered with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mattia took a long swig of his drink, then asked, "That wasn't the first time, was it?"

Everything told him that it wasn't. Now, was Richard going to deny it or come clean? He would have bet money on him not denying a thing.

"It wasn't," he answered truthfully, and Mattia took another drink.

Funny how you know your partner, but at the same time you don't.

Mattia shook his head. "I thought we've always been honest with each other. Wasn't it something that had been dear to both of us? Honesty?" He said angrily, "Oh wait, you probably haven't mentioned a thing, because I hadn't asked." With both hands on the table, Mattia sat down on one of the barstools. "Is that it? You played safe because you thought I wouldn't mind?"

"We weren't going to get married or anything." Richard shrugged and glared at him as if *he* was the bad guy all of a sudden.

Mattia groaned, "Only because I hadn't asked, yet."

Richard blinked at him. "I'm sorry, honey, I didn't think you were *that* serious," he said with as much conviction as if he really believed his words.

"You didn't think we were *that* serious?" Mattia raised his voice and was fully aware he was doing it. "Are you kidding me? We've been together for two years. Two. Years." Where had they gone wrong?

"Come on, Matt." Richard softened his tone. "Honey. We've been dating, yes, but... you have to admit you're not really good at showing what you feel. I just didn't think it would be such a big deal if I had some fun on the side. It

never interfered with our relationship,” his so-called boyfriend said matter-of-factly.

Mattia wanted to throw things, jump at Richard's throat and show him *matter-of-factly* just how much he hated him right now. Did they really live two different lives?

Maybe it was about time to show more emotion and feeling, and whatever he apparently was missing. God, Mattia was angry, and he was determined to show it.

“I do love you,” Richard said huskily, moving towards Mattia.

*Fuck.*

*You.*

“You can't be serious! You wanted fun on the side?” Mattia said accusingly. *In my fucking apartment?* “On my fucking couch?” Mattia felt exhausted “Have you lost your mind completely?”

...and here he was, sitting by the bar in his apartment with a stupid gold ring in his pocket, ready and eager to fall to his knees and surprise his boyfriend of two fucking years with a marriage proposal.

What a fool he'd been to carry around a ring for the last three months. Why hadn't he noticed anything? His heart ached. How could Richard have fooled him like that?

“Yeah, I like fucking on your couch, honey.” Richard walked up to him, once more fussing with the buttons of his silky, red shirt, obviously ready to take it off again. “Why don't we have some hot makeup sex? That will calm you down.” Richard winked, a ridiculous grin on his face.

“Makeup sex?” Mattia shouted incredulously. *Oh, no way, not with me.*

Was there something wrong with his ears? The guy he loved, who had been balls-deep into some twink, wanted to have *makeup sex*? On the very same couch where he'd just had a disgusting fuck-fest with some random kid? Like he could fix anything with sex...

Richard moved closer, holding out a hand in invitation. “Of course. You'll see how much better you will feel,” he drawled, making Mattia shiver in disgust.

“Don't you touch me! Move. Leave. GET THE FUCK OUT!” Mattia shouted, shoving Richard away from him. He couldn't let the guy touch him.

*Crap.* Now he was shivering all over. But the anger was still too strong, too fresh, and the tears he knew would come later didn't fall just yet.

"I don't ever want to see your face again!"

Richard took his shoulder and squeezed it. "Now you are overreacting, honey."

"Overreacting?" Mattia gasped and stepped away from his ex-boyfriend.

He couldn't believe this was happening. How fast could he make Richard leave? He threw his arms in the air and stepped away from Richard who still came at him with a sultry look, thinking he could just win him over again, act like nothing happened.

Richard walked around him. "Yes you are," he muttered, moving about like he owned the place, opening cupboards, taking out things. While fixing himself a glass of red wine he asked, "Maybe we can talk about this like adults?"

"There is nothing to talk about." Mattia snorted. "Last time I checked, you fucked a stranger in my apartment. Fuck, Richard, you slept around like I didn't mean anything to you!"

Richard gave him an incredulous look. "It's not like you and that pretty guy you work with haven't fooled around." Taking a sip of his wine, he said, "Behind my back, I might add."

Mattia clenched his teeth. "Are you seriously accusing *me* of cheating? I haven't touched Leo more than you know about," Mattia said incredulously, "or anyone else for that matter. The kiss should never have happened, I know, but I would never sleep around behind your back. You know I wouldn't!"

"Come on, Matt." Richard smirked. "He was practically all over you at that dinner, undressing you with his eyes and all that." He snorted before taking another sip of his wine. "You can't seriously think I haven't noticed how you look at each other? Not that I blame you, he's quite the looker."

Mattia stared at him with irritation. Richard was definitely going too far.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You two made out the other night. You even told me," Richard said matter-of-factly, like he didn't even care but had to say it anyway. Mattia tightened his fingers into fists. Richard had obviously never been bothered about the thought of him sleeping around. *Just wonderful.* Mattia had been living in a delusion.

“Oh, no. You are not allowed to do this, Richard,” Mattia said in frustration. “Leo kissed me!” *First*. “He was drunk. He said he was sorry. I told you everything there was. You even said it didn’t matter.”

Which should have been a clue.

*But no, stupid me was thinking he loved me so much he’d forgive a little innocent kiss!*

“Because it didn’t,” Richard said, palming his half-empty glass. “If we loved each other it wouldn’t matter what we do with others. It never meant anything what I did with anyone else, you know.” Richard looked at him intently, his voice even and calm. “Except, that Leo guy means something to you, doesn’t he? That’s what’s got you so twisted.”

“Jesus, Richard. You are molding this into something that makes *me* the bad guy? Can’t you just accept that I’m not like you? I don’t sleep around, and I don’t—” *fall in love with others while I am with someone I already love*. Shit, isn’t that exactly what happened?

He really had fallen for Leo. They had both fucked up here, hadn’t they? This wasn’t how his life was supposed to turn out. He’d never meant for any of this to happen. He hadn’t planned to fall in love with Leo, not now anyway, and he’d never meant to get his heart all twisted and shit.

“Just tell me one thing—why would he kiss you if he wasn’t into you?” Richard smirked. “Or at least want to get into your pants?”

That was it.

“Don’t you dare talk about Leo like that!” Mattia yelled, shoving Richard hard, causing him to spill some of his wine onto the counter as he moved. “I want you to leave. Now!”

Richard snarled, “What is so good about that guy, anyway? He’s hot, okay, but that can’t be all there is.”

“He is a great friend to me.” *Something you never really were. And he is kind and sweet and caring, and he wouldn’t treat me like you did*. Mattia felt exhausted. Why wouldn’t he just leave?

“I mean it, Richard, please. You can’t be seriously thinking that things will be okay between us, not now, probably not ever. This can’t be fixed.” Mattia sighed. “Actually, I don’t even want it to be fixed.” He took a deep breath. “I’ll ask you one last time before I call the cops, please, just leave me the fuck alone tonight.”

Finally, Richard seemed to get it, understanding that he'd lost the game he was playing, not that Mattia thought Richard might actually care about losing him all that much. Quietly, Richard collected his fancy leather shoes and his expensive designer jacket. Mattia escorted him to the door.

With one hand on the metal doorknob, Richard looked over his shoulder and smirked, "I know you're fucking him," he said matter-of-factly. "Now you have my consent and blessing. Do it right, or you'll lose him too."

He couldn't believe this guy! Frozen to the spot, Mattia watched him walk out of his life, knowing he'd have to face Richard again to retrieve his key and let him take the few things that were his. In the past, Mattia had often complained about Richard never feeling as if he could trust him with his possessions, but for once Mattia was glad that he kept this distance between them. They should be able to have another conversation some other time; Mattia just couldn't deal with all of this right now. He wanted Richard out of his sight for as long as possible.

Funny, how you can go from loving someone so dearly to hating his guts in less than ten minutes time.

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*Fucking shit. Crap. Bollocks. Fuckityfuck.*

Mattia's heart hurt.

It was painfully throbbing, pounding almost unbearably fast. He could hardly believe how much his chest was able to ache. Maybe it should just stop beating altogether. Would save him some fucking pain, and nobody would miss him anyway.

He'd been sitting on the floor between his bedroom and the kitchen, huddled in the corner with Prince purring on his lap. Hours passed, and he'd hardly moved, only getting up once to feed his cat. Mattia watched the sun go down from where he sat, petting Prince. Eventually, even his cat left him and moved to the sofa where he lay curled up in a ball, sound asleep.

*Stupid, disgusting couch.*

The growing headache made it painful to think, or do anything but stare into the darkness of his apartment. Unable to sort his thoughts, he wondered what he'd done wrong in his previous life to make him deserve any of this crap. His father would probably say, "*I told you so. That's what you deserve for being a cocksucker.*"

Oh yeah, as if liking cock had anything to do with it. It didn't define who he was. But his father had made it perfectly clear before, told him just how fucked up he thought Mattia was. As if being gay made him such a horrible person. Maybe he was right, and Mattia really didn't deserve happiness.

Mattia palmed his smartphone, cradling it in his hands like it was precious. He turned it around carefully and then turned it some more, eventually dialing the only number he programmed into his speed dial besides Richard's. *Oh god, Richard.*

"Leo?" Mattia choked out, sounding fucking weak to his own ears, and his vision blurred for a moment, feeling nauseated.

"Mattia? Come on, man," Leo grumbled into the speaker, "it's one in the morning. Why are you not in bed?" Leo's voice came through low and raspy, sounding a lot like Mattia had just woken him up. *Sorry.*

"I think I am..."

There was a long pause. Mattia couldn't think, couldn't concentrate on speaking. His heart hammered too fast, pumping and pounding against his rib cage. The damned room was still spinning like a fucking carousel.

"You, what?" Leo yawned.

*Shit.* He should have gone to bed and called in the morning, or afternoon. Only problem was Mattia couldn't go to bed, couldn't forget about today. Nothing was right anymore, and his chest ached so much...

"I think I am having a panic attack or something."

Or something.

*I might be dying for all I know.*

"Shit, Mattia," Leo gasped. "What happened?"

"The room. I'm dizzy. It's spinning." Mattia took a deep breath, but his throat was so dry, and it hurt so much, he choked. "Can't hold on. Can't breathe."

There was shuffling on the other end of the line, a short pause, and then Leo's worried voice echoed through his ears. "Tia, calm down, please."

He did as Leo asked, trying to take a deeper breath and let it out without choking. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in—*Fuck.* It really hurt. Mattia yelped when Prince's tiny paws stumbled over his legs. He hadn't even noticed the cat return.

“Listen, you’ve got to calm down, and tell me what happened.”

“I.” He coughed into the speaker. “Can you? Leo. Please.”

*Leo, please. I need you.*

“Where is Richard? Shouldn’t you be calling him? Wait.” Leo paused a moment, then raised his voice asking, “Did something happen to him?”

“Oh, God. Richard.”

Mattia broke down, and the tears finally ran free. He sobbed and sneezed and sobbed some more, because now that was all he could do.

“Just... sit down, okay? Don’t freak out. I’m gonna be there in ten minutes,” Leo said calmly. “Hold it together for me. I’ll be right with you.”

As much as he wanted Leo here, he couldn’t let him see him like that.

*I’m such a fucking mess.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eighteen

### *My Love Lasts Longer Than a Summer*

Leo quickly slipped into his black denim pants and cream-colored flip flops that he wore to the beach the other day. He didn't bother with a T-shirt and just flung his dark blue trench coat over his bare shoulders, closed one button in the middle, and ran for the door. On the way, Leo grabbed his messenger bag and tossed his keys and phone inside.

"Dammit," Leo cursed when he had to search for his car keys, once he reached his truck. He could hardly concentrate on the simple task of getting the door open, and on his way to Mattia he knew he broke several traffic laws, but luckily didn't get pulled over by the police. It was dangerous and stupid, he knew that, but all he could think of was getting to Mattia as fast as possible.

Leo bumped into a tipsy, young couple, chuckling at each other as they went through the main entrance the moment he arrived at his friend's apartment building. They must've just come back from a date, seemingly too wrapped up in each other to be suspicious of him following close behind. Leo hurried up the stairs, and thanked heaven that Mattia still had his emergency key inside a white, cat-shaped ceramic figurine next to his doormat. Leo had a feeling that something was seriously wrong when, even after ringing the doorbell a couple of times, Mattia hadn't opened for him.

"Christ! Look at you, Tia. What the hell happened?"

Leo didn't want to believe his eyes when he found his friend huddled on the floor, his back against the wall, his arms tightly wound around his knees. He wore a tight black T-shirt and well-worn gray sweats. Without a second thought, he dropped to the ground and joined Mattia, reaching out to touch his arm so he'd look up at him, but he didn't stir.

"Hey, it's me," Leo barely whispered, not wanting to startle his friend. He gently ran his hand up and down Mattia's arm. His skin was chilled, and Leo's finger brushed over goose bumps at the back of his arm. "Hey." He tried once more but no reaction. Leo took a deep breath, praying he would be able to stay calm. "What happened?" he asked with difficulty, tears threatening to fall.

It scared Leo when Mattia still wouldn't answer, continuing to simply stare at the floor in front of him. Then Leo slowly stood, smoothing out the wrinkles

in his trench coat. "Come on. Let's move you to the couch," he said with a small smile, in case Mattia decided to look at him.

Leo reached out and offered his hand to help him up. Mattia shook his head back and forth like it was possibly the worst idea ever. Leo wasn't prepared for the forlorn look on Mattia's face when he finally lifted his face. His heart stopped. Mattia's eyes were red-rimmed, dark and emotionless, his cheeks red and tear-stained.

"No," Mattia whispered, biting his lip hard and squinting his eyes in pain. Leo feared he might draw blood if he continued biting down like that.

"Okay, okay. The floor is fine," Leo whispered soothingly, and once more dropped to his knees in front of a broken-down Mattia. His friend looked exhausted and shaken, traumatized even. Leo could see more tears in the corner of his usually so breathtakingly beautiful, gray-blue eyes. He reached for Mattia, caressing his cheek when his fingers made contact with Mattia's face. Leo gently ran his hand across his heated, tear-stained skin. His thumb brushed along Mattia's lower lip, carefully nudging the soft mouth in the hope that he'd ease up his teeth and stop biting his lip.

"God, do you know how much it hurts to see you like that?" Leo whispered, gently grasping Mattia's jaw.

With a low sigh, Mattia lifted his head a little higher, and when his eyes collided with Leo's, Leo felt his breath catch, and his throat suddenly ached like he'd been trying to swallow a rock. Shaking his head, Leo dropped his hand and let his eyes take in Mattia's *lost* expression once more, before casting his eyes to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Leo said. "It's just... really hard to know you're hurting." *And I can't do anything.*

When the only response he got from Mattia was a weak snort, Leo reached for his hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "Please relax a bit. I'll get you some water and a pillow for your back," Leo whispered, barely audible to his own ears. "Then you tell me what else I can do to help, okay?" he asked and got to his feet, not really waiting for an answer.

Mattia stared at him, looking bewildered, and nodded. When Leo moved to get said items, Mattia reached for his hand and stopped him from walking away. "No pillow, please. Not from the couch," Mattia mumbled, almost choking on the last word.

"I can get you some from your bedroom," Leo offered, wondering what was wrong with Mattia's couch.

Mattia considered him for a long moment before speaking. "Water will be great, thank you," he whispered, giving him a small smile that pained Leo. He had to do something about the terrible state Mattia was in, and fast.

Leo returned shortly with a glass of water and a large black satin pillow he plucked from Mattia's bed. He watched Mattia empty the glass in long gulps and then settle back against the wall, relaxing into the soft pillow. When Mattia appeared to have calmed down a bit, Leo sat beside him, their shoulders touching.

After a long moment of silence, Leo finally asked, "Will you tell me what happened? And where is Richard?"

Leo watched Mattia's face for any indication of pain. Was he hurt somewhere? Leo couldn't imagine what was going on, and why the hell wasn't Richard here for his boyfriend? Leo knew that Richard had his own apartment, and they often spent days or nights apart, but what the hell? He should be here for Mattia right now! Unless something happened to him? Was that why Mattia had been crying?

"Is he okay?" Leo asked carefully, dreading the answer. "Do you want me to call him?"

"Please, God, no." Mattia shook his head and tears eventually fell again. "He's a liar and..." He wiped the rolling tears with the back of his hand, sniffing adorably. "Fuck Richard! He cheated."

*Oh, shit.* Leo tightened his fingers into fists. "Are you... sure?" he asked, keeping his voice low and as calm as he could muster. He honestly couldn't believe what he was hearing. Anger quickly pooled in his stomach while watching Mattia's face contort with the rage Leo was feeling.

*Richard, that bastard.*

Mattia growled. "Uh-huh. Pretty sure." He then gave Leo a weak, lopsided grin—one Leo thought he'd not see again so soon. It didn't fool him, though, he knew Mattia was far from amused. The knowledge that Richard hurt Mattia in the worst way possible made Leo want to hunt the fucker down.

"I kinda, you know." Mattia tipped his head into the direction of his living area. "The couch."

“Are you kidding me? You saw them?” Leo asked, shocked, his voice sounding strangely pained to his own ears. *Shit. That bastard! I’m going to rip his fucking throat out.*

“Blue-haired twink from the third floor,” Mattia muttered. “Fuck. He kept the punk busy, all nicely bent over the couch while I was out...” he added, sounding resigned.

“Oh Tia, I am so sorry.” Leo scooted closer and reached out his hand, giving Mattia’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Mattia nodded. “Me too,” he said in a whisper and closed his eyes, leaning into Leo’s comforting touch. Leo wanted to wrap him up in his arms and stay like this forever. His blood was boiling at the mere thought of Richard even existing.

Leo sighed. “It’s lame to say, but I’m *really* sorry he did this to you.” How Leo wished he could’ve saved his friend from that man, before something like that could have happened. It wasn’t fair. Mattia didn’t deserve this pain.

Mattia nodded. Leo moved and closed his eyes, inhaling the faint scent of Mattia’s spicy cologne. “You don’t deserve this, Tia,” Leo whispered as he wrapped his arms around his friend and just—finally—held him tight for a long while.

Leo feared Mattia might just fall asleep here on the floor with him, but before he had any chance to suggest they move this to the bedroom, so Mattia could finally sleep and get some rest, Mattia asked, “Am I really that bad?”

Leo moved back enough to get a proper look at Mattia’s face. “What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

“Why does everyone hate me?” Mattia’s voice was low, sounding sad and close to tears. Leo’s stomach churned.

“I don’t hate you, Tia,” Leo stated, unable to tear his eyes away from Mattia’s as he waited impatiently for his reply.

“Yeah, I know,” Mattia eventually whispered, sounding unconvinced. The forlorn look on his face was like a punch to Leo’s gut.

“Do you?” Leo asked carefully. “‘Cause you sure don’t sound like you believe me.” Leo poked Mattia’s shoulder, trying to lift his spirits, and pulling Mattia away from all those negative thoughts looming over him. When Mattia grinned back at him, Leo smiled in return, the heavy feeling on his chest

dissolve a little. Given Mattia's grin was only a weak attempt, but it was one, nonetheless.

"I guess so. I mean, you're here, right? You wouldn't be if you hated me." Mattia considered him. "'Cause honestly, Leo, I have nothing of value for you to steal."

Mattia's small smile barely reached his eyes, but Leo hadn't expected him to feel all better yet, so it was okay. He'd need time to recover from his shock, and Leo planned to be there for him along the way.

"Unless..." Mattia continued, faking a loud sigh. "Shit. Unless, you want my jewelry! You'll have to wait until I pass out from exhaustion, before you can run away with it," Mattia said with teasing banter.

"You're an idiot, Tia." Leo shook his head. "And nobody hates you."

"Yes they do," Mattia said stubbornly. "And out of all the people who hate me, you should be the one despising me the most." Mattia startled him by reaching for his hand and wrapping his fingers tightly around Leo's. "You really do have reasons, Leo, even if it's been years since I... You know."

Mattia's gaze fell, and Leo could have sworn he heard a quiet sob escaping him.

"But I don't!" Leo said firmly, squeezing Mattia's hand. Because he didn't. "Shit. I could never hate you, Tia. How can you even think that?" Leo shouted.

"But you should. I didn't treat you right."

"You idiot! Man, that was ten fucking years ago!" Leo exclaimed, frustrated. When would Mattia ever stop mentioning it? "It's done and forgiven. I've told you so, how many times now?"

"Thanks," Mattia whispered. He gave Leo's fingers a quick squeeze but didn't look up from where his eyes were fixated at the ground. "I'll try to believe you."

"Good. You'd better believe me," Leo said, tugging at Mattia's arm to get his attention. "Don't you ever say that I should hate you again," he added firmly, hoping they would never have to discuss this in the future. Leo was at a loss for what to do now, though. Despite the terrible event that'd brought them here, Mattia's closeness was starting to take its toll on Leo. The longing he felt toward Mattia hadn't diminished. In fact, now, it steadily grew stronger the longer they sat huddled together on the floor like this.

The shy smile on Mattia's face, when he finally looked at him, was almost too much, and Leo could hardly resist kissing him. Deep and hard. Soft and slow. And all at once. Leo desperately wanted to throw himself in his friend's lap and—

“What?” Mattia growled, his voice deep and husky.

Leo blinked at him, slightly confused. “What?” he stupidly repeated Mattia's question.

Mattia raised his eyebrow. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, searching Leo's face.

When their eyes met again, Leo relaxed and smiled. “Because, you are you.” Leo sighed. “And you care, Tia. About what I think of you. And you're worried that I don't like you. You also trust me, and that makes me happy.” *And just a little aroused*, he thought, embarrassed.

Mattia considered him. “I, well, I guess so.” He then shrugged and beamed a playful grin at Leo, one that he didn't see that often, and it was all the more beautiful right that moment. Leo squirmed a little. It was suddenly too difficult to keep his hands to himself and not jump Mattia right then and there.

“You're like my only friend now,” Mattia said matter-of-factly. “The only person who cares I even exist,” he added sincerely, gazing at Leo with flushed cheeks and a hopeful smile.

Leo felt guilty that this made him even happier.

“You should have a million friends, Tia,” Leo whispered. “That's how amazing you are.” Leo's fingers twitched, wanting to touch Mattia so badly. “Shit. The whole world should know how wonderful you are.” *Although I don't want to share you with anyone.*

“Oh, God, please no!” Mattia whined. “Way too many people. Way too many.” He then laughed, the sound causing Leo's heart to sing along. “I'm glad when I can deal with one person at a time. I don't need more friends.”

Leo couldn't help but grin. Mattia could at least smile again and laugh a little. Maybe Leo was doing his job right. He inched forward, resting his hand on Mattia's shoulder and gave his soft fabric-covered arm a squeeze.

“You can be so adorable when you let your guard down, Tia.” *Can I kiss him now? Please?*

“Excuse me?” Mattia almost squeaked the two words. He raised his eyebrow, and the flustered expression looked so good on him, Leo could hardly

resist any longer. Yes, his cheeks were red, and the faint stains of his tears were still visible, but he was beautiful, and it took Leo's breath away.

But Leo was sure the last thing Mattia needed right now was Leo kissing him. He might get his chance, but tonight was definitely not it. Before Leo could suggest they finally get up from the floor, which was starting to become rather uncomfortable, he noticed Mattia lowering his head. Leo nudged his friend. "Hey," Leo whispered. A quiet sob escaped Mattia's lips. *Shit.*

"You know, I'd planned to propose today." Mattia's deep voice for once didn't make Leo weak in the knees, instead painfully tugging at his heart. *Propose.* Leo rolled the word around in his head, on his tongue. And he caught his boyfriend fucking someone else? *Fuck.*

Mattia's hand gently nudged Leo's shoulder, feeling it slowly slide down his arm. When Leo looked between their bodies, he found Mattia's balled fist resting on his trench coat covered arm. Before he could ask what was wrong, Mattia slowly opened his hand, and a small golden band twinkled in the darkness. Leo's breath caught, and without a second thought, he gathered his friend in a tight embrace, losing the ring with their movement.

Leo didn't need an explanation; he knew that this was most likely meant for Richard. Leo could only imagine how much the guy meant to Mattia. One thing Leo knew for certain: Mattia lived for the idea of getting married. Mattia had mentioned often enough that he dreamed of building his own a family. After Mattia had lost the support of his parents and friends, Leo didn't want to imagine how much Mattia must be hurting right now.

"Let's move you to your bed, Tia," Leo soothed, patting his back. "You should sleep. It's been a long day."

Leo would make sure to be the best friend, and family, Mattia could have. Even if it meant putting his feelings second. Forever, if he had to. *Damn, this was going to be tough.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nineteen

### *Wake Me Up Inside*

Mattia woke to the sound of *someone* breathing, the tingling sensation of *someone's* breath caressing his bare skin. Turning his head slowly on the soft pillow, he found Leo sound asleep next to him, his cute, pointy nose pressed against Mattia's bicep. There was no way he would not *not* smile at the sight. For a brief moment, the world—everything—appeared to be well again. Then he remembered yesterday and wanted to scream and shout, cry, and just run away.

*Fuck. So much crap went down.*

When Leo stirred, his cold toes touched Mattia's ankle underneath the blanket they shared, his warm hand sliding around Mattia's bare chest. Looking at Leo's peaceful expression he could feel his spirit lifting again. He wouldn't want to run away if he could wake up next to that person and his sweetness every morning. The warmth Leo's skin provided soothing to his soul, and the weight of his hand on his chest grounded him.

Mattia took a deep breath and moved a little. He was still tired, exhausted even, but he was twitchy and couldn't lay still for too long, even with Leo next to him. Perhaps, especially not with the way Leo's body pressed into him, his fingers tickling the hairs on his chest as they slowly slid downward. When he moved, Leo stirred, and Mattia quickly felt his cock twitch and harden—oh yeah. Shit, he *was* aroused. He could feel that he was also wearing his comfy underwear. Thank God.

Gazing at Leo's face, he once again admired just how peaceful he looked in his sleep. And so beautiful, with his full lips, rosy and slightly parted, and his wavy hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks and slightly tangled at the nape. Mattia's fingers itched to move, to brush an errant curl out of his face, maybe even caress his cheek, just to feel how soft it would be right now.

*Admit it, you want him.* Of course, Mattia still wanted to be with Leo; it would be perfect with him. But Leo was his best friend, what if he lost him too?

*You won't if you do it right, man.* Which meant he shouldn't rush into anything.

*Just don't screw it up.*

"Morning," he whispered when Leo cracked one eye open. Pools of warm, deep brown met his gray-blue gaze. Leo blinked once, twice, and then groaned, squeezing Mattia's chest for a moment, before letting go. He quickly withdrew his hand, pressing it against his own body, hiding it underneath blanket and skin.

*I won't screw it up.*

"M sorry," Leo mumbled into his shoulder, his feet shuffling underneath the blanket they shared, before inching away from Mattia. Did he just apologize? What for?

Mattia nudged him.

"Said sorry," Leo grumbled and tore his head away from where it had rested against Mattia's shoulder. With one swift move, he buried his face under the pillow that lay next to his head, probably unused all night.

"What?" Mattia prompted when Leo peeked out from under the pillow and glared at him, his cheeks redder than they'd been before. *Noted, Leo is definitely not a morning person.*

He couldn't help but smile sleepily, watching Leo glare and grumble at him. "I didn't mean to use you as pillow and mattress. I'm sorry."

Mattia chuckled. "No harm done, really."

When Leo let himself fall back into the mattress, face-first, Mattia asked, "Want to go back to sleep or get up? I don't feel like moving yet."

A few moments later, Leo threw back the blanket and yawned. "I'm gonna make coffee." He smiled at Mattia. "You. Don't move."

"Aye, aye captain."

"You, mister, are way too chipper at this ungodly hour," Leo muttered and dragged his sleepy butt out of bed. He turned to glare at Mattia once more. "Considering we've never woken up together, I'm going easy on you today, but don't get used to it."

He waved his finger in the air, pointing at Mattia after swiveling it around a few times as if to summon something, or someone.

"You don't want to talk to me when I am half asleep, okay? I'm not taking responsibility for what the hell ever happens before I've had at least two cups of coffee." He grinned then turned to slip into the jeans he wore yesterday.

"Got it." Mattia laughed. "I'll zip it."

Mattia watched him curiously, as Leo shuffled about, randomly opening his closet drawers, probably in search of a shirt to put on. He remembered that Leo hadn't worn anything underneath his coat last night. He must've hurried to get to Mattia, after he'd woken Leo up in the middle of the night. Mattia felt a pang of guilt for causing Leo trouble and being such an inconvenience.

"You don't have to get dressed on my account," Mattia said, cringing a little when he remembered Leo didn't want him to talk. *Well, tough luck, man.*

For some odd reason, he didn't mind Leo rummaging through his closet without asking, and it felt sort of good, thinking that Leo guessed he'd be allowed to do as he pleased. They were friends, after all. But Leo was so much more; he was a friend like one he'd never had, and Mattia was glad that he was here with him today and, hopefully, for a very long time.

"Nice try." Leo winked and pulled a white tank top over his head. Strangely, it fit him rather well, considering Mattia's height and slightly heavier build. "Fits me better than you, huh?" Leo asked, but laughed out loud and turned around, heading for the kitchen before Mattia had a chance to reply.

"It does," Mattia called after him.

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He'd never really done anything in Mattia's kitchen; it was bigger than his but not by much, he guessed. Leo opened his fridge and was instantly impressed by how filled it was. Leo knew Mattia could have quite the appetite, but he hadn't thought to find his fridge filled to the brim with anything you could desire. He reached around the juices to grab the milk. While he preferred his coffee black and without sugar, Mattia liked milk and two packets of sweetener with his.

A shiver ran down Leo's spine as he stood before the stainless steel sink, watching the rest of the water disappear down the drain. The air was a little chilly, raising goose bumps on his exposed arms. Leo suppressed a groan. Mornings sucked, and he wanted to go back to bed for a while.

Mattia's bed.

Leo shuddered.

Last night had been horrible. Closing his eyes, he could still see Mattia's tear-stained face and his dead eyes. Remembering any moment from that night was painful, and the urge he'd felt to kiss Mattia made him cringe and feel ashamed. Even if it might not have had led to anything, Leo wouldn't forgive himself if he'd taken advantage of the situation.

Leo wouldn't deny that he was glad that Richard was out of the picture, or rather, out of Mattia's life, but what the bastard had done to him was unforgivable. Richard was as much a disgusting piece of trash as he'd thought and hoped for. Leo just wished Mattia did not have to go through all of this right now.

*Could he really ever want me?*

*I'm just a friend to him, aren't I?*

Leo wasn't sure how to go on from here. He wanted Mattia so badly it hurt. At the same time, it mattered a lot more to him that Mattia would be okay. He wanted him to recover from the shock, and get over his broken heart. He also wanted to stay Mattia's friend. Leo had never done relationships; he didn't know if they could even function as a couple.

Much as he wanted Mattia, Leo couldn't bring himself to do anything about it yet, but would there ever be a right time? There was something else that bothered Leo; he didn't want to be a freaking *rebound*. Maybe they were supposed to be just friends after all. No matter what, Leo would be there for Mattia; there was no doubt about it. Their friendship came first, definitely.

A persistent meow and nudge to his foot drew him from his thoughts. Leo looked down to find a purring Prince pawing at his bare feet.

"Ouch, that tickles, mister!" He laughed and tried to catch the cat, but it was faster and dashed away. With one smooth jump, it landed on all fours on the marble kitchen counter.

"You hungry, little man?" Leo asked, and was rewarded with a loud meow.

Leo looked around the kitchen for where Mattia kept his cat food.

"Just a moment, I'll find you something delicious."

At least, Leo hoped he would.

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Mattia wondered what Leo was doing. It felt like he was gone for a long time, and Mattia almost drifted back to sleep a few times. When he thought Leo would never return, he poked his head around the door to Mattia's bedroom.

"Breakfast in bed?" Leo asked with an amused, sleepy smile.

Even from afar, he could tell Leo looked dead on his feet, but adorably so.

“Not really my kinda thing, but thank you,” he replied with a stifled yawn. It really wasn’t. Mattia would rather eat in the kitchen when there was time, and he felt like eating. Most days he’d survive on coffee and apples in the office until lunch break.

“Thank God.” Leo laughed, before he disappeared again.

Mattia had the faintest impression that Leo wasn’t a breakfast in bed kinda guy himself. A smile forced its way to his lips. Or Leo was simply too tired and lazy to do anything right now, especially not prepare breakfast.

Mattia yawned and stretched then settled back into his usual position, drawing his knees up to his chest and hugging them lazily. He watched Leo walk back into the room with two steaming cups of coffee that smelled like heaven on earth. Leo handed him one before rounding the bed, placing his cup on the nightstand, and finally crawling onto the side he’d been sleeping on earlier.

“Mmm. To be honest with you, coffee in bed isn’t so bad.” Mattia smiled. “I could get used to that.”

“Of course you could.” Leo laughed and snuggled under the covers, sitting with his back against the headboard, looking all cozy and cute. Mattia took a drink from his coffee before putting it aside.

With a sideways glance, Mattia studied the colorful tattoo on Leo’s arm and the tiny bit of the skull on his chest that poked out from underneath his tank top. His hand itched to reach out and let his fingers brush over the inked skin. He’d never touched someone’s tattoos before the time he rubbed sun lotion onto Leo. Of course it felt like any other skin, but it was a strangely exciting feeling to trace the colorful lines.

He *really* liked Leo’s ink. It looked incredibly hot on him. A thought he hadn’t let himself ponder much before. But the more he looked at Leo’s body, the more he realized just how insanely hot Leo was. And those tattoos did nothing but make him even more gorgeous and irresistible.

Mattia knew this wasn’t the right moment to ponder his attraction toward his friend, and perhaps far from the right moment to want to kiss him, or touch him. It didn’t stop his confused heart from aching or his cock from becoming painfully aroused. Dammit, just when he’d thought he’d gotten rid of his morning erection.

Leo poked his arm and looked at him with a funny expression.

“Tia, there is cake on the floor in your living room.”

*Shit. The fucking cake!*

He had totally forgotten about the thing.

“Oh, yeah. Shit. Prince didn’t eat any, did he?” Mattia asked, ready to get out of bed if needed.

“Considering he was quite a hungry kitty, I’d say no,” Leo said, with a smile that turned into a yawn.

“Thank God,” Mattia sighed. The last thing he needed was a cat emergency.

Leo gave him a melancholy look then dropped his hand on top of his. Before he could ask what he was holding in his palm, Leo opened it, and he caught sight of his stupid engagement ring. The small golden item brought back all kinds of memories, causing his chest to ache.

*Shit. Richard.*

“You dropped that last night,” Leo’s voice was barely a whisper, his eyes searching Mattia’s face. “Thought you should put it away before you lose it.”

Mattia guessed Leo must feel uncomfortable, but he smiled at him nonetheless. Mattia himself felt terribly embarrassed and much like a fool for even telling him about the proposal that never happened. But Leo always made him feel safe and drew out his confessions. He made him say stuff Mattia wouldn’t normally feel comfortable enough exposing.

“Thanks,” he croaked his weak reply.

Lovely. There were a whole bunch of new emotions he wanted to get rid of, memories he’d rather forget, and things he didn’t want to talk or think about. Would there ever be a happy ending to all of this?

Mattia observed Leo watching him. “My birthday is in about two months. Can we do something fun together?” Mattia eventually asked, not surprised by the confused look on Leo’s face.

“Of course.” A smile quickly found its way back onto Leo’s lips. “We have to do something great.”

Mattia surprised himself though, for bringing it up. He’d planned on the usual, quiet dinner with Richard, nothing out of the ordinary. He suddenly felt the urge to go out and do something bigger and better. With Leo.

“I’ve always wanted to go to Disneyland, you know,” Mattia hinted, batting his eyelashes as well as he could. He’d never done that on purpose before. The rapid blinking quickly made him feel dizzy. *Shit*.

“Whatever you want, Tia.” Leo laughed. “You want to take photos with all the princesses, don’t you?” he teased with a snicker.

“Absolutely.” Mattia rolled his eyes, loving the sound of Leo’s laugh. It was impossible not to join in.

Leaning in closer, Leo asked curiously, “Who’s your favorite, huh?” He pondered his question for a moment, giving Mattia his sweetest smile, one that made his insides melt. “Come to think of it, there is still a lot more I need to learn about you.”

“For example, who is my favorite princess?”

All of a sudden, Mattia felt ridiculously nervous and afraid to say anything wrong.

“That,” Leo whispered sweetly, “and a whole bunch of other things.”

“We’ll get there.” Mattia poked him in the chest. “We have time, right?”

“Time we have.”

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty

### *A Thousand Years Would Be Worth the Wait*

“Come on in.” Mattia waved Leo inside. They’d made plans to spend the day out on Leo’s boat. “Give me a minute to feed Prince, then I’m all yours for the day,” he said with a wink and followed Leo into his living room. A shudder ran down his spine when he saw the piece of furniture that recently haunted his sleep.

While Mattia had gotten over the initial pain Richard caused him, he wasn’t any closer to figuring out what the future could hold for him and Leo. In fact, not much had changed since that night of his breakdown. They still worked together and talked almost daily. Often, Leo would stop by at his office with lunch or just to talk and keep Mattia company. Sometimes, they went out to grab a burger or pizza and walk along the Navy Pier like they used to. Most days, everything seemed oddly normal between them, Leo always doing his best to cheer Mattia up to make him forget about his ruined relationship with Richard.

Leo was determined to take care of Mattia after the guy had come back for his belongings the other night, surprising them on their way out to dinner. They had run into Richard in the parking lot, and in order to keep Leo from punching the guy’s lights out, and Richard from saying anything hurtful or stupid that would have aggravated Leo only further, Mattia had personally escorted Richard upstairs. Leo had been ready to pounce the second he saw him arriving in his silver BMW convertible. Leaving Leo behind had proven to be a smart move.

Richard hadn’t bothered shutting his big mouth, even for a minute, his poison tongue as insulting and unthoughtful as ever. Thankfully, Mattia had already boxed his ex-boyfriend’s designer jeans and shirts as well as the few accessories he’d left behind, and thus avoided further drama. In the end, despite his endless accusations, Richard didn’t show further interest in Mattia. After getting his valuable belongings back, Richard was out of his life faster than Mattia had dared to hope. Fortunately, Richard handed over his key without further discussion, turned and left.

Mattia still couldn’t fully comprehend seeing this heartless side of Richard, but after all that had happened, Mattia realized that he was better off without him.

“Prince! Time for your lunch!” Mattia called for his cat, who followed him into the kitchen to be fed, then Mattia rushed down the small corridor into his bedroom to get his scarf and maybe something a little warmer to wear over his rather thin, blue crewneck T-shirt. The weather had gradually become colder, and it would be quite windy out on the water. God, he looked forward to an entire day with Leo. Though they were spending a lot of time together, he hadn’t wanted Leo to visit him at his apartment since the incident happened. Mattia himself hadn’t been able to stay, even a moment longer than necessary, in his living room, and sitting on that damned couch like nothing happened was simply impossible. He’d camped out in his office almost all day and night for over a week now.

Mattia shortly returned from his bedroom, his black scarf and a gray sweatshirt slung over his arm, Prince—who liked to follow him anywhere—wrapped around his other, meowing quietly. His heart sped up and his chest tightened uncomfortably when he saw Leo sitting cross-legged in the center of his couch. Prince jumped off his arm when Mattia freaked and dashed toward Leo. “*Please* get up,” he pleaded with a shaky voice.

“What’s wrong?” Leo asked, giving him a confused look, carefully stepping aside, and holding out his arms when Mattia thrust his clothing toward him. Mattia didn’t hesitate and gripped at the furniture he loathed so much, eagerly pushing it toward the balcony door.

“This is it! Shit!” Mattia cursed, frowning at Leo who watched him with a pained expression. “Can you open the door for me, please?” he asked through gritted teeth, pushing the furniture with all his might. “*Move* goddammit!”

“What are you doing?” Leo looked from him to the glass door and back. “You’re not going to do something stupid, are you?”

“I wouldn’t call it stupid,” Mattia muttered. “I need you to help me, though.”

“Mattia, stop! You can’t just throw the sofa off of the balcony. Shit, you can’t just throw it out like that,” Leo pleaded, trying to talk some sense into him, but Mattia felt like there was absolutely no way around it; he had to get rid of that thing, right this moment. Thinking about Richard, who had been fucking that stupid twink almost two weeks ago on that very same couch made him sick to his stomach, and he just couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Oh, I can, and I will. Watch me!” Mattia growled and gripped the arm of the sofa with both hands, pushing it further toward the double glass doors. At

least, he tried to. The damn thing was *really* heavy. He might not be able to get rid of it like this right now, after all. *Dammit*. A series of earnest curses left his lips before dropping the heavy thing with a loud thud onto the floor.

Leo let out a frustrated sigh, walking around the ugly furniture, until he stood before Mattia. "I think I might have an idea. Let me give you a hand here." He wound his arm around Mattia's shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. "Do you trust me?" he asked with a sincere smile, and Mattia nodded. Maybe he needed to calm down. Leo was right; he couldn't just throw a piece of furniture out of the fifth floor balcony.

"But, I really need it gone." Mattia grimaced in disgust. "It's giving me nightmares, Leo. I can't take it any longer. I swear." He kicked the furniture with all the strength he had. "It stinks, too. Can't you smell it? Disgusting!"

"What happened to your plan of ordering a new sofa? Wait, don't tell me." Leo paused dramatically, waving his hand about. "You couldn't choose, could you?"

"Exactly," Mattia confessed. "I looked at a million sofas, but they are either fucking expensive, extremely ugly, look terribly uncomfortable, or I just didn't like them."

Leo smirked. "And it has to be gone right this second?" he asked, brushing Mattia's shoulder as he leaned, beaming Mattia a warm smile, like he understood exactly what he was feeling. The simple smile felt much like a promise that whatever his problems were, Leo would make them go away.

"Trust me, Tia." Leo patted his shoulders affectionately. "You'll like my plan."

And Mattia did. He had the sudden realization that he'd trust Leo with his life.

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"What do you say?"

Leo called from where he puttered around in Mattia's small kitchen, gathering the rest of the plates and cutlery. Mattia couldn't stop himself from watching his swift movements, as he twirled around, picking up dishes and dancing back into the living room. There was always something breathtakingly beautiful in the way he moved. Leo's black cardigan fluttered about, the tight white jeans hugging his behind just flawlessly, fitting snugly.

“Doesn’t it look just perfect?” Leo beamed him a bright smile then bent to fix the cloth on the glass table in front of them. He hadn’t noticed how fast the table had filled itself with pizza, chips, all kinds of dips and sauces, veggie sticks, and wine.

“I can see you like it,” Leo said, grinning cutely. “Tell me I’m a genius?” He batted his eyelashes then burst out laughing. Mattia nodded, not knowing how to express his gratitude or tell Leo just how amazing he was or how much he loved the *new* couch. The way Leo’s curls fell into his brown eyes, and how his tiny dimples still showed was also quite distracting.

“Yeah. You are,” he eventually got out. “But—”

“No *buts*,” Leo scolded him with a frown, Mattia instantly wished away. “Sit down and eat.”

With one quick step, Leo was right up in his face, a bright smile on his lips. Leo placed both hands on his shoulder and gently guided Mattia down onto the leather sofa.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Tia.” Leo winked at him and for a long moment, and Mattia was lost in his own little world.

How could he not have seen it?

*The way Leo looked at him, with pure adoration and affection. And all the things he did for him.*

It was fucking obvious how much Leo actually cared about him. It wasn’t just that they carried his disgusting piece of furniture outside, together, instead of throwing it recklessly off of the balcony. It surely was a much better plan than his, and they actually managed to get it down the flight of stairs. Leo then went to get Sam and some of his other friends. Apparently, they took Sam’s uncle’s moving van and got rid of the filthy thing. Leo had sent Mattia on a mission to buy *a lot of groceries* and ordered him to stay out until he called.

Mattia did as he’d been told. He spent the afternoon food shopping and half an hour at Starbucks. Turned out to be a good trip. Mattia found a bunch of delicious-looking things to snack on, and got a handful of kitchen utensils. Not that he’d needed them, but they looked like they would come in handy someday. Maybe he could pick up baking once again.

When he got back to his home, after Leo’s call, of course, Mattia almost had a heart attack when he saw the beautiful piece of white furniture sitting, perfectly so, in the middle of his living room. Large, U-shaped, white leather.

Small, round throw pillows neatly aligned from one side to the other. Some black, others leopard-printed.

At first, he'd thought Leo had gotten him an identical sofa to his own, but he fast dismissed that possibility. How in the world would he have paid for it? Then he wondered whether Leo had snatched his credit card from his wallet, but remembering that he didn't have a limit higher than one thousand dollars made that seem impossible, as well. It wouldn't have paid for a quarter of the thing.

Leo pushed his butt back against the soft leather, sitting cross-legged next to Mattia. Mattia turned to look at him, wondering how he could possibly thank Leo for all the trouble he went through, not just to stand by his side as a friend, but also to go so far as to *lend* him a freaking sofa. And all that only because Mattia had been an idiot and too worked up to choose something for himself.

*I only wanted it to be something amazing. Like Leo's sofa.*

He always loved lounging on Leo's sofa when he was there, which sadly, hadn't been very often.

As if reading his mind, Leo reassured him, "It's okay, Tia. Keep it until you find something you *really* want."

"You know I love your couch, Leo. It's incredibly comfortable and just plain beautiful," Mattia admitted. "But don't you need something to sit on? I mean, you can't sit on the floor because of me. I should be the one going all Japanese-style for a while."

Beaming him a brilliant smile, Leo snorted, "Yeah right, you hate sitting on the floor."

"Well..." Mattia grinned. Damn. Leo knew him too well. "But still, I can't possibly let you do things like that."

"Seriously, it's fine. I will just stay with you a lot more often now, so I won't miss not having a goddamn couch in my home." Leo grinned. "Now, open up, wide!" he said, waving a carrot stick in front of his face. "Try this dip. It's heavenly!"

"Are you sure we are supposed to eat things like carrots and celery?" Mattia made a face, refusing the offered piece of vegetable. He loved to eat, very much so, but vegetables were not what he'd call comfort food. "They grow in dirt you know." Mattia laughed. "That's kind of disgusting."

Leo's expression turned sour, and Mattia thought for a second he'd punch him. "Of course, we are supposed to eat them, idiot. They're fucking healthy *and* delicious. Now open your potty mouth and have some dirty veggies." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Mattia couldn't help but laugh and eat whatever Leo decided to shove into his mouth. Leo really was the best thing that ever happened to him, but as much as Mattia wanted to wrap his arms around Leo and kiss him dizzy, he just couldn't cross that line after everything that happened recently.

"Tia?" Leo's concerned voice tore him out of his thoughts, but his mind was still swimming in dangerous waters when he looked at his friend. The sudden lust and want and need he felt for Leo might not be healthy and was barely under control.

"Ouch!" A firm punch to his left shoulder brought him back one hundred percent. "What the? Leo!" Mattia rubbed his arm and winced with emphasis. "That *hurt*, dammit."

"Good." Leo smirked at him, a carrot stick in his hand and a purring Prince on his lap.

"Good?" Mattia asked with a raise of his eyebrow, as he reached for the glass of wine on the table before him and took a swallow of the fruity beverage.

Leo snickered. "Yeah, you looked like you needed it." He grinned that sweet demonic grin he seemed to have stored for special occasions.

Mattia rolled his eyes. "I looked like I needed to be smacked?"

"Absolutely." Leo never stopped grinning, and Mattia loved that about him. "Now you look like you need some more food," Leo added, smile in place, and his pretty brown eyes locked on Mattia's.

His chest began to swell, and his heart ached, begging to be filled with Leo's love, through and through. He'd really like for Leo to kiss him right now. If Leo didn't want him the way he wanted Leo then Mattia would do *nothing* to find someone else. He had come to realize that Leo was everything he ever wanted. With Leo, he could have a best friend, a lover, and a *family* in one person.

"Open up wide," Leo singsonged, holding out a slice of pizza. "Hurry, it's gonna drip if you don't—"

Mattia leaned forward and caught the end of the slice with his teeth, slowly biting off the biggest piece he could manage. His skin tingled where Leo's

fingers curled around his wrist resting on his knee. Cheesy flavor burst on his tongue, followed by tuna, olives, and more cheese. As he chewed, Mattia watched Leo take a bite off the slice of pizza as well, his face merely inches apart from Mattia's. He observed Leo chew and smile and swallow. Mattia almost lost fighting the urge to lean in closer and sharing the rest of the piece with both their mouths, together—teeth and lips nipping, tongues swirling, tasting and sharing—God that would make it the best pizza, ever.

“What are you looking at?” Leo asked, his voice teasing a little. The corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled at Mattia.

“You,” Mattia said matter-of-factly. Leo blinked, looking somewhat dumbfounded. Mattia then laughed and reached out to pull Leo close, hugging him loosely, causing Prince to jump off the sofa with an annoyed hiss.

“Stop fooling around,” Leo scolded. “You are going to get pizza all over the couch!”

Squeezing Leo tightly, Mattia then tickled him, until his addicting laughter was the only thing bouncing off the walls.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-One

### *Words Don't Come Easily*

Leo took a deep breath, bracing himself before knocking on Mattia's apartment door, the sound of his knuckles against the dark brown wood echoing through the narrow hallway. He had already rung the bell downstairs, and Mattia told him to come on up over the intercom. Finding the door still closed when he reached the fifth floor, Leo decided to annoyingly knock a few times to let Mattia know he was already here.

"Hey, Leo, come in," Mattia greeted him with a wide smile, holding Prince in his arms, as Leo entered his friend's apartment. It hadn't gone unnoticed how cheerful Mattia recently seemed, despite everything that had happened over the last couple of months. Of course, Leo was thankful for Mattia's good mood. He'd been praying for things to go back to normal fast and that Mattia would recover from the emotional devastation of finding Richard on his couch with that twink. Thank God, he seemed well now.

Leo was still hurting for him, though. He didn't know what he'd do if a two-year relationship with someone he'd loved—if it was anything like what he was feeling for Mattia—went up in smoke. Leo had tried to imagine it all, what it would've been like sharing a bed with Mattia for two years and then suddenly having it ripped away. The thought alone made him want to curl up in a ball and never move again. He wondered how Mattia managed.

"Are you doing okay today, Tia?" Leo regarded his friend, once they were settled on the sofa. As always, he had instantly made his way toward his spot on the left side, where the couch formed a large U. "Is there anything I can help you with? Work? Do some shopping?" Leo eyed the plate with chocolate cookies that always sat on Mattia's round glass table, his fingers itching to reach out and grab a handful.

Mattia sat across from him, far enough away for them to properly look at each other, yet so close that they could touch if they wanted. Which they shouldn't.

"I'm doing great, and no, thank you, but there's nothing I really have to get done," Mattia said with the same blinding smile, observing him closely, making Leo feel a little uncomfortable under his intense gaze. Sometimes, those mysterious and mesmerizing pale gray-blue eyes could still get to him.

Mattia's eyebrow rose as he said, rather concerned, "You are looking a bit flushed, Leo. Are *you* feeling all right?"

"I was wondering." Leo tried for a confident smile, hoping that would take Mattia's thoughts off of his health. He was fine, but then, he wasn't. Leo didn't want to show any weakness, though. "You still haven't picked out your own sofa, and—"

Oh, God, he couldn't say it.

"Right, I'm sorry, Leo. I should have given you back your couch already," Mattia said regretfully, slumping back against the leopard-printed cushion.

"There's no need to..." Leo swallowed with difficulty "...to get your own now," he eventually managed, unable to look directly at Mattia. He didn't want to see the disappointment in his friend's beautiful eyes that he knew was coming, instead, studying the cookie-filled plate.

"Please, don't be mad, Leo." Mattia leaned forward and placed his hand on top of Leo's, which he hadn't realized he'd balled into a fist, resting on his crossed legs. "I promised I'd give it back. And I will. It's just, you've been here a lot, and you kept saying how much you liked my apartment, and I thought—"

"No, no stop! Mattia, just stop right there." Leo raised his voice and spoke too firmly, which wasn't his way, and it obviously surprised Mattia. He looked at Leo with concern, his pale eyes narrowed at Leo's. Leo swallowed. "I mean, of course I'm not mad. I want you to keep it. Please, keep it."

"Oh-kay," Mattia said, sounding dumbfounded, giving Leo's hand a squeeze as he crawled closer, resting on his knees merely a breath away from Leo. Leo's heart rate sped up significantly, and he thought he might faint.

"What's going on, Leo?" Mattia asked in a soothing voice, obviously knowing that something was up. The scent of his spicy cologne reached Leo's nose, and he felt a chill down his spine. Feeling intimidated, Leo dropped his gaze nervously from Mattia's stormy gray-blue eyes. His fist opened and his fingers relaxed while Mattia rubbed his thumb all over and around his turned wrist. Leo stayed silent, watching Mattia's finger ghost over his palm.

"I can tell there's something that's bothering you, and I know for a fact that you love that couch." Mattia took his other hand and pulled it out from under his knee. "I'm so sorry I kept it for so long without even asking if you wanted it back." Mattia took a deep breath, watching him closely. "And then I just assumed and again—I didn't use my head."

Leo wanted to say something but his throat felt too dry, as if it hadn't been used in years. He didn't dare speak for fear of breaking down like a little boy.

Leo had to tell him now.

He withdrew his right hand, reached out and touched his palm to Mattia's cheek just as Mattia beat him to it, speaking first. "I never meant to upset you, Leo," he said with a sense of guilt. "I was stupid. God, I've been stupid all my life."

"You were never stupid," Leo rasped. "You're brilliant, Tia. You're wonderful."

Mattia turned his face in Leo's loose hold and moved his lips to touch them firmly to his open palm. A gentle kiss followed, and the gesture alone warmed Leo's lovesick heart.

He swallowed hard. "And I want you to keep my couch because..." Leo took a deep breath, watching Mattia's pale eyes widen "...because I won't need it anymore."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke with their voice, but they did with their eyes—pale blue and gray collided with walnut-brown—and the zing Leo felt wasn't the good kind. Leo knew that Mattia knew he wasn't talking about getting a new one for himself, but he couldn't tell what exactly was going on in Mattia's head. He was at the point of no return. It was time to spill the beans.

*God, please help me. Forgive me.*

*I promised him.*

"Santa Barbara. I'm going to move," Leo croaked out, his voice heavy with pain and guilt. "It'll be a hassle to drag that thing all the way there, and I didn't lie. My baby looks better in your apartment than it ever did in mine. It fits."

Having finally let it out didn't make him feel any better; the guilt still wore him down as if he'd been carrying it around for years, instead of days. The stunned look on Mattia's face only added to the heaviness within his chest. But he knew it was the right thing to do, at least, that's what he'd been telling himself. Perhaps, it was the coward's way out.

"You fit here too, Leo," Mattia whispered, the corners of his eyes glittering like tiny silver stars had been caught in them.

When he didn't say more than that, when Mattia didn't freak out, tell him off, or whatever Leo imagined could possibly come from his confession, Leo knew he'd just hurt his best friend more than he could have possibly imagined.

Mattia would never forgive him.

"Maybe," Leo said. "But maybe, I don't."

Leo felt like a child, young, scared, alone. Lost. He'd never meant for this to happen. He wanted to be found so badly that, in the end, he was about to lose everything he'd ever wanted. Was he doing the right thing? How could this be the right thing if Mattia hated him?

"What does that mean, Leo?" Mattia's voice was small and vulnerable. He touched Leo's hands, which somehow found their way back into his own lap.

He shrugged.

With one swift movement, Leo was gathered up in strong arms, and squeezed so tightly he thought his lungs would stop functioning any second now. Mattia pressed Leo's head against his shoulder, and he shuddered when Mattia's lips brushed his ear, his comforting, cinnamon scent stronger than before.

"You promised." Mattia's breath tickled his lobe, but he wasn't in the mood to laugh. Leo didn't feel anything but the expanding pain in his chest and the growing nausea threatening to bring his breakfast back up. Leo wiggled a little, trying to get himself free. The last thing he wanted was to throw up on Mattia and his couch.

"I won't let you go, Leo. I won't."

Leo was being held captive, pressed tightly against his friend's chest. He could hear Mattia's heart beating vigorously against his own body, and the nausea grew stronger, harder to fight.

"You promised."

The last words left his lips on a sob, then Leo was suddenly pulled back. "Why do you want to go to Santa whatever you said?" Mattia glared at him, confusion as visible on his face as the anger.

"It's a promotion, of sorts," Leo whispered guiltily. He tried to avoid Mattia's glare, but his eyes were glued to those unique, mesmerizing pools of gray-blue. *I'm so sorry.*

“Is it because of the money?” Mattia asked, his voice low and pained. “Shit, Leo, do you need more money? If that’s a problem, I’m sure we—”

Leo cringed. “I don’t,” he interrupted Mattia sharply. “I don’t need money,” he said in a softer voice, trying for a smile but failing miserably. Leo felt his lips twitch and his eyes burn.

“Good.” Mattia regarded him. “Don’t ever choose money or a job before friendship and love.”

Leo wanted to tell him that this wasn’t what it looked like, but Mattia didn’t give him a chance to open his mouth. He kept on talking, furiously so.

“And don’t you dare say something like, *‘It’s going to be okay, you will make new friends’*, because it won’t be okay, if you are not here.” He took a deep breath. “And I won’t be making any friends. I don’t need friends, and I most certainly don’t want to have anyone replacing my best friend.”

*Please, don’t make me feel even guiltier. I know I’m an idiot.*

He’d originally applied to their headquarters in Santa Barbara, but they thought he’d be a better fit for their Chicago branch instead, so that’s where he ended up two years ago. Now that he’d helped them to get on their feet again, they’d offered him a position in Santa Barbara. Leo guessed it could be a higher-paying job, but that hadn’t mattered to him.

His dream had always been to live in a warmer place, California preferably. Leo also hoped being away from Mattia for a while would help them both, because the way Mattia had been acting lately confused him in too many ways, and he didn’t think that it would do them any good if they gave in to their attraction or whatever the hell it was that was threatening their friendship.

Mattia leaned in closer. “Nobody could anyway, and I won’t try finding someone else,” he whispered. “If you leave now, I’ll rot to death all by my lonesome self.”

“You don’t need me, Mattia,” Leo breathed, but was cut off by Mattia’s lips as they pressed against his in a firm kiss. He could tell how pissed off Mattia was and that he struggled to hold back, not kissing him too deeply or with the passion he could imagine lying beneath those barriers. A simple, lingering press of lips was all it was, as if Mattia was hoping it would, magically, make him change his mind. But Leo had to do this; he had to go.

“You’re right. I don’t need you, Leo,” Mattia said, when he pulled back and gently eased Leo away from his body, as far as he could go. It was impossible

to move much, his back immediately bumping against the soft throw pillows lined up against the back of the sofa.

“But I want you, Leo. I want you here with me,” Mattia spoke matter-of-factly, his expression sobering up, and he was actually smiling at Leo now. A small, weak smile, but a smile nonetheless.

Suddenly, Leo's stomach heaved, and he tasted something bitter on his tongue.

*Crap.*

“I need to use the toilet,” Leo mumbled, stumbling over his own words and feet, as he got off the sofa and hurried into Mattia's bathroom. For a moment, he thought he wouldn't make it in time, his stomach feeling as if it was going to burst.

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Mattia had been wondering what was going on with Leo lately; he'd seemed a bit off the entire week. Mattia longed to see his friend's bright smiles that seemed to be missing for days. Now he knew what had been going on with Leo, and he didn't like it. Moving to Santa Barbara? No, Mattia selfishly couldn't let him do that.

*I just found you. I can't let you disappear again. I just can't.*

When Leo stumbled out of the bathroom, long minutes later, Mattia was right at his side, holding out a brand new toothbrush. He watched Leo's cheeks flush a nice shade of red. With careful fingers, Leo took the item out of its plastic wrapping and mumbled an embarrassed, “*Thank you,*” before he fled the scene once again.

Despite everything, Mattia smiled to himself. It took a lot to make Leo feel embarrassed, but he guessed that throwing up at a friend's place would easily make anyone feel uncomfortable.

A friend. That's all he was to Leo, still, wasn't he?

Mattia instantly smiled when Leo emerged from the bathroom again. His hair was slightly damp where it touched his face, so were his jeans and the front of his purple T-shirt. Mattia didn't give Leo any time to apologize—because he knew that's what he'd do—when he quickly cornered Leo and scooped him up in a tight hug, startling his friend. Leo had avoided Mattia's gaze as he walked back toward the living room, which added to Leo's surprise.

He heard Leo harrumph, his breath tickling his neck—Mattia loving the feeling. He squeezed Leo tighter, drawing a soft giggle from the other man, reassuring Mattia that Leo would be fine, eventually. Mattia only had to play his cards right this time. Leo cared about him; that was a fact, like the sun being yellow.

For a moment, they stood like that, arms wrapped around each other, soaking in one another's body heat. Leo being too quiet didn't sit right with Mattia for long. They should be having a good time, for crying out loud. For all he knew, nothing was standing in their way to be happy, together. Perhaps, it was time to finally talk. Mattia took in a deep breath and withdrew from their embrace, reached for Leo's hands, and held them close to his chest. Leo lifted his head, those brown eyes looking sad and tired as they met his own.

"What's got you so frightened, Leo?" he asked, speaking softly and calmly. "You know you can talk to me, right? We will work it out. Whatever it is," he promised, with a firm squeeze to Leo's hands.

Leo looked as if he wanted to say that he wasn't afraid of anything, but they both knew it would be a lie. He kept his mouth shut, lips pressed to a thin line, a look Mattia didn't approve of seeing on his face. He stepped forward putting his feet onto Leo's—gray socks covering brown—pinning him to the ground with a fond smile.

When Leo lifted his gaze from their joined feet back to his eyes, Leo grinned too.

Mattia squeezed his hands tighter.

"Do you love me, Leo?" Mattia whispered, watching the smile slip from Leo's face. He expected it would, and it frustrated him. He didn't know how to do this, but he couldn't screw it up. He just couldn't.

"I— I don't—"

Mattia didn't let Leo finish his sentence. Whatever he was about to say would be a lie. By now he knew Leo loved him, and if he wanted to say he didn't *know*—which Mattia guessed would most likely be Leo's response—it would be as bad as if he'd simply said that he hated him.

Mattia's fingers on his cheeks startled Leo, as did Mattia's lips when he took Leo's with an unintended urgency. He moved fast, almost toppling them both over, but Mattia quickly relaxed into the kiss, as did Leo. Not wanting Leo to pull free, he slipped his hands over his cheek, down his neck, and gripped

him as firmly as he dared without hurting him. Mattia gently nipped at his lower lip, adjusting his feet on Leo's, keeping them in place.

The way Leo now slowly but surely kissed him back, and as quickly as Mattia had, with as much want and need, told him it had been the right move. At least for now. Mattia's head was spinning and his heart hammering inside his chest. He gasped as their mouths met in a collision of lips and tongues, Leo claiming him again and again.

For a short moment in time, everything was perfect.

Mattia stepped off Leo's feet and with firm hands, took hold of both of Leo's jeans-covered butt cheeks and urged him to move—any way would be good, but preferably in the direction of the couch. Faster than even he could comprehend, he had Leo wound tightly around his waist. When had he pulled him up? God, he was losing his mind.

With their lips locked tightly, caressing, and tongues nudging and stroking, Mattia turned around, took a few steps, and then lowered Leo onto the leather beneath him. Hovering over the guy he adored to bits, Mattia sighed.

"I can see it in your eyes, you know, not just now but always," he whispered, stroking Leo's heated cheek with one hand, holding him upright with his other. He brushed the side of his waist when he tipped slightly, his fist pressing hard into the soft furniture behind Leo. Perhaps this wasn't the best position to keep himself steady and avoid crushing Leo.

"It's not enough. It will never be enough," Leo breathed, the pupils in his unfocused eyes blown and damp, glittering. Mattia felt Leo's hand close over his, the gentle rub of his thumb soothing and perhaps an attempt to distract.

Mattia broke the contact their fingers had made and now used both hands to leverage himself on top of Leo. Straddling his lap effectively, he gripped Leo by his shoulders, gently but firmly at the same time.

"It will be enough, and it will be perfect, wonderful, amazing," Mattia whispered, lowering his head until they were nose to nose. "If you let me love you, too, I promise it will be everything we ever dreamed of."

Leo's breath tickled his dry lips when he inhaled and exhaled in small, harsh gasps. He brought both hands to Leo's still warm cheeks and just held him for a moment, reveling in the close contact, the warmth of his skin underneath his fingers, and the hot breath colliding, mingling, with his own. Mattia wanted to kiss him so badly he could taste it, and he wished like hell it would convince Leo that they were perfect where they were right now.

Together.

Before he could touch his lips to Leo's, Mattia felt something wet on his left thumb. A tear.

*Dammit, Leo. Don't do this.* Mattia was at a loss. He had never seen Leo crumble to pieces; he'd never thought it possible to watch him come apart in his arms, not like that. Leo had always been so strong, happy, and simply positive in whatever he did. How could he have closed himself up so much right before his eyes?

*How could I have not done anything to prevent it?*

With a brush of his finger, Mattia wiped the tear away and embraced Leo in a hug, hoping there was a way to comfort him with soothing strokes to his back and careful whispers. It wasn't anything Mattia was good at, comforting others. He'd never had siblings or anyone who depended on his hugs and love. But he wanted Leo to be able to depend on him, all of him. Mattia wanted to give him everything he had to offer, and he'd be damned not to try his hardest to do just that.

"Let me open your eyes, Leo," he breathed close to Leo's ear, pressing him tighter against his chest. "Please, let me show you that I can love you, with all my heart and soul, because I already do, and you can't do shit about it."

Mattia felt a strong and important connection to Leo, and he wouldn't let anything in the world get between them now. This connection couldn't be broken, but being apart now would bleed him dry from the inside out. It wasn't a death he looked forward to.

"I don't know what's got you so frightened about this, us, but if it's about, I don't know, Richard—I've told you many times that I am over it, there is nothi—"

Leo suddenly pushed him back, both hands on his chest, hard enough that it almost made him topple over backwards.

"Whoa," Mattia gasped when he steadied himself, luckily still sitting on Leo's lap. Only the furious look on Leo's face made Mattia wonder just how fortunate that position was right now. He didn't anticipate a blow to his face or anything. Leo wouldn't hit him, would he? God, what had gotten into him? Mattia almost didn't recognize his friend today.

"But that's just it!" Leo shouted, probably louder than he intended, because he frowned immediately after his words left his lips. "How can you be over

him? Tell me? I tried to understand but, for the life of me, I can't. Mattia, I cannot understand it."

Mattia cringed. He didn't like it when Leo used his *real* name.

"I am. I swear," Mattia said, "I don't feel anything for—"

Leo cut him off. "How, if you loved him?" he said angrily, glaring at Mattia with what looked a lot like hurt in his deep brown eyes.

"I don't know how, but it's true. Just, believe me," Mattia pleaded. "All the love I feel is for you, and only you."

"Oh geez, Mattia," Leo muttered. "Since when do you talk crap like that?"

"Hey, watch it!" Mattia harrumphed. "I'm telling you how I feel, and all I am getting as a thank you is a shove in the chest? Come on." His voice went lower. "You know very well that I don't do this shit easily."

"I know." Leo's face sobered up gradually, but still he sounded seriously upset. "It's just that I can't see how that's possible. I know what he did to you was terrible and that you are angry. Of course, you have every right to be."

Leo shook his head, his slightly damp bangs falling into his eyes. "If you'd cheated on me, Mattia, if we'd been together, and you'd done what Richard did, I would forgive you in a freaking heartbeat."

Mattia tried to digest what he was saying, and he sort of understood, even if it didn't make a lot of sense. Not only would Mattia never fuck around behind anyone's back, but if he did, he'd never deserve Leo's love in return afterward. A strange part of him felt like he might actually forgive anything Leo himself did, if it came down to it. Or perhaps, it was more like together they would be able to work out whatever differences might come their way, because he felt so much more for Leo than he'd ever felt for Richard. The thought of losing Leo nearly killed him, while he'd mostly just felt hurt and betrayed by Richard.

"That's how badly I want you in my life," Leo sighed. "I don't know if my love is stronger or if I'm just plain stupid, but I'd do anything to have you love me too. And if you didn't, I would still stick around like an idiot and take whatever you'd offer me." Leo gasped, and took a deep breath, his eyes never straying from his. "So, forgive me if I don't understand how you can be so clearly over Richard. It was one mistake, wasn't it?"

"I don't know, Leo. I'm guessing he's the kind of guy who made many mistakes while we were together, if you get what I mean," he said matter-of-

factly. It really didn't hurt anymore, even thinking about all the guys Richard must have slept with behind his back. Disgust and a little leftover anger was all that he felt. They never would have worked out anyway. He could see that now, clearer than ever. It was Leo he wanted—only Leo would make his world go round.

“Oh, shit.” Leo cringed. “I’m sorry.”

Mattia shook his head. “It’s okay, like I said, and let me repeat myself just for the fun of it. I am over it.” He reached out a hand and pressed it to Leo’s neck, his thumb gently rubbing against his skin. “Those feelings for you have always been there, Leo. Please trust my word.”

Being able to touch Leo felt wonderful, the warmth he hadn’t known before spreading across his chest and all around his stomach in swirls and bubbles. Making him feel like he could walk on water or fly with the birds across the autumn sky.

“But you’ve been in love with Richard. He meant a lot to you, and he will always mean something. And I, I just can’t... I don’t want—” Leo’s brows furrowed, and he cringed again before his gaze dropped to where their bodies met. “You’re getting heavy.”

Despite the thick air around them, Mattia laughed. What the hell ever was going through Leo’s mind, it did nothing to make him appear any less sexy in that adorable way of his. Ruffled chestnut-brown hair, curls stuck to his forehead, disheveled shirt, and a bright flush on his soft cheeks. Leo had gotten a little chubby lately, and it looked good on him.

“Maybe I never was really in love with Richard. At least, it was never the same kind of love I feel toward you,” Mattia whispered, watching Leo’s face closely. Leo remained silent, so he continued to pour his heart out.

“You know, once I thought only *one* kind of love could possibly exist. Then I met Richard, and it felt right at that time. It was good, and I felt safe and almost comfortable. I’d never felt like that with anyone before, so I thought that must be it, you know, love in its full glory. Like a fairy tale or something.”

Mattia studied Leo, his expression changing from flustered to confused, perhaps. He didn’t look too pleased, though, with Mattia’s story; that much was obvious. He went on anyway, because maybe it would make Leo understand his feelings better.

He hardly understood his own feelings, but it was now or never. Mattia had to get it out, and maybe talking would help. The last time Leo had made an

advance toward him, he'd only dismissed his friend in a way he didn't deserve, and they hadn't talked about it since. Of course, back then, the time hadn't been right, but it was now.

"When I thought my life was perfect, I told my family how happy I was, and well, you know how that ended. At least then, I had Richard who I thought had my back. Everything was fine, we never fought or anything." Mattia paused for a moment, squeezing Leo's hand. "But then you came back into my life, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Leo's lips turned up at the sides and formed a bittersweet smile. It was true, every word he said was true, and he hoped Leo would see it.

"I quickly understood that you were the missing piece in this goddamn puzzle, Leo. I care about you more than I ever cared about Richard, but it took me forever to see that you were more than that lost friend I needed. I never had a real friendship with Richard. We were just, I don't know, together." Mattia sighed. "If you'd ask me now what had me so blinded and kept us together for so long, I could only guess that maybe I was afraid to be completely alone. I don't know."

Leo's finger found his T-shirt and tugged slightly. Oddly, the innocent gesture made his stomach flutter again. Maybe it was the way Leo looked at him, with his cheeks flushed, and his lower lip drawn between his teeth. He hadn't said a word, though, and it frightened Mattia a little.

"What I know, Leo, is that you mean a lot to me and that won't change, no matter how you feel about me, or wherever in this world you will be. Perhaps, love isn't just black-and-white, but colorful instead. Red, green, orange, blue, and yellow." Mattia grinned. "Maybe even a little bit pink and purple."

"You're saying love has seven colors?" Leo asked, with a smile that looked almost like his usual bright, eye-crinkling one Mattia loved so much.

"I would like to think so, yeah."

They stared at each other for a long while, not saying anything, just taking in one another. Maybe adjusting to a few new perspectives, ideas, and understandings. Mattia was certain that they would find their way somehow.

"You're not getting any lighter." Leo chuckled softly, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. Mattia smiled and lifted off him, carefully twisting and turning until he sat lengthwise on the sofa, Leo securely seated between his legs. Leo shook his head and giggled more cheerfully once he was in place, and nodded when Mattia asked if he was comfortable.

“Do you believe that nobody ever made me feel like you do? That I am happy with you, and that whatever we do feels like an adventure?” Mattia whispered, pulling Leo closer by his hands. “Actually, being with you feels like I’m on a high I never want to come down from. You’re my best friend, Leo, you know that, but you are also that one person who’ll always have the most special place in my heart. I think you *always* have.”

Leo nodded. “I would like to believe you, yes.”

“You can. Trust me. I love you for so many reasons, but mostly because you are you.” Mattia took a deep breath. Never had he spoken so openly about his feelings, and even with Leo’s accepting smile, he was fucking terrified. But he wanted Leo to know all of it.

“Your friendship and love made me finally see what I almost missed.” He drew Leo in by his arms, held his breath until Leo met him the rest of the way, then curled his hands behind Leo’s neck. They held on tightly to each other while lips met lips and hearts and souls cheered and danced and *loved*.

“Whether you want it or not, my heart is yours and always will be,” Mattia whispered against Leo’s parted lips. His warm breath made his mouth tingle, his head buzz, and his heart race. Finally, he felt sure that Leo understood, welcoming his love, and a future together seemed possible.

“I want it.”

There. Leo said it. Confirmed it. Mattia thought he might cry and laugh, sing and yodel, all at once, maybe even jump up and dance. Instead, with a quick nip to his chin, Mattia said, “Good, ’cause you’re not getting rid of it now.”

He grinned and leaned back, watching Leo closely. “You’re stuck with my heart for all eternity.”

Mattia admired his features for a while longer. Leo looked awestruck, with flushed cheeks and parted lips, as if he’d like to say something but couldn’t get out the words. His hair, obviously, was still a cute mess, as was his shirt. It had partly ridden up on his sides and was actually more like a *wrinkled* mess.

A laugh escaping him, Leo pressed his lips together in a thin line before opening his mouth to say something. Mattia was faster and pulled him in by his knees until he toppled over and almost all of their body parts touched in one way or another. After some shuffling around, loud giggles and snickers, Mattia ended up fully on his back with Leo hovering above him, a beautiful smile on his red lips.

Life could be truly amazing.

*Please, Gods, if you are listening—and you all better be—don't take Leo away from me again. Ever.*

“Thank you, Tia.” Leo gazed down at him, wetting his lips with his tongue. “I’m glad we finally talked. A future with you honestly means the world to me.”

Mattia nodded, as much as he could, while lying down.

“I never want to make the mistake of not sharing something, anything, with you.” He couldn’t bear the thought of keeping secrets from Leo. “Sometimes you might have to give me some time, especially when it’s about emotional stuff; it might not always come so easily. But I want us to have a future together, without secrets or lies.”

“Me too.”

Leo bent down and kissed him, slowly and sweetly, in a way only he could. Mattia’s heart was beating fast, but in a pleasant way, and the steady tingling in his stomach had nothing to do with how their bodies were touching, turning him on.

*Liar.*

Okay, so maybe the swelling and tingling in his cock and the constant *zap* down his spine might be a slight indication that it was, but Mattia didn’t want to do anything about it if it meant he’d lose Leo’s weight on him. Or Leo’s fingers in his hair, and his lips and tongue on his own.

Perhaps if they did it right, and Leo didn’t freak out—which he hoped would never happen when Mattia asked for *more*—then maybe he didn’t necessarily have to lose any of it.

Especially not Leo. They could even press the repeat button, over and over again.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### *Where You Stop I Begin*

For the next two weeks, it quickly became their routine, picking up one another from work, and either going out to grab a quick dinner or ordering in. But whatever they did, they always spent the rest of the night together. Usually it would be Leo who stopped by Mattia's office, reminding him there was such a thing as working too hard and too long. Luckily, it never took much persuading—the moment Mattia saw him, he'd drop everything. Before, Leo never minded getting lost in his own job, but for the first time in his life he had a pretty damn good reason to leave on time. Nothing was worth wasting even a minute of his day if he could be spending it with Mattia.

Like every single day the previous week, Leo'd dragged Mattia out of his office; today with the promise of a romantic dinner at one of the nicest seafood restaurants in the city. And just like every other night, they found themselves back at Mattia's apartment.

"Can we get inside first?" Leo whispered, his breath coming out ragged, while his heart was furiously beating away within his chest. His eyes fluttered shut when Mattia pressed him against the door, grinding up against his thigh, gasping when his lips were caught in another searing kiss. A kiss so wonderful and intense he wouldn't mind dying from it. Okay, perhaps he would mind a little. His hands caressed Mattia's neck, moving until they found his hair. *Yep, definitely not done yet.*

Leo wanted more.

Tugging at the soft strands between his fingers, Leo deepened the kiss with everything he had, grinding in response to Mattia's movements, until he knew they had to break for air, which as always, came too fast.

Mattia took his lower lip between his teeth and gave it a firm tug before withdrawing so they could look into one another's eyes.

"Maybe." Mattia grinned down at him with heated affection. Leo's chest ached as if he'd been denied air for hours, if that were possible. He wrapped his shaking arms tightly around Mattia's neck and dropped his head onto the other man's much stronger chest, closing his eyes for just a moment. Every time in

the past weeks, whenever Mattia held him close, his emotions seemed to burst out of control, and today was no exception. He loved being able to hold on to Mattia and knowing that's where he—finally—belonged.

With one hand fumbling for the key in the pocket of his jeans, Mattia tugged him close by his waist. His fingers gave him a firm squeeze, right where his anchor tattoo lay beneath his clothes. Memories of the night before, when Mattia's tongue traced the colorful skin, caused Leo to shudder. He'd spent almost every night of the past three weeks in Mattia's bed, and the man seemed not to get enough of Leo's ink. Whenever Mattia got the chance, he would trace the lines of his tattoos with his fingers, lips or teeth.

"Gotta move your pretty butt, *sweet-cheeks*," Mattia said teasingly, as he reached around Leo and gently guided him out of the way before giving his neck a wet kiss. A soft click indicated the key had found its way home. Leo hummed, and moved together with Mattia through the threshold into Mattia's apartment.

A firm squeeze to his ass, and nine steps later, Leo's lips found the warm skin of Mattia's neck and nibbled at his pulse point. He just couldn't help himself, his mouth was drawn to the man's skin like a moth to light.

Making Mattia moan in delight made Leo smile. It always did. But even in moments like these, when he felt perfectly happy, wanted, and *loved*, Leo still wondered whether Mattia was really okay with *this*, with having Leo in his arms, instead of Richard; having Leo's finger gripping his hair and *his* lips feasting on Mattia's throat.

Leo didn't have much time to ponder the doubts he couldn't seem to let go of. He jerked a little when Mattia tugged at the hem of his T-shirt but leaned back and moved out of his embrace to allow Mattia to pull it over his head. He quickly discarded the unwanted item then went straight back to kissing Leo fully on the mouth. So lost in the sensations of Mattia's demanding tongue exploring the far reaches of his mouth, and the gentle play of his fingers at the back of his head, Leo only noticed that they were moving when his back hit the bar table. He was left dizzy and breathless when Mattia withdrew reluctantly.

"God, you taste so much better than any dinner," Mattia murmured, his lips tickling the side of Leo's neck, the aftereffect of his breath on his skin making Leo's groin tighten.

"So do you." He gasped and tightened his hold on the other man's waist.

Mattia lifted his head and grinned down at him, a hint of satisfaction twinkling in his eyes. Leo was amazed at just how often he'd witnessed those expressions of happiness and excitement on him lately. It felt incredibly good.

*Stop doubting yourself.*

*You can be enough for him.*

*You are what he wants.*

He hoped like hell the voice in the back of his mind was right.

With one hand hooked in Leo's belt, Mattia reached for his chin with his other and squeezed. Three fingers tipped his chin up, and soft lips touched his, caressing and reassuring. His stomach tightened when Mattia's tongue lapped at his lower lip. His hand slipped from his chin, smoothed down the side of his throat, and squeezed the nape of Leo's neck. Gripping Mattia's silky black shirt, he stood on his toes and pressed his naked chest against the cold fabric of Mattia's shirt, kissing him deeply. With tongues meeting and lips caressing, he poured all the love and passion he felt deep within him into their kisses.

"Leo," Mattia panted. "Just, what have you done to me?"

Leo gave him a questioning look, his eye twitching involuntarily. It was hard to focus on anything right now, especially answering questions he guessed he'd have no answers to.

Mattia slid his hand down Leo's exposed chest and whispered, "I can't get enough of you." The slight roughness of his calloused fingers sent shivers down Leo's neck. He didn't see how this was a bad thing. A smile found his lips, before Mattia dipped his head and kissed him soundly.

"I hope you ate your veggies tonight," Leo asked breathlessly when they parted. His head was spinning, his cock pressed uncomfortably against the confines of his tight pants, and he wondered briefly how long he was going to last. Mattia simply drove him crazy. He closed his eyes, trying to keep his emotions at bay just a while longer.

Mattia gave his butt a squeeze and nipped at his chin. "I sure did," he replied with a grin that Leo could feel against his cheek. Mattia's hot breath ghosted over his skin when he continued, "Care to share why you forced them into me?"

Leo chuckled, then gasped when Mattia bit his ear. He gripped Mattia by his shoulders and lifted himself up on his toes again. "You need your strength

tonight, Tiger,” he whispered, his voice coming out a little shakier than he’d intended. *Crap*. He was absolutely on edge, buzzing with excitement and sweet anticipation. He couldn’t wait to have them both naked and writhing, panting, sweaty, and wrestling together.

While kissing Mattia’s neck, he ground his hips, causing their groins to touch in the most delicious way possible. Mattia tightened his grip on Leo’s ass and wordlessly pulled him up against his body. Leo jumped up and wound his legs around his waist and held on tightly as he was carried into the bedroom. He liked to think Mattia knew that was what he had wanted. Leo always loved it when Mattia would hold him, his strong arms squeezing him and, better yet, pick Leo up and carry him to bed. There was something incredibly sexy about being manhandled that turned him on.

In the bedroom, Mattia lowered him onto the king-sized bed then crawled after Leo. He welcomed Mattia’s warm hands on his chest, the teasing fingers trailing down his sides and back to tweak his nipples. Leo arched his back at the stinging pain his fingers caused by tugging too harshly. He scooted back for Mattia to kneel between his opened legs. With his thumb soothing Leo’s nipple, Mattia leaned forward, touching his lips to Leo’s stomach. When fingers tugged at the pants he wore, and teeth scraped over Leo’s hip bone, nipping where the anchor tattoo was, he gasped, squirming when Mattia’s tongue lapped at his skin there, raising goose bumps everywhere.

He wanted to be touched *all over* by this man. Needed it more than he needed air to breathe or blood to pump his heart.

Kissing a path up his chest, Mattia hummed, the vibrations of his lips and the heat of his tongue and breath made Leo wriggle and gasp. Biting the back of his wrist, he tangled the fingers of his other hand in Mattia’s hair and stroked, unable to suppress the moan that escaped him when Mattia’s teeth grazed his left nipple.

*Oh yes, that’s it.*

Leo’s skin tingled as Mattia’s sucking kisses interspersed with gentle bites and the promise of so much more. He hardly noticed his belt coming undone, and he barely registered the swift movements as Mattia held his butt up, removing his tight pants and underwear. Leo’s eyes fluttered shut when warm exhaled air hit his cock, and a strong fist stroked upward in a tantalizing rhythm.

Shit, he was already *so* close to losing his mind.

Overcome with sensation, when Mattia fluttered his tongue over the slit, Leo shuddered. The need to let go and come grew stronger with each lick and stroke of Mattia's tongue, boiling under the surface of his skin. Mattia took his balls into his hands, fondling them while that talented tongue licked up his shaft, suckled at the head, and then dragged hotly down the crease of his groin. Leo opened his legs farther. Soft hair tickled the inside of his thighs, and a hot mouth sucked on his balls.

*Fuck, yes.*

Leo couldn't stop the moan slipping from his lips; that teasing tongue tickling his sensitive skin was too much. Mattia hummed and pressed a chaste kiss to his sac before nibbling his way up the length of his shaft. He moaned again when Mattia lowered his mouth over Leo's cock, the warmth and wetness of it driving him insane. Mattia suckled on him leisurely. With agonizingly slow licks, playful tugs, and pulls, he made a game out of teasing him to completion. Leo loved it.

"You sound so hot when you moan," Mattia exclaimed, letting go of Leo's cock long enough to voice his thoughts.

Heat rose in Leo's cheeks, and he grinned.

*So do you.*

Reaching for Mattia, he tugged at Mattia's neck, asking him wordlessly to move up and give him a kiss. Which Mattia did. Pressing down on Leo's body, he claimed his mouth in a tender kiss. The salty tang on Mattia's tongue made the hairs on the back of Leo's neck stand up, and shivers erupted down his spine. Leo pressed himself up against Mattia's groin, wanting more friction, but even more so, wanting to feel Mattia's skin on his.

Leo wanted to touch, kiss, and lick this man *all over* too.

Lifting himself off the mattress, Leo guided Mattia into a sitting position with gentle hands, then reached for his shirt. Mattia complied wordlessly as Leo undressed him, the heated look in his stormy gray-blue eyes making him feel all the more lightheaded.

"You are so handsome," he whispered as he slowly opened button after button, admiring the beauty before him. Strong but gentle features, dark stubble on his jaw, heated deep-set eyes, and the blackest hair he'd ever seen. This stunning man was all his now. Would he ever get used to that thought?

Mattia's hands rubbed along his lower back, and Leo shivered.

"I want to sit here and just stare at you for days, Tia," Leo whispered affectionately.

His cock was still hard and throbbing, painfully asking for more attention, but Leo wanted to take in the love of his life. Having Mattia's eyes on him, looking at Leo like he meant the world to him and more, felt better than any orgasm could.

For a moment longer, he was allowed to take in the sight, studying Mattia's content smile as it grew wider, and the fire in his eyes deepened. Before he could finally slide the shirt off Mattia's shoulders, Mattia moved swiftly and gathered Leo in a fierce embrace, toppling them both over, laughing. His eager mouth latched onto Leo's throat, and he sucked eagerly, licking at the juncture of his shoulder.

"You can watch me while I'm asleep," Mattia murmured against his skin, punctuating his words with a nip to Leo's neck.

Leo gripped the fabric that clung to Mattia's shoulders and gave it a good tug. Rolling fully on top of Leo, Mattia slipped out of his shirt, his lips never leaving Leo's skin.

"You bet I will." Leo chuckled. And he would. For as long as he could stay awake.

Leo ran his hands up Mattia's arms, swearing at the white tank top he wore underneath the silky shirt that now lay crumpled somewhere on the floor. With every intention of having Mattia's jeans follow suit, Leo reached between their bodies and tugged open that one button holding together the tight fitting pants. The sound of a zipper opening died somewhere between Leo's moans and Mattia's gasps as they twisted and rubbed and kissed and tugged at each other, eventually losing the jeans in the action.

Supporting himself on both arms, Mattia hovered merely inches above Leo. Licking his lips, Leo admired the beautiful, flushed, and extremely sexy sight above him. Slipping his hand inside Mattia's black boxer briefs, Leo wrapped his fingers around the hard, hot flesh that greeted him there. Mattia let out a low moan when Leo began to stroke and caress his erection, rocking with the movements of Leo's hand.

"Oh, God. Leo," Mattia gasped, the hands supporting him shaking and almost giving out under him.

"That good, huh?" asked Leo with a teasing voice, licking his lips and watching Mattia's expression closely, cataloging each and every line on his

face—the tiny wrinkle on his forehead, the creases in the corner of his eyes, and the adorable tiny beauty spots near his mouth.

Mattia nodded, gazing down at him with hooded eyes and a sly smirk on his full red lips. More than anything, he wanted to kiss those lips again and again. As if reading his mind, Mattia lowered his head and a hot tongue swept into Leo's mouth. Leo gripped the back of Mattia's neck, pulling and tugging, grinding his throbbing erection against Mattia's trapped cock.

*Time to turn this game around.*

"Move," Leo murmured against his lips, pulling up his knees until Mattia collapsed onto him. Leo then wrapped his arms around Mattia's waist and flipped him over. "Turn around for me?" Leo asked, patting Mattia's butt as his lover moved to lie on his stomach.

"I didn't think you'd have the patience for a massage," Mattia said with a chuckle, wiggling his Calvin Klein-clad bum in the air.

Grinning, Leo said, "I don't think a massage is what you want."

"You did promise me one the other day, though, do you remember?" Mattia said, smirking, looking over his shoulders to see Leo straddling his ass. Bending down on Mattia's backside, Leo kissed the nape of Mattia's neck, the fine hairs tickling his nose as he inhaled his addictive scent—musky and rich, with a hint of oriental spices. *Mh-hm.*

"But I think," Leo whispered, "you'll like what I have in mind anyway."

With hungry lips and teasing teeth, he then kissed and nibbled his way down Mattia's spine. Reaching the waistband of his briefs, Leo dragged his tongue hotly along the silver band of fabric. Mattia wiggled his ass, and Leo felt him shiver under his touch. Leo couldn't stop himself from smiling as his teeth tugged at the waistband of his underwear. Sadly, it wasn't as efficient in removing the unwanted item as it was sexy.

Nuzzling his fabric-covered ass, Leo inhaled deeply. He kissed Mattia above the waistband and squeezed his cheeks, massaging them as he pleased. At one point, Mattia cursed loudly and asked him to *fucking* do *something*—something other than teasing his ass—which only made Leo laugh and playfully smack his behind.

Mattia moaned. "Are you done teasing?" he asked with an amused smile.

*Was he?*

Leo smirked, considering his boyfriend. "Lie back, head on the pillow. Relax," he said, guiding Mattia into the center of the bed. When Mattia's head hit the soft pillow, Leo moved to his side, lay his head down, and nuzzled Mattia's neck affectionately.

"I want you so badly it hurts, but at the same time, I don't want the night to end," Leo whispered close to his ear, running his hand down the other side of Mattia's neck to his chest. He pressed kisses under his lover's ear, nipped his cheek, and licked toward Mattia's stubbly chin.

"Mmm," Mattia hummed. "I know what you mean," he mumbled and pulled Leo closer, tugging at his thigh with one leg. Sliding his hand under Mattia's white tank top and finding his chest, Leo lingered there, slowly, teasingly, circling his palm over and across the expanse of hairy skin. With soft murmurs and encouraging noises, for a while, Mattia let him do as he pleased.

Holding himself up on his elbow, Leo shuddered slightly. He'd learned that Mattia didn't like his nipples to be touched that much, so he skipped the pinching and tugging he personally loved. Lowering his head downward, he kissed Mattia's right nub through the thin white fabric, then moved to his exposed collarbone and the top of his shoulder. Lifting Mattia's arm, Leo peppered the length of it, down to his hand, with lingering kisses.

Mattia rubbed his free palm soothingly up and down Leo's back, moaning when Leo suckled eagerly on one of Mattia's fingers, then another and another. Sitting up, Leo slid his free hand across Mattia's stomach, reaching for Mattia's erect cock peeking out from the waistband of his briefs. Leo slid his hand inside, wrapping his fingers around the base. The feeling of Mattia's hard and throbbing flesh under his fingertips, as he tugged firmly at the shaft, made his stomach flutter in anticipation. Mattia gasped, his hands falling to his sides, when Leo leaned forward and kissed, then bit, the inside of Mattia's thigh.

Nipping at his skin in between placing small kisses from Mattia's thigh upward toward the crease of his groin, Leo stroked him with gentle movements. Leo shuffled closer, lifting one of Mattia's feet so he could kneel between his legs. Easing his tugs and pulls to teasing caresses, Leo's actions drew the sexiest noises from his lover's lips. Though unwillingly, Leo had to let go long enough to fully undress Mattia. Once his tight briefs were gone, Leo dropped to his elbows. Lying between Mattia's spread legs, he trailed his tongue hotly over Mattia's balls, excitedly lapping at the soft, fuzzy sac. Tickling his thigh with one hand, Leo brushed his lips over the sensitive part of Mattia's body, kissing and suckling, and loving the way the velvety skin wrinkled under his lips.

They exchanged heated looks when Leo lifted himself up into a kneeling position, and rubbed his palms over each side of Mattia's hip bones. Leo licked his lips, Mattia moaning encouragingly when his eyes locked onto the tip of Mattia's neglected cock, where drops of pre-cum threatened to trickle down if Leo didn't catch them. Leo's eager lips tingled and his mouth watered at the incredibly hot sight. Mattia's cock was gorgeous—slightly dark, thick, and strongly veined and just perfect in all the right places. He needed to taste Mattia like he needed to breathe.

Reaching for Mattia's delicious erection, the rock-hard, heated cock twitched the second Leo's fingers came in contact with it. Leo flashed Mattia a wicked grin before he lowered himself down and touched his wet tongue to the plump head, lapping at the salty flavor. Mattia lifted his ass as Leo tightened his grip around Mattia's cock, tugging and teasing as he drank in every bead of fluid he was rewarded with, his eyes never straying from his lover's flushed face.

"Shit. Leo!" Mattia groaned, his body trembling uncontrollably when Leo swallowed him whole. He only got a few good, deep moves in before Mattia's hips bucked a bit too forcefully, threatening to choke him. Easing his lips around the throbbing flesh, Leo exchanged his mouth for his fingers, wrapping them tightly around the base. He quickly found a tantalizing rhythm, stroking and suckling for long moments, before Leo abruptly pulled Mattia's cock from his mouth just to hear Mattia complain.

"You're fucking killing me," he hissed, and Leo laughed.

God, it felt good to be this intimate with the man his whole world seemed to be revolving around lately.

Leo tried to move out of his way, laughing hard, when Mattia pushed himself onto his knees, wobbling slightly as he reached for Leo. He didn't make it far before Mattia had a good hold on his arm and pulled him close, not that he really wanted to get away. With a playful growl, Mattia toppled them both over, rolling Leo around until he had him lying underneath his strong body. His hand slid down Leo's chest, and he tickled a slow trail down his sides and moved his teasing fingers around to his ass. Mattia squeezed his bare cheek firmly, kissing and licking Leo's neck while his other hand nudged his own leaking, throbbing cock. Fingers wrapped around Leo's shaft, and he shivered. *Too close, too excited, too much.*

Leo felt Mattia shiver when their eyes met, and he closed the small distance between their mouths, kissing Mattia. One gentle kiss, then another and then

deeper and more possessive, gliding his tongue over and under Mattia's, kissing him for all he was worth. In return, Mattia, first gently, then more eagerly, massaged Leo's balls and stroked him to the rhythm of their kisses. His effort was rewarded by thrusts of Leo's trembling hips, jerking forward as a series of low moans escaped Leo's lips.

"Fuck. You're incredible, Tia," he almost whimpered.

Mattia's hot breath, as he panted in response, tickled his lips. Then he grunted, "You're *better*, sweet-cheeks."

And Leo felt the smile on Mattia's lips as he kissed Leo sweetly. Loving kisses quickly turned eager and more passionate once again.

Leo slid his fingers up Mattia's chest and into his hair, tugging at the soft strands, encouraging him to take this further, before he passed out from all this built-up pleasure. Blinking his eyes open, Leo saw his lover's red lips parting, panting and excited from their kissing and touching. His brain zapped like something short circuited, and he knew that this was *it*. This was what they both wanted, needed, and would fight for. They belonged in each other's arms—sweaty and slick, panting, holding each other, loving.

With one arm around Leo's waist, Mattia ground his hips against his as he pressed his throbbing cock into Leo's. Leo moaned, pulling Mattia's head down to his, long enough to brush his mouth over Mattia's in a chaste kiss, before dropping his head back onto the pillows and blankets, groaning, as Mattia's strong body pressed against him. The tingling sensation coiling deep within his stomach was a good reminder that this wasn't going to last forever. Leo was close to losing his mind; Mattia's fingers wrapped tight around Leo's cock, while his lover's erection pressed flush against his, felt amazing. Moving his hand in the same rhythm as Mattia bucked his hips had Leo cursing and panting as Mattia tugged and pulled at both their dicks.

His other hand now cradled Leo's neck, and Leo gripped Mattia's shoulder, while he spit in his other hand, then reached for their cocks, using spit and precum to work their bodies together until they were both slick, hot, and trembling. Mattia dropped his head next to Leo's, his hot breath tickling Leo's ear. When Mattia pressed a chaste kiss to Leo's burning cheek, Leo knew he wasn't going to last any longer. Mattia then moved faster, frantic even, as if he were inside Leo, taking him for all he was worth.

Leo *had to* let go now. There was no need to draw this out further, even if it were possible, which he doubted. This wasn't the end—they could make love again and again.

More than anything, he wanted to come right now. With his mind spinning, his head buzzing, and the rest of his body humming in sweet agony, Leo lifted his body to meet Mattia's in the best angle possible, until they both cried out and let go in each other's arms, spilling their fluids onto one another's bodies.

Leo felt the nudge of a nose, then a chin, the tickling sensation of eyelashes brushing his cheek, and the warmth of someone's breath on his neck. He blinked his eyes open to find Mattia kissing his collarbone, his arms squeezing Leo so tightly, it stole his breath. Or perhaps that was the aftereffect of what they'd just done.

Mattia kissed him again, letting his lips linger on Leo's skin. "Let's get a bath," he suggested, then brushed a kiss across Leo's cheek. Loving the way their spent cocks rubbed together, Leo sighed. "I'd love to," he said, tugging at Mattia's shoulder, asking wordlessly to be moved, maybe even lifted up.

Cradling the back of his head, Mattia kissed his way down Leo's jaw and caught Leo's lips with his in a sweet, consuming kiss.

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Leaning comfortably against a pile of pillows, Mattia watched Leo stroll back into the bedroom, carrying bottled water and a plate with chocolate cookies. He set both on the nightstand and crawled back into bed, snuggling close to Mattia who threw his arm around Leo's shoulders and pulled him close. Leo hummed when Mattia pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Thinking back on the last two hours, Mattia could hardly believe that he was still awake and breathing. They'd hardly made it out of the bathroom in one piece when wet, teasing touches led to even wetter, consuming kisses and to Leo bent over the bathtub with Mattia worshiping him from behind.

Their eyes met when Leo lifted his head, giving him a funny look.

"What is it?" Mattia asked, feeling his cheeks turning hot and probably flushing red.

Leo slowly rubbed a hand across his own neck, and when he pried his fingers apart he asked with a wicked grin, "When did you do that?"

Mattia squinted his eyes, lifting the hand off his lover's throat. "Oh, those look good on you, Leo," he replied with a low chuckle, when he saw the angry red and purple marks covering Leo's neck and shoulder.

"My mom!" Leo almost shouted in horror. "Shit. We are going to have dinner with her tomorrow, remember?" he gasped, then covered his mouth with his hand.

Mattia smiled, caressing his exposed shoulder. "She won't mind," he whispered soothingly. "You're not exactly sixteen anymore."

Leo's eyes widened. "That's just it. She won't mind," he raised his voice, "she will fucking love it!"

Mattia could have sworn he felt Leo shiver in his arms.

Dropping his head onto Mattia's chest, Leo murmured against his skin, "She will want to know all the dirty details about our relationship! It's gonna be so *baaaad*, Tia."

"You're kidding, right?" Mattia stared at the back of Leo's head.

When Leo laughed, the sound vibrated through his own body. "I wish I was," Leo said, when he lifted himself off Mattia and turned around to reach the water.

Mattia grabbed the bottle when Leo handed it to him, taking a long drink as he watched Leo munch on a cookie, grinning at him with a full mouth. Mattia felt his chest swell, and the love he felt for the man in his bed almost made him weep.

"You really don't mind having dinner with my mom?" Leo asked, when he took the bottle out of Mattia's hands, leaving it unscrewed.

He shook his head. "Of course not, Leo," he said, smiling. "Your mom is great. I can't wait to see her." Mattia reached out and pushed a strand of wet hair out of Leo's eyes and bent forward to kiss him briefly on the mouth, Leo's lips tasting just a little chocolaty.

He remembered the one time he'd met Barbara, and the way she had treated him still made his chest ache a little. He really did like her a lot, and to think that he could be part of their family felt absolutely wonderful.

"Good," Leo said, and put the bottle back onto the nightstand. Looking at Mattia with sparkling eyes, he added, "'Cause you know, *Tia bear*, she adores you."

Leo licked his lips and flashed him a wicked smile.

"Oh, does she?" Mattia asked, playfully tugging Leo closer.

"Uh-huh." Leo grinned at him with the sweetest expression he'd ever seen—brown eyes glowing, pointy, cute little nose scrunched up, and his tiny dimples showing.

Chuckling, Mattia grabbed Leo by his arms and pulled him on top of his chest. Leo bent to touch his lips to Mattia's, kissing him sweetly. "Do you want to know something else, *Tia bear*?" Leo asked, with a dreamy look on his perfect face.

Mattia nodded. "Do tell, *sweet-cheeks*."

Leo grinned and lowered his head. "I think, maybe..." he whispered close to Mattia's ear, his breath tickling Mattia's skin, "...maybe, you'd like to keep my sofa after all."

Mattia snickered, because it tickled, not because he thought it was funny, and he hoped like hell Leo got that. Leo abruptly leaned back, holding himself up on both arms and glaring down at Mattia.

Mattia schooled his expression. "But it's your sofa, Leo. We've talked about this many times. I can't just keep it *forever* and—" Then it hit him. "You're not moving away after all, are you?"

He knew it didn't make sense. Leo wouldn't just leave after successfully talking his bosses out of transferring him to Santa Barbara. As Leo had told him it took quite a bit of begging to keep his position here, after accepting the transfer so enthusiastically at first. And just where would he go all of a sudden?

Instead of getting off of Mattia, as Mattia imagined he might, Leo pressed closer, drawing a low moan from him. The way Leo's naked body pressed flush against his felt so good and wonderful in all the right places. He didn't want to lose *this*, ever.

"I'm not," Leo whispered, stroking Mattia's cheek affectionately, then bent to nip at Mattia's lower lip, drawing a low moan from him when Leo moved back. He smiled down on Mattia, with the most contented look he'd ever remembered seeing on Leo's face.

When Mattia returned his smile, because it was impossible not to, Leo flushed and blinked nervously when he spoke. "Maybe..." he whispered close to Mattia's lips, "...maybe, you'd like to keep me too?"

A smile grew on Mattia's lips, and he kissed Leo quickly.

"Are you saying?" Mattia said, his voice trailing off when Leo's smile grew wider. Shit, he couldn't believe it!

"Uh-huh." Leo lifted himself up on his arms and grinned down on him. "I'm saying, after all, I really *do* love my couch, and I'd like to see it more often than a few times a week."

Leo felt his chest swell and ache with too many emotions as Mattia regarded him with the most insanely cute grin on his beautiful, full lips.

Yep, no more regrets. No more waiting and no more wasting time. He'd thought about it many times, chewed it over and over, but Leo couldn't find a reasonable explanation as to why they couldn't, or shouldn't, plan a future together in the same place. After Mattia's insanely long and absurdly amazing and simply wonderful speech a few weeks ago, they'd talked about literally *everything* a few more times, and as far as Leo was concerned, they came to the same conclusion.

They were better together. Together, they would be strong and happy, and maybe they could finally feel whole only if they were together. Yes, it was cheesy as hell, but Leo didn't care. He had never felt this *right*. He loved Mattia, always had, and he finally believed that Mattia could, and would, love him the same way in return. Maybe there were all kinds of love and whichever kind it was that kept them together now, he hoped would also keep them together in years to come.

"If your *unspoken* offer still holds, that is," Leo smirked, but he couldn't say anything else even if he wanted because, with one swift move, Mattia had him wriggling and writhing on his back and took his breath with the most intense kiss he'd ever felt. Leo was sure he whimpered at one point—those strong arms never failed to overwhelm him in more ways than one.

Maybe they were rushing it, maybe they should take it slower, but they didn't have to move in together right away—just, hopefully, soon and preferably forever.

Leo wiggled some more, welcoming each stroke of Mattia's tongue as well as every nip of his teeth; it was impossible to simply hold still. Leo felt the excitement of not only right now, but also of a promising future with Mattia buzzing through every cell of his body, leaving him dizzy and breathless.

"You'll never have to ask me if you want to move in, you know," Mattia said, regarding him with a happy smile. With a heady feeling, he looked up into Mattia's warm and loving eyes, but he wasn't given time to reply just yet. Mattia closed the distance between them once more to feast on his lips. Leo reveled in the intense caress, absorbing every bit of Mattia's love for him.

"Who should I ask then?" Leo finally got out a little breathlessly, smirking at Mattia hovering above him. "Prince? Oh right, Prince! Of course, I will have to ask his majesty the next time he decides to—"

Leo ended up laughing before he could finish his sentence; Mattia's naughty fingers tickling him below his waist didn't help the matter.

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As if Leo's voice summoned his cat, Prince appeared by their side, jumping on Leo like the insane cat he just might or might not be. Of course the cat's persistent pawing and meowing caused Leo's laughter to rise tenfold, and for a long time, Mattia could only stare at the two crazy creatures in his bed.

Someday soon, they would be able to replay this scene every morning and every night, hopefully every day of their lives. He didn't want to rush it, but Mattia would make sure that they would bring as much of Leo's stuff as they could fit into his apartment, as soon as they could. Then they would start looking at the possibilities of buying or renting something bigger and better. He only wanted the best for Leo.

Mattia waited until Leo's eyes met his.

"Had enough fun with my cat?" Mattia asked teasingly, pulling Leo by his arm. Leo slowly leaned forward and took Mattia's lips with his own. He felt Prince's soft paws on his legs, as the cat made its way to where their feet were and curled up in a ball. Leo grinned against his lips before deepening their kiss and turning it into one long exchange of saliva, filled with desire, love, and promise. When at last they pulled apart, Mattia enveloped Leo in his arms and whispered into his ear, "I love you."

"Love you more," Leo whispered back, giving his lips a quick kiss and squeezing him tight. "You are mine now, forever."

The way Leo touched him, the way he kissed, always made Mattia feel like he was the only thing that mattered. The intensity of it caused Mattia's heart to beat faster, and he pressed closer yet, wanting more of the man in his arms.

"That I am."

Now there was only one thing Mattia really wanted to get out. He'd held it back for way too long and finally just wanted to say it out loud. Mattia hadn't considered it as a secret between them, at least nothing that would threaten their relationship. It wasn't an easy topic, but as much as Mattia wanted, he couldn't forget about it.

Brushing his fingers up and down Leo's arm, he whispered, "I never told you why I sent you away that day."

Leo stopped kissing his chest and lifted his head. "You don't have to say anything," Leo said, his eyes sparkling with sudden emotion. "It doesn't matter. It *never* honestly mattered."

But it did to Mattia. He considered Leo with a smile. "What if I told you I hated your guts back then?" he asked teasingly.

Leo grinned. "You didn't," he said, before pressing his lips to Mattia's chin.

"How d'you know?" Mattia was unable to stop smiling. It was amazing how happy this man made him.

Leo snuggled closer and purred, "I just do."

"Oh yeah?" Mattia snickered and nipped at Leo's ear.

"Oh yeah," he chuckled in return.

"Seriously though." Mattia sighed. "It was my father. He..."

"I said it's okay, Tia," Leo whispered soothingly.

Mattia shook his head. "No, Leo it's not. What I did wasn't okay." He squeezed Leo tighter. "I still feel terrible for being unreasonably mean to you, when you were nothing but nice. I never wanted to be that person. I swear."

Leo looked up at him with that endearing half-smile that made his heart beat faster. "I know you're not," he whispered and pressed closer. *If he only knew how comforting his closeness was.*

"He didn't like that we were together every day, and that time when he saw us coming back from the lake, all drenched and dirty, undressed down to only our underwear, he kind of freaked out on me and swore he wouldn't let me see you again." Mattia shuddered at the memory of his father shouting and throwing things. "Of course, I complained and told him that we were friends and that he should be happy for me that I found someone to spend time with, but he wouldn't hear any of it. When he threatened to make sure that we wouldn't be hanging out anymore, I knew there was no way I could disobey him. You don't know him, Leo. He could be so scary when he wanted."

"Oh, Tia." Leo hugged him tight and nuzzled his neck. "I'm sorry that your dad is such a lunatic."

"You bet he is," Mattia muttered. He wanted to forget any of those things ever happened, but sadly, he couldn't completely erase those memories. They happened, and they would stay with him forever. "I just knew I couldn't let anything happen to you, you know."

"You're so wonderful, Tia." Leo kissed his forehead then his cheek. "You had your reasons, and you did what you had to do. I love you for it, and I hope you can forgive yourself like I have a long time ago."

Mattia nodded and bent to kiss his lover's nose. "No more secrets," he whispered close to Leo's lips.

"No more secrets," Leo agreed, before he kissed him fully on the mouth. Mattia put his hand to the side of Leo's face and pressed their foreheads together, savoring the sweet sensation of his lover's skin on his.

They continued to kiss dreamily, when Mattia suddenly remembered something: a question probably quite irrelevant, but so mysterious Leo had always dodged answering it since the first time Mattia'd asked. He brought his palm to Leo's cheek and brushed his thumb over his lips as they slowly parted.

"Talking about secrets," Mattia whispered, withdrawing further. "Is there anything you'd like me to know? Now is your last chance to come clean."

Leo looked at him with a puzzled expression. "What are you talking about?"

"Your boat? You still haven't told me its name," Mattia prompted. "Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to finally let me in on your secret? Since we've just established that there wouldn't be any more secrets between us, you know."

"Tia." Leo let out a nervous laugh. "This isn't the kind of secret we actually have to tell each other about, is it?"

"I didn't know there were different kinds of secrets." Mattia raised an eyebrow, watching Leo sit back against a pile of pillows, his lower lip between his teeth. Leo always chewed on his lips when he was either nervous or having naughty thoughts. Right now, Mattia was quite positive he could rule out the latter.

"No, that's not what I mean. It's just, well, it's not something that's actually of importance, you know?"

"If it isn't that important, can't you just tell me?"

Mattia really didn't get why Leo made a big deal out of it if it didn't mean anything to him. He reached for Leo's waist and drew him in closer, holding him, stroking his bare shoulder for comfort. Leo looked noticeably nervous. Mattia didn't want to think that there was a reason for Leo to feel uncomfortable, especially not in his arms.

"I never meant for it to have a name." Leo sighed, squeezing Mattia's wrist before entwining their fingers. "I suck at picking names and such. I was afraid that I'd get bored with it. That's why there is no actual name on the boat, not anywhere."

"But it does have one." Mattia remembered that Leo'd told him so, the first time he asked.

"Sort of." Leo's brown eyes became watery as he gazed into Mattia's. "Guess I named it mostly for myself. Since the day I got it, it was T to me."

Leo probably saw the confusion in Mattia's eyes, because he clarified, "That's its name. T."

"Tea?"

"T. Like the letter T." Leo avoided looking at Mattia as he added, "In the alphabet."

"Just that? T?" Mattia squeezed Leo's shoulder and pressed himself closer. "That's not really a name, sweet-cheeks." He said teasingly, pressing a lingering kiss to Leo's cheek, and rubbing his palm across his lover's flat stomach in smooth circles.

When Leo withdrew his head, and their eyes met, Mattia's chest swelled, and it felt as if a billion butterflies were dancing deep within his stomach. There was something about the look on Leo's face that stole his breath away and made his spine tingle and his skin feel like it was slowly catching fire.

"It's good enough for me." Leo smiled. "The most wonderful memories are connected to that letter. Always were." With his hands on Mattia's chest, Leo gently pushed him onto his back and lowered himself down. Their knees bumped into each other's, and the blanket tangled itself around their bodies as they moved into a comfortable position.

"That's all I'm gonna say, Tia," Leo murmured against his lips before he caught them in a searing kiss, Leo's fingers kneading his shoulders and his weight pressing Mattia into the soft mattress. Mattia could live with this. He didn't need more of an explanation. Resuming their kisses, he sighed happily. No more secrets.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Riina Y.T. currently resides in Germany. She spent countless exciting days in the UK and US and lost her heart in Tokyo.*

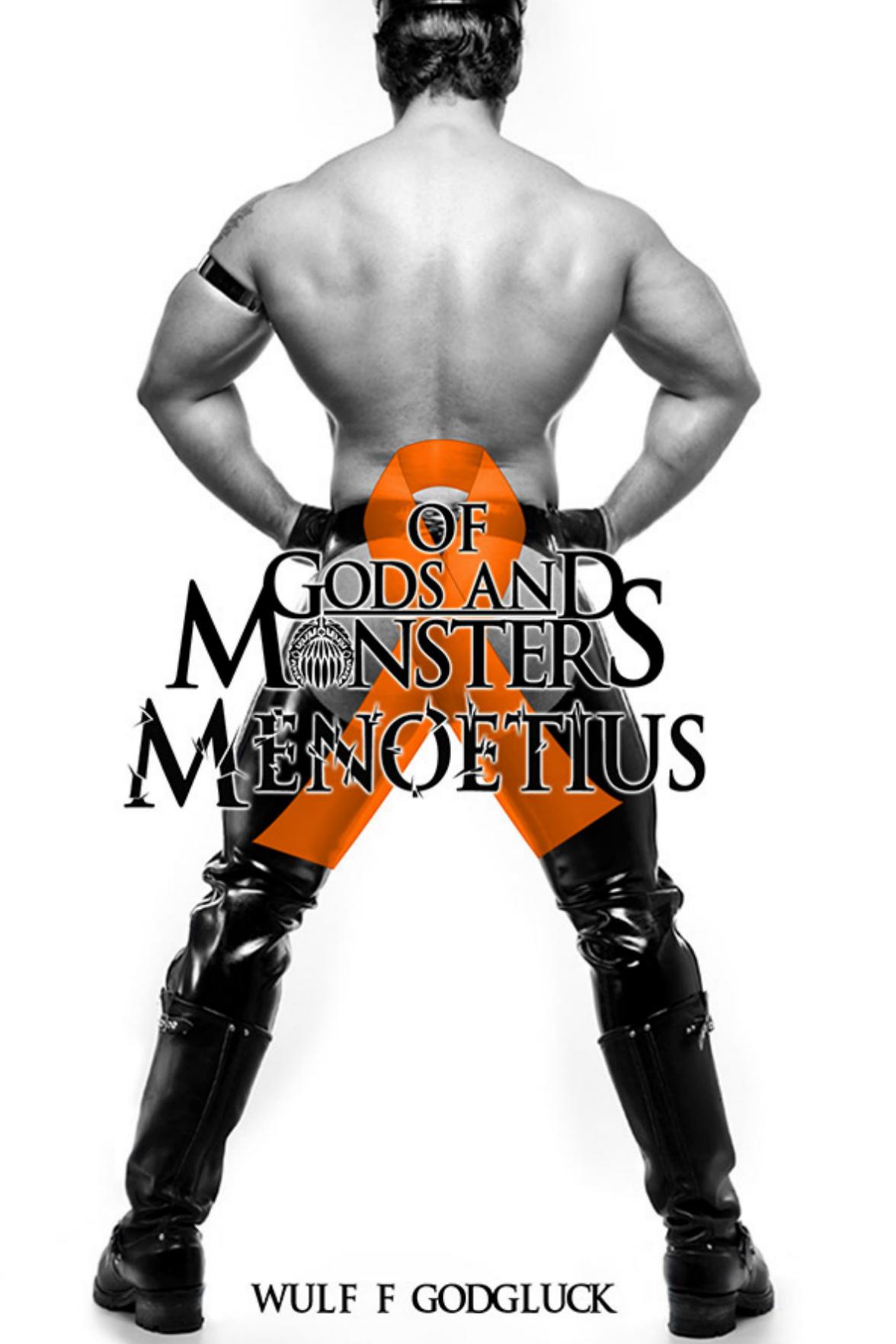
*She would be thrilled if one day her stories could brighten someone's day in the way those beautiful romances always lighten up her dull everyday life. Riina is looking forward to sharing many more stories with the world.*

*When she doesn't daydream about boys in love, and isn't glued to her Kindle, Riina loves to travel the world and explore the unknown.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)



OF  
GODS AND  
MONSTERS  
MEMOETIUS

WULF F GODGLUCK

# OF GODS AND MONSTERS: MENOETIUS

By Wulf F Godgluck

## Photo Description

The photo shows a young man with thick, dark hair pinned on a bed, hands clasped above his head by the man on top of him. The other man's circumcised cock is on offer, barely touching the young man's nose. The young man's tongue is placed directly against the other man's cock. There is a power exchange but also something else. The man beneath him is daring, teasing his cock—but look closer. Their hands tell an entirely different story. Their fingers are knotted together in a connection deep, powerful and strong. There is love here, with a passion and a playfulness that can only be understood between them.

This is their story.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He calls me "Master", but I'm the one who's really a slave to his heart. I'm supposed to be strong, but I feel so weak every time I think about how we almost didn't have this... how close I came to losing him... my precious boy.*

*I'd prefer contemporary, but take it away from there!*

Sincerely,

Wendy (wluvsbooks)

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** dark, businessmen, BDSM, SOB-alpha males, angst, hurt/comfort, illness/disease, tearjerker

**Content Warnings:** dubious consent, past child abuse and rape, swearing

**Word Count:** 80,514

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

### Acknowledgements

A Dedication of thanks

For my betas:

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Alicia Mattson – for wanting to hit me over the head so many times for stupid silly mistakes.

Sanet Nel – the nights, the emotions, the promises of chocolate fudge and wine.

I couldn't have asked for a better beta group. How I will ever thank you enough I will never know. Without you all, I'd be left in the dark with a small flame struggling against the chaos. Some of you sat up until the wee hours of the night working through my unreadable ramblings. THANK YOU! You guys are epic!

For my husband. Thanks for being patient with me and all that other jazz, Sir. Oh yeah, and thanks for the cover photo, too!

To Gabriel Goldberg – for permission to use said photograph, thank you.

And to Sir Daddy Jim – Thank you.

For the moderators of the M/M romance group for holding the *Don't Read In The Closet* event – Thank you. You guys are epic.

For my editor Alishea – thank you for not wanting to backhand me, being patient, and being just freaking awesome!

*About the Title*

Menoetius: The “doomed might”, deriving from the Ancient Greek words *menos* (might, power) and *oitos* (doom, pain). Menoetius was the Titan god of violent anger, rash action, and human mortality. Hesiod described him as hubristic, meaning exceedingly prideful and impetuous to the very end.

Menoetius also means “hubris”, which often indicates a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one’s own competence, accomplishments or capabilities—especially when the person exhibiting it is in a position of power.

# **OF GODS AND MONSTERS: MENOETIUS**

**By Wulf F Godgluck**

## Prologue

“Master,” Beo whispers. As his warm breath deftly washes over my cock, he shivers beneath me. With my knees under his shoulders on either side of his torso, I keep him trapped against the mattress—using my bodyweight to pin what’s *mine* where I need him to be. He places his tongue flat against my cock’s base, teasing and moistening the skin under my shaft.

“Beo!” I reinforce my grip on his hands above his head, and he locks his fingers with mine. The feeling of air blown on wet skin forces me to push up on my knees and escape his sweet torture.

Beo growls as my cock is taken too far from his lips. No sub before him would ever dare such a gesture, but that changed three years ago. My life changed, I changed—for him. I needed to be a better man, deserving of his precious heart. His beautiful love.

“Please,” he begs, and I start to lower my hips. He parts his mouth, but not before a pleased smile cracks the corner of his lips. His eyes seek mine, and I am helpless against the burn in my cheeks. At forty-one, such a thing would be a sin for any man, yet he still succeeds in drawing it out of me. His brown eyes soften with contentment, and he focuses them on my cock once more.

Beo moistens his lips and swallows. God, I could merely sit and watch him the entire day, and I’d be forever grateful.

I hiss aloud when wet heat engulfs my dick. Snapping my hips forward, I thrust my meat down his throat. Beo gags, and I pull back quickly. His nostrils flare, blowing air in and out. “More. Please, Master.”

I rumble above him, and a pearl of precum escapes from my slit. Beo catches it with his tongue, taking it into his mouth. Savoring my taste like it’s a pure drop of heaven. Some days, there are moments I wonder if Beo is more in love with my cock than the Titan wielding it. Inwardly, I chuckle at the imprudent thought. We have been through too much for me to ever doubt his love.

I drop into his mouth again, slower this time, and he sucks. Beo works his tongue under the base of my dick, his lips move like liquid velvet over my meat, and his throat muscles vibrate as he hums. Softly, gradually, I fuck my boy’s beautiful mouth.

Christ, he knows how to make me howl, and I do. Rolling my head back, I let it out loud, flooding my seed down his throat. A watery burn pools in my eyes, my breath hitches, and my chest draws tight. Emotions of complete gratitude rock through my soul. I pull out of Beo's mouth, release my hold on his hands, and sit next to him. Beo reaches for me, and I cradle him into my lap, pressing him hard against my chest. A shudder rakes my body, and he wraps his arms around me.

"It's okay, Master," he whispers, moving his hand up and down my spine.

You'd call me weak; a man of six foot seven, two hundred and eighty-six pounds of pure supremacy, being healed by a twenty-five-year-old who is half my size, with half my muscle.

I am weak.

I will never be as strong as him, as courageous as my boy.

You should know that Beo is my hero.

There was a time, two years back, that he was going to be ripped from my arms, forever.

I thought I was a man, that my money gave me authority and power. Subs begged at my boots, as I took whomever and whatever I wanted. I thought I was untouchable.

Till I met Beo.

Through his pain, I was brought to the lowest point in my life, repentant and broken, shown that I could do nothing. That the money and power I had accumulated over the years meant nothing, and that his life was in the hands of another. A man who held power over my precious boy—a Dom like myself—and I was rendered incapable of doing anything about it.

Only, you won't understand my ridiculous ramblings. I need to start from the beginning, before I knew my boy existed.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter One

*"I never saw the point of love. Love was for other people, and not for me. Not that I didn't believe in it, I just never wanted it. Little did I know, you can never run from love. It hits so hard and fast you barely realize what it is till it's too late. And once it finds you, it clasps so tightly you can hardly breathe."*  
— Colt Maxus.

Portland, Oregon. Carnival. There were too many fucking people around. I like my surroundings desolate and quiet, yet here I was accompanying a fellow Dom so he could make his dick happy.

"Stop being a dipshit, Colt!" Richard slapped me on the back, and I wanted to backhand that smirk off his face.

"Once the human race starts to make fewer of those things," I gestured my hand to indicate a woman trying to manage three children on a sugar high, "it might be more pleasurable for other people."

God alone knew why a supposedly sane, intelligent person would feed their offspring sugary treats then agree to stand in long lines for rides that got them even more hyperactive, resulting in sugar-induced tantrums. The noise levels seemed to increase with each child—and *who the fuck brought a baby to a carnival anyway?*

I didn't like people. Period.

My life was mostly secluded, the less people, the better. I had my own home gym in my penthouse solely for the purpose of not waiting for a 'roid junky to grunt and finish his workout. Shopping was done online, or I had my assistant do it for me. I kept out of shopping malls like they were dogs' hurl. Holidays were the worst; all that festive music made my stomach turn.

I'm not saying that growing up I had a bad experience with holidays, or that I had some phobia of people and crowded places, or that I was depressed. I was just a rude, arrogant prick that liked things my way. I wanted to be in control, all the time. I needed to be, and nowhere brought me more pleasure than The Bark. There the subs knew to tread carefully around me, other Doms respected me—*Would someone shut that fucking baby up?!?*

I turned to Richard, his gaze fixed on his sub hookup, walking a couple of feet ahead of us. "I'm going back to the hotel," I hissed. "You and *tight ass* go have your fun. I can't deal with this shit!" I ranted at him. *Jesus, why did I agree to this in the first place?*

Richard shook his head. "Okay, Mr. Scrooge." And, at that, he practically ran to catch up with his new toy, placing a protective hand over the boy's ass.

"Don't you go losing your heart, Mr. Flinór," I said under my breath.

If there was one man that deserved to have love, it was Richard—the complete opposite of me. How we remained friends through high school and college then ended up building an empire together, should be labeled the eighth wonder of the world. Richard always ended up with the wrong kind of sub. They stole money from him, manipulated him, were drug addicts, were mentally unstable, or were suicidal, cheating, little fucks, and he fell for their fucking tricks every time. I just hoped, for Richard's sake, James was what he appeared to be. The kid had a good head on his shoulders, and seemed like a genuine, career-driven young man. Cute, but not exactly my type, but with an ass like his, even I'd be tempted to fuck him. Maybe, probably never.

I turned and walked back the way we had come.

Ten minutes passed, and I knew I had taken a wrong turn. The trail became uncrowded, and the carnival's music, rides and lights faded into background noise. I was about to turn when a figure stepped out of an old Bow Top Vardo, holding a lantern in hand.

"Came to have a reading, master?" Her crooked, old voice sent a shiver down my back.

"No. Took a wrong turn," I said, with a bit more grit in my voice than intended. *Nah, it was fucking intended.*

She shook her head and stepped towards me, bells ringing as she sidled closer. "We will always be led to where we are supposed to be." She looked up, holding the lantern close to her face. One eye was a milky gray, the other green. Some teeth were missing, and a lock of greasy gray hair strained to get free from beneath her bandanna.

"You are here now, because you were meant to be. The choice of whether or not you will take the path life has pushed you towards is yours, however."

*Would that be so bad?* I didn't believe in God or some celestial being watching over us. Neither did I believe in magic, nor this hocus-pocus shit. So what could I lose, except ten bucks?

“Fine, tell me how I’m going to die,” I sneered.

“The cards don’t work like that, master.” She turned, guiding me back to the Vardo. “They don’t tell the future. They represent turning points in our life that have been and might be. They tell us more about ourselves and what we can come to accept or deny. Only you can write your future.” She stepped into the carriage.

Immediately, my nose drew in the incense burning—masking the smell of herbs, mothballs and, most likely, molding cockroach shit.

She pointed with a wrinkled and freckle-stained hand to a miniscule chair not nearly large enough to support my weight. I leaned against the red-flecked counter instead. My skin crawled at whatever might have been slaughtered there before.

She offered a deck of overly long tarot cards. “Shuffle them, master.”

I took the ancient, craggy and thin-looking deck, shuffled them, and handed them back to the woman. Setting them down, she drew the first card and placed it in the center of the table face up. A man on a throne, sprouting a white beard, stared up at the ceiling.

“The Emperor is a powerful leader who demands authority and dominance. He is able to create order out of chaos. This is the heart of the matter. However,” her eyes flashed darkly at mine, “domination of the mind over the heart is sometimes unwanted, or best avoided, master.”

What a load of cock fuck that was. I was perfectly happy dominating my empire.

The second card was placed over the first. “The Fool,” she smiled, “who has such purity. A new journey, one that is completely unknown and will take you to unfamiliar territories. A choice to be made—one of vital importance. One you must make wisely. Follow your heart, no matter how irrational or foolish your impulses may seem. This is the contradiction to the heart of the matter, one I see you will struggle with.”

I almost laughed out loud at the crazy old bitch. I’m Colt Maxus; there is nothing I struggle with. Except crowded places, but I can manage if I need to.

She drew the third card, placing it in reverse to her. “The Chariot represents the past you had little control over. People looked at you differently, despised you, smote you. Some envied you. You had so much, and yet, you still have nothing at all.”

Feeling my muscles clench, my chest drew tight from the liquid fire coursing in my blood. I knew what she was referring to. A drunken whore for a father, who fucked everything with a pussy. The worthless father who'd beat me into a pulp of blood, piss and tears. He always said I would amount to nothing, that I was useless.

And.

A drunken mother who raped her son from the age of eleven.

I bore a fucking grudge against the world. People always looked at me with hate in their eyes, and I hated them right back, violently, with my fists. *You think bullies and thugs are bad? They are nothing in comparison to me.*

There was money growing up, but there was never love—only cold isolation.

I had closed that part of my life. Laid them six feet under. Shut that fucking bitch down, and buried those memories so far that not even the fucking CIA could dig them up. I changed my name, and made it big. Showed those fuckers something. The results of that? I charred everyone in my path. No mercy. No fucking guilt. I didn't break hearts. I. Shredded. Them.

I bullied kids. Called them little, queer pussies, even though I myself was one. Call me a hypocrite? I'll take it, and laugh it off in your face—probably put you to ground, too. No one fucked with me anymore, and never would again.

I knew I was some special kind of fucked up in the head, but I didn't go blaming it on my shitty-ass childhood or my sad excuse for parents. It was all me. I chose to be the way I was, and I didn't want anyone's sympathy for it. My soul was the equivalent of Clive Barker's worst nightmare, all shredded up and bloody-angered scars. *Who the fuck cares?*

I grunted at the old hag, who only flared her crooked nose and reached for the fourth card.

A slow smile spread upon her face, her eyes softened and gently she placed the card down, revealing a man on a white horse holding a cup in his hand and dressed in white or silver armor.

"The Knight of Cups," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "Someone is going to come into your life, master. Someone young, innocent and pure."

Yeah, there was always some young-innocent-pure sub wanting to get fucked. So what was new. I only raised an amused eyebrow at her.

“Someone who is ruled by their heart, rather than their head.”

*God! What a gimmick bunch of bullsh—*

“Do not fight against it, master,” she said, with her hand already pulling the fifth card. Her tone made me clench my fists. No one—fucking no one—used that tone of voice with me or glared in warning like she did.

“If you follow your heart on the matter, and allow things to be as they should,” she placed the fifth card down, “you will be holding a treasured gift.”

I stared at that card. I fucking glared at it, wishing it would go up in flames, and burn the goddamned Vardo and all the bullshit this bitch was spraying from her tongue. And yet, I could not tear my gaze away from The Lovers staring up at the roof. The witch said nothing more, only placed the sixth card down in reverse.

“The Ace of Swords, events that will happen—some of your own doing, others out of your control. There needs to be chaos before there can be clarity, destruction before healing. Pain, hate and anger before forgiveness, acceptance and love.”

Fuck, she was just toying with me, putting on a fucking show to impress. I kept rotating those thoughts in my mind. Yet, knowing I could walk out, I still stayed.

“*Humph,*” she breathed and placed the seventh card down. “It suits you, master. Your true self.” She glared, and I looked down at the card.

“The Devil represents many things, master—egoism, lust, obsession, sexuality, vice, godlessness, tyranny.”

I was probably all of those things and a lot worse. Some people would even consider me to be the actual Devil.

The eighth card came up on the table, and at that moment, we both stared at the figure with its bony fingers wrapped around a scythe, wearing a black cloak, and riding a white horse.

“Do not fear him, master. Death represents many things other than his name.” I blinked at her and swallowed. Did I fear Death? Yes, everyone does. I was hardly the type of man to go easy; kicking, screaming and clawing would be my style. Her words couldn't have shocked me more.

“All good things come to an end—people part ways, and some let go of the old in order to give birth to the new. Yet, Death is also eternal. It is a fate we cannot escape, forcing us to face that which stands in the past and the present.”

She reached for the ninth card, “This is the one you should pay heed to, master,” and flipped it over, placing it horizontally to the table.

“It is the one that represents hopes and fears. The critical turning point which could determine all outcomes. The Nine of Swords I place down horizontally for it is not set in stone—it can swing both ways. Each card has two meanings,” she said, pointing to The Chariot in reverse, and The Lovers that was upright.

“There will be a great darkness, one that will make you doubt yourself. It is filled with fear and anxiety, pain and desperation. You will be brought to a point in your life where you will feel utterly hopeless, confused and weak.”

I froze. My mind stopped thinking when she said that word.

I growled from deep in my chest, “I am not fucking weak!” I gripped the end of her little table, shoving it aside and causing the cards to scatter and spread over the floor. All except for the last card, which she had already drawn.

Her eyes met mine, and I could practically smell the fear on her. No one called me weak. My father had once. Once, and never again. I wasn't weak, hopeless or afraid of shit. Fuck, even Death could go screw himself a new asshole. *I am Colt Maxus*. A fucking untouchable divinity amongst these shit piles of people. *Not. Fucking. Weak.*

“T-the last card, m-master.” she stuttered as my violent gaze pinned her where she sat.

“Fucking save it, bitch!” I turned towards the door, pulling out my wallet. Seeing only a twenty dollar bill, I retrieved it and threw it at her. I was out of the witch's little shithole, burying that fucking experience.

Little did I know, the last card she turned would come back to me, literally.

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Four weeks later, I was back home in New York, seated in my office, watching Richard—who was deeply engrossed in his phone.

“Richard?” I said.

“Yeah?” He didn't look up, tongue swiping over his bottom lip, fingers making love to that phone's buttons, texting away.

“Richard fucking Flinór, look at me!” I growled, slamming my fist on my desk, feeling my tie coil tight around my neck.

“What the hell, Colt?” he snapped. “Who crawled up your ass?”

“Your boy.” My lips twitched, watching his face tremor and forehead wrinkle as he pulled back his lips.

My boy Richard was in love. Again. Just to make things clear, Richard is my boy, not like a sub, but my brother, and I was his. A private little joke only shared between the two of us.

I saw him clench and unclench his fists. Gritting his teeth, Richard hissed, “Colt, please tell me you didn’t.”

I would never, and he knew that shit. He was my only friend. The only person I could call a fucking moron, and still have him give a fuck about me. I would never purposely hurt him in any way. He was there for me when no one else was. He was my only family. The one person that had the courage to break through my walls and offer a hand.

“Now that I have your attention. No, I didn’t screw your new toy. Moving on to other things... We have the gig tonight with that fat face cunt, Rodolfo what’s-his-name?”

“Marche.” Richard pouted like a fucking two-year-old.

“Yeah, so what’s his deal? How much is he packing?” I drummed my fingers on my desk, staring at the smog-infested NYC skyline.

“Not much, about five million,” Richard said as his phone chirped.

Rolling my eyes at the lovesick puppy, I contemplated the charity event for tonight.

“Do I need to make arrangements for company?” I asked, already feeling my cock stiffen thinking of boy Finn, and his tight little ass.

“It’s up to you. James is coming, by the way... And Sam...” My eyes cut with killer intent to Richard’s when he used my old name. He knew how much I hated it, how much went with that name, but I also knew he never used it unless he was dead serious.

Clenching my teeth, I managed, “Yes?”

“Be nice to James. I like him. He’s a good man, still learning as a sub, but, yeah.”

Well, fuck. When the old Casanova's face went all dreamy and *sparkly eyed*, I knew I'd lost him.

A knock on my office door drew my attention. Usually my assistant would call before letting someone come to see me, and I knew I had no scheduled appointments for the afternoon.

"Come in," I droned, leaning back in my chair and scowling.

And come in he did. Hair a mess, or an attempt to make a mess look presentable, only resulting in it looking more like a vulture's nest of black curls. The blue dress shirt and wrinkled tie didn't match, and gray slacks... At least the shoes shone.

"Mr. Maxus, sorry to disturb you, sir. Your PA wasn't at her desk, so I wasn't sure if I—"

"Get the fuck on with it, kid. I don't have the whole day!" My tone of voice caused him to jump and spill the stack of envelopes he was clutching.

Quickly, he went on his knees, picking them up. Cheeks flushed, he stood and presented them to me.

"You're the new kid?" I asked.

He nodded, and his cheeks darkened. Sneering, I snatched the mail from him. Catching Richard's warning glare, I brushed it off. Richard knew I fucked what, when and how I wanted.

"Richard? You planning on giving birth in that chair, or do you have things to do?" I said and stood.

Oh, he was not a happy camper, that was for sure. I ignored him when he stormed out of the room, hissing at himself—though it might have been towards me. The stupid kid still stood in my office.

"Did you lose something?" I raised an eyebrow and adjusted my pants, my dick already granite from watching the boy blush.

"I just wanted to thank you, Mr. Maxus, for the opportunity. I will never be able to repay you for this."

I knew what he was bitching on about, since he had basically begged for the job. I didn't fail to see him glimpse at my tenting slacks and blush. Easy. Fucking. Prey.

"Close the door and fucking come here! I'll show you how you can repay me."

I blackmailed people. Used my authority and power to get what I wanted, and never gave a shit about the wreckage left behind.

The kid was sucking my dick like a little prissy-boy virgin having cock for the first time—too scared to take it all in, and down the throat, and fuck, did he suck softly. Fuck this shit.

“Harder!” I grunted above him. Blue, tear-stained eyes looked up at me.

Clasping my fingers in his hair, I forced him down on my dick, heard him gag, and that’s all I needed. Skull fucking the little shit’s lips, I emptied in his mouth.

“Swallow!”

He tried and choked, spilling some of my cum down his chin, onto his dress shirt and my shoe.

Pushing him down to the floor, I snapped in his ear, “Lick it clean, queer.” He blinked, confused, and whimpered when I fastened my hand in his hair. “You want to keep your job, want to keep paying Mommy’s asylum bills? You’ll fucking lick it clean!”

A small, pink tongue snaked out from swollen lips and lapped the translucent cum off my shoe.

I let go of the kid’s hair, tucked myself away and watched him slowly get back to his feet with a hard-on. His head was bent, tears glittering on his cheeks, followed by a debased sob.

Perhaps I was getting old, or the old bitch’s fortune reading played my hand. Call it what you will.

“What institution?”

His head perked up. “Sorry, sir?” he said hoarsely.

Letting out warm air, my nostrils flaring, I asked him again. “Your mother, what’s the institution called?”

“Mothers’ and Daughters’ Haven, Mr. Maxus.”

I knew the place, donated to them often. There the domestic violence and rape victims were only offered a place where they could feel safe and three meals a day. Any medical expenses, psychologist and therapy sessions still had to be compensated for by the victims or their relatives.

I picked up the phone and dialed the number.

“Mother’s name?”

The kid stared, terrified and quivering in my office.

“Kid!” I snapped.

“Helen Jones, Mr. Maxus.”

I spoke to the receptionist, then to the woman in charge. I watched the little shit’s face light up as if I was giving him a fucking diamond ring when I made arrangements for his mother’s bills to be sent to my finance department for payment, along with any additional costs to come in the future.

“Don’t take it as payment for sucking me off, kid. If I’d wanted a whore, I’d have called for one,” I said, placing the phone down. “You bending there, ass in the air, blushing like you did—my cock wanted up in that pretty little mouth of yours. Now get back to work, and if you see that PA of mine, tell her to reel her ass into my office!”

“Thank you, Mr. Maxus,” he said, walking to the door. I grinned and gripped his arm. Turning him to me, I brought his small frame intimately against mine.

“Sir?” His Adam’s apple moved under the skin.

“Got a suit, boy? And not something that looks like it came from the bottom of your closet!”

He shook his head.

“Find my PA—she’s probably doing Xavier in the stationary room—leave her your address and measurements. I’ll have one delivered. Be ready by eight tonight.”

Slowly, he nodded, and I let go of his arm.

“And don’t put shit in your hair! Wash and dry it. A comb won’t hurt either,” I barked, watching him walk out.

I knew the sexuality of all the employees in my office—even those that hid their true selves. Let’s simply say my gaydar is 99.999 percent accurate. Did I rape the kid? In my judgment, no. In his, it might have felt that way, though not once did he say no to sucking me off, nor did he fight me. If he did decide to report it as sexual assault, well, there are ways to shut people up, make them turn a blind eye. It all comes down to money and power. Always has, always will. The world’s greedy and fucked up that way.

Did I fuck the kid's face because I was horny? No. I needed to feel in control, needed to feel I had authority. My money and power couldn't provide it, not in those instances when I got reminded of my pathetic past. I needed someone to physically dominate, making them bend to my will and pleasure. He wasn't the first, but I never knew he would soon be one of the last.

Later that evening, as we finally stopped in front of the charity house, I asked Richard, "What kind of a charity is this?" and climbed out. I glanced at James next to him. He did look fucking delicious with his charcoal gray suit and a little bow tie—all dimples, big green eyes, and flushing cheeks.

"A Day for Hope. They sponsor cancer children, helping them reach their dreams," he responded and laced his fingers in James's when he saw me gawking at the boy.

"Fucking hell," I groaned.

"Dick!" Richard elbowed me in the ribs.

Laughing, I wheezed out, "Wasn't talking about the charity. Was referring to you two lovebirds just now, and earlier back in the limo, eating each other's faces off. You planning on giving us a show, tongue fucking at the dinner table, too?"

Richard glared at me, irritation, hell, fucking blazing in his blue-hazel eyes. Shit, he was really feeling James. And on a whole new level than I'd ever seen in Richard before. My chest drew tight at that moment for my boy, knowing, hoping he had found the one.

"Sorry, Richard." I gave him an earnest smile. "I approve."

"Approve?" James said, his green eyes squinting, and glared at me, "I swear you two are like teenage girls speaking telepathically in a language only you will ever understand."

Which was basically true, except we were no motherfucking pussies.

"I think your boy needs to be gagged," I cocked at Richard, "and pulled over the knee. I mean, if you're slipping as a Dom, there's plenty at The Bark that could teach him the proper discipline." That said, I stepped up to James, bringing my face close to his, and matching his glare. "I fucking like you, kid," I yapped, stabbing James in the chest.

Richard stepped in. "Okay, you two. Neither of you are going at each other's throats. I like my men alive, unscarred, and to stay pretty... and I'm fucking hungry. So, sweethearts, can we get the show rolling?"

Richard pulled James to him and walked up the stairs toward the man holding the door.

“Thank you for tonight, sir,” the soft, little voice spoke behind me.

Turning, I looked Gregg, Glenn—fuck, whatever his name was—over. Smiling, I watched his pupils dilating as he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth.

“You’re dessert, got it?”

The kid nodded, eyes on the ground. The yellow light coming off the house cast a creamy appearance against his skin. He was beautiful, I guess, to someone. To me, he was only the fuck ticket of the night, but I’ve played this game before.

He was still standing there nervous, gaze down. I cupped his cheek and pulled his eyes to me.

“You’re too soft, boy. Don’t let anyone walk all over you, me included. Especially me. I’d just rip out your heart in the end.” I smiled at the confused look on his face. “Now give me your mouth,” I growled, and took his lips in a hard kiss.

A real virgin kisser. His eyes were shut, lips trembling and begging for more, tracing and savoring my taste on them.

“Come on, boy!” I barked, moving up the steps to the front door.

By the time we finished the main course—consisting of a piece of sickening-looking fish and a couple of mushed up vegetables forced into some elongated shapes—our hostess had stood up and addressed the guests. Marche was seated at our table with a tall, blonde woman in desperate need of a nose job. Marche could barely keep his eyes open, red in the face and sweating, from all the wine he had consumed. I was ready to blow this joint and slip away when the lights dimmed. Some kid that had reached his dream through the charity was on stage, going to sing us a fucking song!

“Richard,” I whispered in his ear, “I’m about to ditch this place. You two joining us for something better than what a dog regurgitated?”

He had to cover his mouth with his hand, and I sent up a silent prayer of thanks we came in the limo. Richard wasn’t quite wasted yet, but he was not far from it either. James didn’t look happy about his drunken boyfriend, going by the scowl on his face. I didn’t drink, not much. One drink was my limit. I

wasn't my father and never wanted to be, so I stayed clear of the poisonous substances.

"Yeah, boy. For the first time, I have to say, I agree with ya," Richard slurred in my ear.

It was at that exact moment a single spotlight shown on the stage, highlighting a young, thin man seated on a barstool. His face was shadowed from the knitted black beanie on his head, and he was clutching a guitar in his hand. A real fucking hippie kid with black, ripped jeans and a black cardigan covering a dark shirt.

"Yo," he spoke into the mic with a gruff, smoker type of voice. The kind that could only come from singing for a long time, and someone that knew the hard knocks of life.

"Beo's gonna sing y'all a song." He strummed the guitar and looked up. My mind dead bolted at that *angel-like* face, glowing pale under the spotlight. Slowly he started pulling and manipulating the strings into a familiar tune, and a haunting, mesmerizing voice cast the room into silence. He was singing "What's Up", the cover from 4 Non Blondes.

I hadn't realized it till he was done. I'd been gaping at the kid, captivated. The world around me had drifted away, only to be pierced by the anchor of applause.

I watched him move off stage as the clapping died down. There was no arrogance in his stature, no sense of pride that he had a beautiful voice. He was just a hippie kid that came to sing a song and was now moving on.

I sat in my seat, staring at the empty stage, chatter rising up around me, while inside, deep down, some shit had begun to stir, and I knew I was royally fucked. My heart pounded in my chest, my hands felt damp, and my blood pressure dropped. The suit I was wearing started feeling too tight all of a sudden. Yeah, my fucking posterior pituitary gland was pumping oxytocin, raping my brain and heart.

"Let's go," I growled, standing. James had to hook in under Richard to help him up.

I really didn't give a fuck, 'cause I was getting out of there since motherfucking Cupid had decided to put a fucking bounty out on my head.

*And a hit on my heart.*

Reaching the lobby, I heard a hushed conversation about rent and money coming from a backroom.

*Fucking shit!*

I bit my lip. I knew no matter how much I fought against this, it would keep haunting my ass till I gave in. Might as well be now rather than later. Because, when it came to what I wanted, people standing in the way were in danger.

“Give me a second,” I uttered, and turned to follow the sound of his voice.

“Colt!” Richard hissed from behind me.

Even in his drunken state, Richard reached for my arm and pulled me back.

“Colt, don’t.” Richard stared with that look he gave me so often, pleading and begging me. Yet this time, those eyes struggled to focus. I had to hand it to him, even drunk, he was looking out for me, or for the hippie kid. Maybe for both of us.

“Fuck off, old man.” I shoved Richard, something I rarely did. He was the only one that knew where I had come from, what I had been through, what made me who I was, and knew all my fucked up shit. And he would take my secrets to his grave.

“Not him. He doesn’t deserve it. Go to The Bark, find Finn and go have a fuck, but not that boy. You will destroy him.”

*Same song—different tune, Richard.*

“As with all the others before him, Richard? You’re drunk, and your own sub is pissed off at you. I don’t think you have any right to stand here and tell me shit, while you’re blowing your own heart out.”

Pain flashed in Richard’s eyes. He had a drinking problem. Not an addiction, but he knew he took to the bottle too much. He glanced in his boy’s direction. James’s arms were closed across his chest, and he was staring up at the ceiling.

“Shit,” Richard hissed, and stumbled forward. I caught him on the shoulders.

“James, boy, come here,” I called and steered Richard towards him.

“Get him in the car,” I whispered in James’s ear, “and ask the driver to take what’s-his-name home—”

“Colt, please don’t—” I ignored Richard’s drunken blabbering.

“You get him out of here now, before he embarrasses himself, or worse, I knock him on his ass.”

Richard growled when James slid his arm around him.

“And James, take care of him, will you?” I said and winked. I turned away, wanting to hear no more of Richard’s drunken overprotective attitude. If he was sober, it would have been a great deal worse. We fought like brothers, and loved each other with the same passion.

I stepped up to what I would assume was a makeshift dressing room with the door standing wide open. In the far corner sat the hippie kid with his back to me; shoulders slumped, elbows on his knees, and face pressed into his hands. My heart broke for the damn boy, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t know what to fucking say. So I cleared my throat and walked into the room.

He looked up at that moment, and our eyes met. As beautiful as those brown eyes were, there was also a tiredness to them, with dark rings underneath, and a defensiveness in his expression and tone.

“Evening,” he said, and climbed off the chair.

I nodded and stepped closer. Hell, I was nervous.

“You were, your voice is... really nice.” *Dumb fuck!* What the hell is this? I’m thirty-eight. I give one look at a sub and they’re all dripping and kissing my boots, and the best I can come up with is this?

“Listen, dude,” he said, picking up his guitar. “Whatever you’re hawking, I ain’t interested. Whether it be a record deal, or time in studio for an Extended Play. Thanks, but no thanks. I like my life the way it is. Uncomplicated.”

I shook my head, feeling like a fool.

“I’m not from a record label, though, if you ever reconsider, I can hook you up with the right people.”

“Okay, thanks bro, but I’m really not interested. I need to get packing and move on.” He turned, bent over and placed his guitar in its case. His jeans weren’t baggy, but they weren’t a tight fit either. He just had a fucking nice ass.

“Let’s try this again.” I stepped closer, and he stood, turning to me.

“Hi.” I extended my hand only for him to stare at it and bring his big brown eyes to mine. I’m not even going to deny it, my heart skipped a fucking beat. Might have been several.

“Hi,” he said and smirked, then smiled. God, he smiled and burst out laughing. I couldn’t believe the different person standing in front of me, the way his face glowed and his voice sounded. It sent a shudder through me to know I sparked that laugh.

He leaned against the countertop, shaking his head. “That is the most awkward come-on I’ve had in a long time.”

Normally, at this point, I would have lost my temper, but I was strangely calm. His whole presence seemed to soothe me, and it was fucking weird, freaky weird. No one had power over me, and I would never allow anyone to have power over me again. I mean, he wasn’t even all that. Attractive, yes. But not what I usually fucked. So it wasn’t a case where I kept calm to get the kid into bed. The hippie kid was thin, real motherfucking reed thin. Greasy hair sprouted from under the beanie, there were holes in his jeans and his cardigan, and I’m almost certain that black shirt was a couple of days ripe. For all I knew, he was a street whore.

Finally, his laughter died down.

“Listen big guy, you’re hot. You really are, and by the looks of it, you’re probably a rich son of a bitch too, but I’m tired. I want to go home, grab a beer and a smoke, and just forget the day ever happened.” His eyes reached mine, and he shrugged. “Besides, look at me. I’m a little punk. I’m sure with whatever you’re packing in your bank account, you can do a whole lot better than me. Might not even have to pay for it with the way you look all buff and scary handsome. Go fuck some whore, or pick up some pussy in the club. Go get your rocks off, then get back to the wife. But me, I’m really not interested.”

I wasn’t even considering doing the boy; I just wanted to talk and maybe ask him out. Yeah, definitely ask him out, which sat wrong with me. I never asked boys out. Hell, I almost never ate out for dinner unless it involved a very important client. Most of the time, I got Richard to do it.

“I’m not married,” I said, showing him my ring finger. This is so not how it should have gone down. I should be clasp him on the shirt, shoving him against a wall and forcing him to my will—taking whatever the hell I wanted and not bothering with this sweet, useless talking.

“How about I walk you to your car?”

He looked up and frowned.

“Come on, let a gentleman be a gentleman. It’d be my honor.” I gave him a rare sincere smile.

“Sorry, dude. Took the subway, so I’ll be walking home. It’s nice of you though.”

“You sure I can’t change your mind?” I stepped forward, picking up his guitar case and swinging the strap over my shoulder.

“Really, you don’t have to, Mr...?”

“Colt Maxus.” I stretched out my hand again, and this time he took it. Cold, thin fingers gently brushed against my bigger, warmer ones, and I clasped his hand with both of mine.

“Beo Moon,” he said, and pulled in a deep breath as I started rubbing his hand to fill it with warmth.

“Call me Colt, Beo, please. Let me call us a cab; it’s raining outside.” I pointed to the window with a nod.

“Aww, shit!” He shrugged, yet didn’t attempt to pull his hand free.

“No hidden agendas, okay. I promise. Just a rich motherfucker wanting to be a gentleman.”

“There’s no saying ‘no’ to you is there?” He grinned, and my heart nearly imploded.

God, if he only knew. “No, there’s not,” I said, a little breathless.

I reached for my phone and dialed a cab as he pulled on an old WWII coat. There was something mesmeric about Beo, but I couldn’t place my finger on it. I knew I had to have him, and not just for one night. I needed to have him welded to my side, and it scared me shitless. Actually terrified me. Even more so because I didn’t give a damn. I was escorting him home, feeling fucking goddamn euphoric, like a crack addict in a fucking coke storm. This was the start of something new, unfamiliar—*Follow your heart, no matter how irrational or foolish your impulses may seem.*

Yeah, I guess someone as fucked up as me did have a heart. Question was, could I keep this—whatever it was, whatever it was going to be—or would I fuck it up?

The address he gave the cab driver was in downtown Manhattan, while the charity event was in Tribeca. It took us thirty minutes to reach the dodgy part of Queens.

I glanced at him with his guitar resting on his lap. He was edgy, fidgety, with roaming fingers not finding a comfortable place to rest. I snatched his

hand and placed it on my thigh. "Sit still," I whispered, and the little shit gaped at me.

I gave him a brisk nod and gazed out of the window. My pants were beginning to pull tighter as the minutes ticked away. Even more so when those damn fucking fingers of his started making small strokes on my thigh.

The warning signs were all there: me being nervous, him being nervous, pulling his fucking hand onto my thigh like we were old lovers. Way too comfortable with each other despite the fact we had only met a couple of moments ago.

The driver stopped at our destination, and I peered through the rain-drenched window at the building, sneering at the sight of it.

Telling the driver to wait, I stepped out.

"It ain't much, but it's home for now," he said when he caught my glower at the place. I didn't like that statement one fucking bit.

The place was run down, had bad lighting, and just looked sickly and cold. Trash littered the front steps, along with beggars sleeping on top of cardboard boxes, covered in filthy blankets as they sought shelter from the downpour under the small roof over the entrance.

I could offer him a place to stay and a warm meal. Fuck, I'd buy him warmer fucking clothes if I could get another smile out of him. Beo didn't strike me as the kind of person to accept such things. Not because he seemed the arrogant or stubborn type. He just appeared to be one of those people that got by on what he had, not wanting to be a bother to someone else.

Hell, I might have been wrong. Maybe he was a drug addict. I didn't know shit. All the years spent being in the shipping line, container shipping and all the illegal jobs associated with it, you learn how to read people, and I am fucking good at it. Yet, I couldn't read this kid. He was definitely hiding something—everyone hid something about themselves. I wanted to help him, and yet, this time I didn't know how to approach it. I was scared it might push him away and cause me to lose whatever this was going to blossom into.

I fucking hated this feeling.

God alone knew where it came from. As I reached for my wallet, watching his soul-thieving eyes go wide ready to protest, I pulled out a business card and held it out to him.

"Beo, you need anything—" He started shaking his head.

“No, I’m fine. Really, I’m good. You did more than enough giving me a ride—”

“Boy!” I growled, my anger finally sparking forth, making me feel a little bit more like myself. “Take my fucking card!” I hissed.

With a shaking hand, he reached for it. I didn’t let go yet; I wasn’t done saying what I wanted to say.

“You need anything, anything at all, Beo, you call. Even if it’s just to talk.”

He gulped and bobbed his head.

“Good boy,” I said, releasing the card.

“Goodnight, beautiful Beo,” I smirked and turned, moving to the cab before I dug my own fucking grave.

There was a battle raging inside me, one side demanding I take him home, the other screaming, *What the fuck? Where is Colt fucking Maxus? He wouldn’t give two fucks what happens to this boy. He’s nothing but shit-trash with a nice ass.*

But that same Colt Maxus wanted that boy to be his. I reached for the cab door and froze.

“Colt,” he said behind me, and my breath actually took a fucking hitch at hearing him say my name.

I turned around, knowing I was damning myself. But I’d already done so by giving him my card.

Beo came up to me, so motherfucking close I could feel his breath on my neck. “Thank you,” he said, a single tear rolling down his face. He stood on his toes, placed his hands on my chest, leaned in closer, and whispered, “You just made this day worth the hell I’ve been through.” And he kissed my cheek.

*God, fuck! Hold this shit up, right motherfucking now.*

What was I doing, allowing this hippie to get this close? Why the hell did I give a fuck about him? Why the hell did I feel all giddy and shit in my gut because his lips kissed my cheek, and why was I grinning like I’d just had the best mind-blowing fuck of the century?

“Sleep tight, Colt.” He winked and turned around, walking up to the building and disappearing behind stained glass.

I stood there as a second wave of rain washed down on the city, my chest swelling, heaving for air. Those sweet fucking lips had kissed my cheek. It was one of the rarest, most beautiful, fucked-up experiences I had ever had. I knew I should leave. Instinct stung like fucking wasps in my gut, letting me know that this boy would be my downfall. But Colt Maxus wants what he wants—and I wanted Beo Moon.

The cab driver honked for the fourth time. I spun around and got in.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Two

*“It happened again. Another man seemed to have fallen in lust with me, but this one was different. He was, and will be, the only one I love.”* — Beo Moon.

I was trying my God's honest best to piss the man off. Sarcasm and insults, accusing him of cheating on his “maybe wife,” and snapping back sharp comments. Nothing worked. He didn't want to budge, and the more he stood there, gazing at me with his dark-green eyes, the harder it became to say no.

He was older than most guys preying on me, but he was also different. His gaze wasn't raking over me trying to rip my clothes off. He made me feel uncomfortable in my own damn skin. With each step he took closer, my heart threatened to burst out of my chest and pound its way across the floor. He was a predator—a big, scary, hot-looking predator.

And I wanted to be his prey.

He looked almost inhumanly flawless. His thick, curling black hair sat perfectly above his collar. Even the scruff on his face, grazing his short rectangular jaw, looked like every hair had been planted perfectly. Seamless white teeth accompanied a perfect big mouth and a Roman nose that sat crooked from being broken, maybe a couple of times. Hell, that made him even more attractive, along with the black scruff. Yeah, *the Bitches* were definitely packing the big guns. Then he grinned, or smiled—not sure which. I was too busy shaking my inner tail like an overexcited puppy when his brows drew together. The room became too small at that moment, and the door looked like it had stretched miles away. He was tall and wide—Lord, was he wide. I could duplicate myself and still not be able to cover his chest and broad shoulders. His tailor-made suit did nothing to hide the fact that he was a man taking very good care of his body. All Clark Kent good looks, and a man of steel beneath.

“*Colt Maxus*,” he said, and offered his hand for the second time, and I just gave in, feeling my hand being smothered by both of his. His warmth seeped into my always cold skin, and I allowed him to hold me in his snare. Then he offered to take me home, because those two bitches, Mother Nature and Fate, had caused a little downpour on the world. It seemed that both of them had majorly stepped up their game.

*“Beo, are you alright?”* a voice said from beyond the reaches of my fogged-up mind.

I mean, sure, I let the man be a gentleman. But no, he had to go a step further and insist on accompanying me home—watching me in the cab and snatching my hand, which I never could keep still, and placing it on his hard thigh. Okay, not completely innocent in that regard. But I couldn't help myself, feeling the hard muscles under his trousers. Then the look he gave the apartment complex. At least with that, I hoped he would be put off. Na-ah. Mr. Big, Tall and Fatally Handsome had to climb out and demand I take his card, and of course, he had to be an aggressive type—Fate knew I liked them on the rough side—but he wasn't done. *“Goodnight, beautiful Beo,”* he had to say, and I fucking lost it from that point onward.

I kissed him on the cheek while my eyes spewed water. 'Cause if he only knew the day I had had. The news I had been fearing, yet knowing I would hear soon, had finally come.

The monster living inside me had shown its teeth again.

Those two Bitches, Mother Nature and Fate, knew it. They damn well fucking knew it. It wasn't enough for them to crash my world yesterday morning, they had to do it again last night by delivering the man of my dreams. They could as well have put a gun to my gut and pulled the trigger.

Listen, let's get one thing clear here. I ain't saying I don't like love, or don't believe in soul mates or whatever you want to call it. To me, it's just not fair. Why go fall in love with someone when you know in the end you'll just hurt them? Every man that threw himself at me; heart, body and soul, I ran in the other direction. I personally believe those two Bitches are out to break me. I swear, I'm like a freaking magnet for my dream man. Most people get that opportunity once, meeting a person that will worship the ground they walk on. Me, not a chance. Over and over again, till this time, I knew I was screwed. Evidence of that—I couldn't get Colt Maxus out of my head. Honestly, I'm not that attractive. I'm like Africa's hunger child for white people. I had abs because I was so sickly thin, and I could probably jab your eye out with my hip bones.

That didn't stop those two forces from screwing me over every step of the way. It's like this, if you know you're going to die soon, why bother having friends, a boyfriend or people that love you? Why would you want to hurt those people if you knew the outcome of your life beforehand? Why waste taking a

spot in a university when you get offered a scholarship, knowing it could be more beneficial for someone who was going to live a full life and make the best of it? That'd just be rude and selfish in my book. I was destined to die young, so every opportunity that got offered to me—whether it be a record deal of a lifetime, a job or a lover—I'd pat that shit on the head and say, "Thank you very much, but you go find someone else."

Don't feel sorry for me. I made good with Death a long time ago. Call him the old friend I'm just dying to meet. Literally.

But Mother Nature and Fate didn't get that memo. I had to have a personality such that whomever I met instantly had a fondness for me, 'cause shit, it ain't my looks they be liking.

It was a hell of a crappy gift to have. I often wondered why I couldn't just be a mean, rude dick, but I guess Murphy's Law is what it is. Whatever that really means.

"Beo!" Dr. Martin growled from across his desk, where I was sitting in his office, and slammed his palm, causing papers to scatter.

"Kid, where's your head today? Have you heard anything I've been telling you, at all?"

I lowered my gaze at his hooded eyes. Dr. Martin was a good man, the caring and nurturing type. Hence the reason he was a doctor I guess, but he was also one of my only friends. He understood what was going to happen, that death was a part of life, and some got it handed to them sooner than others.

"Sorry, Doc. Last night was just a little bit messed up."

*A little? Are you shitting yourself? Don't know which version of the story you're living in, bucko, but that sure ain't the version I experienced. Oh, hi, conscience, my other friend. Shut up, would you!*

"Beo," he said, and gave me a sad smile, "I can arrange for you to go see a psychologist. This disease isn't just physical. It's emotional, spiritual, and it's in your head, not just your blood, kiddo."

I immediately started shaking my head.

"Doc, I know it's been breeding inside me since I was what, probably born, but I can't afford a head shrink. I just got to get by. Hell, I don't know if it's worth it to do the therapy if it ain't gonna do shit, and just accumulate bills again. Who'd be left to pay those bills once I'm gone? Taxpayers, good honest

people working hard for their coin, needing to pay off my death when I'm rotting away, six feet below? That shit ain't fair, and isn't sitting right by me either."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses back.

"Beo, there is another way, if you would just—"

"What?" I snapped, and clenched my fists. "Go look for my old man, then beg him to donate some stem cells? Where would I get the money for that anyway, not to say the cost of the procedure?"

"Doc..." I sighed and lowered my voice, avoiding his eyes 'cause them damn tears had already started pooling down my face. "I ain't gonna lie. I'm shit-scared, but I'm also tired. This sickness has been haunting and looming over me ever since I can remember. Now that it's back, I'm ready. I don't want to fight no more. I don't want to tell people to butt out of my life 'cause I'm scared, hurtin', disappointed and dying on them."

It was the same dance we'd waltzed to before, just a different jam with different words this time.

His shoulders shook and his own tears started dripping from his eyes, down his nose and landing on the brown envelope in front of him.

"Aww, shit, Doc, not the waterworks." I stood and stepped up next to the old man, wrapping my arms around him and giving him a big old Beo hug. My hugs are epic, just so you know.

Dr. Martin was the closest person I ever had to a dad, and I think the man was a bit in love with me, too. Okay, scrap that, deeply in love with me.

I met him when I was five years old, living in Mary's Orphanage. He was the one who discovered who my real mother was, and also that I had an eighty-three percent chance of getting the same illness that took her life. She died the same year I was born, at age twenty-three. Doc suspected that I would develop symptoms around the same age, but mine came at seventeen.

Dr. Martin was handsome. Hell, he still is, all buff, and gray haired with gray-blue eyes. Broke his big old heart too, when I told him I saw him as a father. The man has been a part of my entire life. I couldn't see him as anything else.

I pulled back and cupped his cheek, feeling his gray beard hairs prickle my palm. With my left hand, I took off his glasses and wiped the tears from under his eyes.

"I love you, Doc. You know that. I am grateful for you being a part of my life, and everything you have done for me, things you're gonna do for me... and don't deny it." I pressed the palms of my hands against his face, forcing him to look me in the eyes. "I know you and the others are scheming to pay for my treatment again. I ain't dumb. It's nice of you, but don't. Please. I'm begging ya. I don't want to be a burden no more."

"Beo," he said heavyhearted, and pulled me to him, pressing his face into my gut. "Kiddo, just let us do this for you, please."

That was my cue to get the hell out of there.

"Listen, Doc..." I pulled his arms from around me and placed his glasses back on, carefully taking a step back. "I got to fly." I moved around the desk and picked up my bag. "Got things I need be doing, so, I'll see you another. Okay." I turned, rushing to the door, only to find it locked.

"Beo, sit down, little man."

I sighed, pressing my forehead against the wood. Why didn't people understand? Why couldn't they just leave me the hell alone? Always butting into things that don't concern them. Don't they know how much it pains me to look at them, and know in the end I'm just hurting them even more? It's a fucking burden to carry all that guilt.

"I took the liberty, and you will hate me for it, but that's my cross to bear." He rested a hand on my shoulder and turned me around, holding out the brown envelope that had been on his desk.

His eyes pleaded with me as he bit his lip. "Please take it, Beo. Look through it, and then decide. A person can't make a decision without having all the information in front of them."

"I could never hate you, Doc." I looked up and smiled.

As I was taking the thick envelope from him, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, presenting me with several hundred-dollar bills.

I shook my head. I didn't want the money, even though I desperately needed it.

"Beo." His eyes darkened, and he pressed his forehead to mine, left arm bracing his massive frame against the door and pinning me to the spot.

"Take the fucking money!" he snarled, and yeah, Dr. Martin wasn't Doc no more, he was Master Martin.

“Do I need to take you over my knee and spank this shit into you, boy!” he breathed against my face, causing me to swallow hard, trying not to quiver.

Cupping my cheek, he brought his lips inches from mine. “I care, Beo. The other Doms care. We know you don’t want our help, and we can respect that, but, honestly, look at it like this. Aren’t you being selfish by denying a person’s support when all they want to do is help? It’s like a slap in the face. We want to do this, Beo. Remember what we are: a family, a leather family. And what does family do, boy?”

“They take care of each other, Sir.”

“Good boy,” he said and shoved the notes down my front pocket, where his fingers got stuck.

I roared with laughter as he cursed, trying to pull his thick fingers free from the tight denim. Doc had some big, thick, manly paws on him.

Heaving, I managed to taunt him. “Having your fingers stuck down my pants isn’t looking good for your reputation, Master Martin.”

“Hell, Beo, you don’t say.” He yanked his hand free, red in the face. I wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or from the tent spanning his trousers.

I watched him turn around, flop down in his chair and cover his face with his hand. I felt sorry for Doc. He was so love drunk on me, he was blinded to the other subs that really wanted to get to know him. One sub in particular, I knew, was as in love with him as Doc was with me.

He reached in his left drawer and threw me the set of keys for the door. Quickly, I unlocked it, stepping out and dangling the keys to draw his attention. He scowled up at me, nostrils flaring.

“You know, Master, if you just once stopped falling in love with me, you would see there’s someone looking at you with the same admiration you always aim at me.” Chucking the keys back at him, I watched his eyes narrow and irritation flare. I turned on my sneakers and got the hell out of there before he really did decide to have a go at my ass.

As the elevator doors opened to the dreary-looking hospital lobby, I glanced at the envelope in my hand. I could only suspect what information waited inside, and now was as good a time as any. Finding a desolate waiting chair away from the noise and prying eyes, I pulled the folder out.

I stared at the name on front. Luther Mark Jacaruso. I knew, going by my dark black hair, brown eyes, thin eyebrows, long lashes, long and protruding

flat nose and short chin, I had Italian blood inside me. The pale skin was totally from Mom's Irish side. Thank God I wasn't some soulless ginger.

Still staring at the folder, I traced a shaking finger down the side.

Was I really going to do this? Open up information I wasn't sure I wanted to know, questions I had that might be answered, or only end up with more? The probability giving rise to hope that maybe, after twenty-two years, this man, Luther, would just donate his bone marrow to his estranged and dying son. Did I want to put myself through that?

Closing my eyes, I thought of the people in my life; Doc, the boys at The Bark, the Doms that actually cared and didn't want to get in my pants, and Mary. That woman had been my rock, my pillar of strength, growing up in the orphanage. Let's not forget Jane and Baby Magpie. I owed it to them. I at least had to try. All of them were willing to reach out and help, and yes, I was selfish, not wishing to hurt them when actually denying their aid was hurting them.

It's not the destination that matters, or in fact, the journey to get there, but the people accompanying you on that ride.

For the people in my life, could I at least give them the comfort of knowing that I tried? That all their efforts—from putting a smile on my face to offering me a bed for the night, or anything else I needed—meant something? That I was willing to fight my illness again, despite the fact that inside I had already given up? That I was willing to fight for them 'cause that would make them happy? This time would be my final round.

*Yeah, Beo, get your shit together here, man. It's just a folder, open it up.*

But it wasn't that simple. For years, I've pondered why a parent would drop a child off at an orphanage, and yet at the same time, I know that answer all too well. Life. Unexpected events spiraling out of control force you to make a decision for the greater good of someone else. My mother couldn't. She was dying in a hospital bed. My father? Who knew? Maybe he wasn't ready to look after a kid at such a young age. Maybe he wanted to, but didn't have the financial resources to do so.

*Stop.*

Asking all these questions would only make me angry inside. What if I found out he could have looked after me, and just didn't want me? That was my biggest fear of all. Living my life desperately wanting to know my father, only

to find out he didn't give a rat's ass that I was eroding away in a hospital bed. Yet, it could be that he didn't want me at the time, but over the years, he might have regretted the decision.

I took a deep breath, letting it out even slower, and flipped the file open, causing a photo to slide out and flutter to the floor. Bending over, I froze at the sight of the face staring back at me from a black and white snapshot. There was no use even denying it, the face was mine. Bigger, older and sharper featured, even down to the way the hair lay on his head—he had the same thin lips and broad, flat nose and eye shape. Yup, that was my old man gawking up at me... and God, talk about fucking killer looks! As I picked the photo up, bringing it closer, it started to paint a different picture. Those eyes were angry, cold, almost cruel. His lips were pressed tightly together, causing a dimple in his chin, and going by the dark shadows on his jaw, he was definitely grinding his teeth when the photo was snapped.

He looked plain pissed off and downright ready to spill blood.

Scanning through the papers, I tried to find another photograph. I hoped the photo was snapped at the wrong time, but I didn't find another. However, a particular piece of documentation caught my eye.

Pulling it out from the bundle of papers, I immediately recognized the bold letterhead. My heart began to pound hard and wild. It couldn't be, and yet the evidence was staring me right in the face in black and white.

*Mr. Luther Mark Jacaruso, co-owner of The Bark, in partnership with Mr. Max Donovan, and Mr. Clay Blackly.*

Fucking shit! My father was the owner of a BDSM club, and most likely a Dom too?

I wanted to shout, scream, kick, do a giddy happy dance, and splatter my brain matter across the wall. I wasn't entirely sure what that might mean. If he'd be glad I'm in the same lifestyle, or if it would only backfire on me.

Raking my hand through my hair and shoving the beanie off to the floor, I leaned back in the chair and let that shit sink in for a moment. It was short lived, when, "Beo?" a stern voice startled me.

*Balls!*

"Hi, beautiful," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. I opened my eyes, and in front of me, larger than life, stood fucking *Handsome*, grinning like he had just gotten the entire pie.

“Hi, Colt.” I nodded and held my breath when he took the chair next to mine. I didn’t need this man around me right now.

“You okay, boy?” he asked, turning in his seat and pressing the back of his hand against my forehead. “You’re sweating, little man, and you’re ice cold.”

“I’m fine,” I huffed out ’cause my breath was gone, and the dude’s eyes were gawping, all concerned over me. I didn’t want to draw Colt into my messed-up life. I had already made the decision to have nothing to do with him. And yet, I couldn’t stop thinking about him.

“What’re you doing here anyway?” I glanced down, seeing the open folder and quickly tucking all that shit in the envelope. Luckily, Colt had bent over to pick up my beanie. I couldn’t help but stare at his blazer spanning snugly over his back and lats. The guy was packing some major muscle mass.

He held the beanie out over his fist, but pulled it away when I tried to grab it.

“Not so fast, little one.” God, did he have to use all these words causing my dick to go crazy in my jeans?

“Came to get my HIV test results,” he said, not looking at me, my beanie rotating on his finger. “You?”

“Same,” I lied.

Turning to me, he raised a thick eyebrow. “Bad news?” he asked.

I shook my head. I knew my stats. Just ’cause guys threw themselves at me didn’t mean I slept with each fiend, friend, and god. With the sex thing at least, Mother Nature had given me a bit of slack. I could be attracted to a guy, but sexual attraction was a different matter. Colt Maxus was on a whole new celestial, cosmic scale. One look from the man, and my blood was already flooding down south. That’s why I knew, last night, that those two Bitches were packing a hell of a punch my way.

Typically, meeting a guy I was sexually attracted to led to a date and a chat, then some kissing and fooling around and finally, maybe—usually never—sex. The last time it happened was well over eight months ago. But with this man seated next to me? I wanted to ride him dry and let him fuck me right through the floor, forgetting my name while we were at it. I needed to be in his arms, curled up into him, making love through the night and burning away in that passion, or lust. This. Was. Fucked. Up!

I stood, and turned, “Sorry, big guy, but I got to run,” holding my hand out for my beanie. He looked me up and down.

“How long are you going to make me wait, boy?”

I gaped at the dude, dumbfounded. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“I can be a very patient man, Beo Moon,” he said and stood, glaring down at me from hooded brows. “But, when it comes to certain things, people shouldn’t test my endurance, or my temper. I’ve decided, when it comes to you, beautiful,” he stepped closer and placed the beanie over my head, “I don’t have any. You will be mine, Beo. I promise you. So don’t make me wait too fucking long!” he growled then cupped the back of my head with his left hand, hauled on it, and bam!

His mouth covered mine as he forced his tongue past my lips and kissed me with fucking, blazing hell-storm and passion. I moaned as his assault continued. The bastard even curled his right arm around my waist, crashing me against his hard body and deepening the kiss. It lasted fucking lifetimes. Grasping him by the lapels, I silently begged him not to stop—kissing him back, hard, and trying to bury myself in his mouth.

He tasted too good, too right, too damn perfect, and I wanted him too much.

Until some nurse snapped next to us, “Gentlemen, this isn’t an appropriate place to—”

“I didn’t ask anyone’s fucking opinion, so fuck off!” he growled against my lips, sending a fire through my blood and causing my poor marathon-running heartbeat to pick up its pace.

Colt finally released my lips and pulled back. With nostrils blazing, he drew in my scent and glowered at me with hot eyes.

“Shit, I shouldn’t have done that,” he mumbled and let go of me.

Pretending not to hear, I grinned and asked, “What was that?”

“Never mind,” he rumbled and started buttoning up his blazer. Blushing, I snorted at seeing his pants tenting as it was quickly hidden from view.

“What so funny?” He smiled, attempting a scowl, and tapped a finger to the tip of the bulge in my own jeans. I gasped and stepped back.

“I’m not the only one that’s got a woodie.” He licked his lips and placed his hands in his pockets.

“You and I, Babyboy, are going to make beautiful fucking puppies one day. Dinner. You will call me,” he said then turned and walked off.

I just stared after the man.

I wouldn't call, not after this. He didn't deserve to have his heart ripped out, no one did.

With shaky legs, I slumped back into the chair, pressed my palms against my eyes and sobbed.

It wasn't fair, none of it was. Fate had no right to play with a person's heart when they were busy dying. Why did he have to be so handsome and damn aggressively demanding? That shit was a major turn-on in my book. And why step into my life right at this moment, or ever at all?

Why did I still want to get to know him, even though I knew I would just be setting us both up for heartache? It wouldn't just be the dying part that would hurt. People would have to watch me thinning, fading away into skin and bones. They say the last part of this illness is the ugliest. Victims start living in their own world, becoming delusional, not recognizing their loved ones, and living in the past. It wouldn't just cause me physical pain but also emotional pain, for me and those closest to me. That's not even to speak of the treatment. That's sometimes worse than the disease.

It was what Doc had said, too. This disease was horrid to see grasping hold of someone. It ripped people apart, and it fucking hurt! I didn't want to be the cause of that pain, not again, not to anyone.

“Beo!” Little hands reached for my arms and clawed weakly at my skin. After sniffing down my tears and rubbing the excess from my eyes, I reached out and picked up the squirming bundle of joy and placed her in my lap.

“Hi, baby girl,” I said as Megan flung her arms around my neck, hugging me tight.

I saw Jane take a seat next to me, her thick blonde hair hanging over her left shoulder. She gave me a look over, then closed her green eyes. I watched as silent tears rolled down Jane's face, tracking a black mascara stripe across her cheeks.

Shit, I haven't even begun treatment, and I'm already hurting the people in my life. Why couldn't she use waterproof makeup? Now all that shit was just going to look messed up. *Women! I don't get you sometimes.*

Jane didn't say a word as she took my hand and knotted our fingers together. She didn't have to. She understood what I was feeling, the emotions I was going through, what my fears were and what my worries were. Because on my lap was her own reason for grieving.

"How you doing, little Magpie?" I said to Megan, who was getting comfortable in my lap. Her arms still around my neck, she laid her head against my chest.

"I'm sleepy," she sighed. Then, totally random like any seven-year-old would be, she said, "Wow your heart's really fast, Beo. You okay?"

*No shit, baby girl. No shit.*

"I'm fine," I lied and looked down at her pastel face. I went to push back a lock of hair, like I always did, then realized there was none. Instead I patted the pink butterfly-pattern bandanna on her head.

"That's nice, Magpie. I love it."

Green eyes sparkling with admiration looked up at me. "We got you one, too!" She released her hold on my neck and dug in her little purse, pulling out a hot-pink bandanna with skulls on it.

"I picked it out, you know, for when..." Her face fell. I knew the hair loss thing, especially for a little girl, was an epic deal.

I was no fluffy gay guy, but for this little lady, I'd wear a fucking tiara and tutu to a biker rally. Taking the bandanna from her, I fastened it around my neck and grinned as she gifted me with a smile.

A nurse stepped up to us, and I nudged Jane in the leg.

"Go with Sinha, baby girl. Mommy will be there, okay."

Megan scooted down from my lap and went to the nurse's side.

"Hey, Magpie," I said, and reached into my backpack. Pulling out a chocolate bar, I held it out to her. I knew she kept plenty of sweets in her little pink handbag to help with the nausea chemo brought with it. Happily, she smiled, came over and took it from me, but I held on. "Remember, baby girl, my chocolate is special. It's got some epic Beo love in it."

"I know, silly," she blushed pink, "but your hugs are better." She giggled, and I gave her one before she went off.

Jane and I watched Megan disappear into the children's oncology ward.

"Beo," she whispered, and already I could feel the inevitable force of emotion burn in my face, "she's going to be okay, you know."

I turned to Jane, tears streaming from my eyes. Her statement wasn't just words to encourage. They were the truth. Megan was one of the lucky few that survived her illness. Me, not so lucky.

"Course she is," I said. "That girl's gonna be a hot doll face one day, just like her mamma bear, making men's jaws drop to the floor."

Jane smiled, the first true, pure smile I had seen since before Megan got diagnosed. She leaned over and adjusted my bandanna so the knot sat on the left side of my neck.

"How are you holding up, kid?"

I looked at her, then avoided her gaze. I couldn't hide stuff from this girl, no matter how hard I tried. Jane was one of the only people, aside from Doc, who knew how severe my form of cancer was this time around.

"I'm a mess inside. Outside, I'm just regular old Beo."

"Have you told Mary yet?"

Both of us kept quiet when two doctors passed. Ever since Jane came to the orphanage, we had this habit of keeping our conversations private, not speaking when people were close enough to hear. I frankly don't know why, since, most of the time, no one bothered to listen.

"No, I was actually planning on visiting her grave today when... *he* kissed me." I was all honesty when it came to Jane. There was no point in bullshitting her. She'd figure it out sooner or later anyway.

"Beo." She scowled, folding her arms under her breasts.

"No, Jane," I warned, "it's different. Bitches really got me by the balls with this one."

She knew who the Bitches were. Jane knew every detail about me. She was five years my senior and had lived at the orphanage till she was ten, when her grandparents showed up and took her away. Even then, she was a demanding little princess and forced them to come pick me up over weekends so the two of us could get into trouble.

"What's so funny?" She punched me on the arm.

"Just remembering when we stole Old Man Ferly's choppers. He still mad?"

“Six feet under. Yes, I’m sure he’s still mad at us for burying his dentures in one of his potted plants.”

She sighed, turning her wedding band on her ring finger, and stood. “Listen, Beo, you know you have a place to stay, and don’t even try your head shaking with me. Granddad’s worried. Hell, I’m worried. You can’t do this on your own. We know you’re strong and tough, and you don’t want to burden any of us. But, here’s the thing, the more you fight against us, the more we are going to fight for you.” With her thumbs she swiped away the new set of tears, causing black smear marks under her eyes. “Shit, look what you did!” She smiled and leaned over, pulling me to her for a hug.

“Just please, Beo,” she whispered in my ear. “I know you don’t have a place to go after tonight. So promise me. It will break Megan’s heart if I have to tell her Uncle Beo’s not coming to live with us.”

Aww, damnit. Jane knew how to hit me straight in the balls.

“I’ve got a bottle of red wine with our names on it, and I want to hear all about Mr. Mysterious. Got it?” She let go and adjusted her blouse.

“Okay, Mamma Bear, but give me a couple, would ya?”

“I’ll give you two days, or I’m hunting your ass down. You got me?” She pointed with a manicured nail.

“Yes, ma’am. Now go get my girl and give her a kiss from Uncle Beo,” I said and got up, picking up my bag and sliding the envelope inside.

“Love you, kid,” she said from a couple of feet away.

Yeah, I loved her, too. Megan even more. I knew I was becoming the big brother figure in the kid’s life. Goddamned unfair. Her daddy was shot dead by a gang of drug dealers. Christo had been a good man, and a damn brilliant cop. They had Megan right after he and Jane got married. I was fifteen when she was born, then two years later, Fate had to take her daddy from us. Then, just ‘cause Fate and Mother Nature were cruel twisted Bitches, they give the kid cancer on her fifth birthday.

I think you’re understanding why I hate those forces so much. But they weren’t done with little ol’ Beo. Things were gonna get bad—really fucking chaotic, messed up, and then some—before I saw the light shine through.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Three

*“When life gives you lemons, Beo makes you pancakes.”*

— Colt Maxus.

I shouldn't have kissed Beo, never even attempted it. But I did, and he did, and God, it was everything and so much more than I will ever be able to describe. I had to cling to every fiber of my self-worth not to take him right there on the hospital floor and pound his sweet hole. My fingers were clammy, standing with my tongue down his delicious mouth, and scenting him that close. I wanted to see every inch of his skin and mark it with my mouth, teeth and seed. I starved for Beo Moon like nothing else existed in my entire life before.

And that bitch nurse tried to tell me it wasn't an appropriate place to kiss the man that had my brain turned inside out and my heart pounding in my chest.

I tried to convince myself that I was holding back the angry storm violently rearing up to tear through me as disgusted and shocked stares from patients and staff glazed over me. *Keep calm, Colt. Keep motherfucking calm. These people are ignorant and stupid.* Matching their stares, I walked out of the hospital. I gloated. They saw. Every motherfucker saw me kissing Beo, and they knew he was mine. I was angry at myself. Once again, I was being a dick, demanding what I wanted. But this time, I gave a shit about my actions and the ripples they would cause.

I was also angry at Beo—for making me want him so much, for being such a goddamn brain tumor in my head. It had been only one day, not even a full day, and he was all I thought about. His soft lips against mine, mouth lingering with the tang of coffee, cigarettes and some mint sweet he had been sucking on. His body pressed up alongside mine, smaller, weaker. Goddamn clothing in the fucking way, but still feeling his bulge growing hard and pressing into my thigh. Hearing his beautiful moan and whimper when he pulled on my blazer and kissed back.

Yeah, my cock almost nuked itself. Now that I had tasted him, I wanted more. Much more.

Maybe it was my own wrongdoing, forcing myself on him, being arrogant and stating the things that I did. Telling him he would be mine, thinking intimidation would work this time to get what I wanted.

I was wrong.

I wanted him to call, wanted to hear that fucking honey angel voice so desperately, but for two fucking goddamn weeks, Beo didn't call. I went over to where he lived only to find he had moved out, and the shit-faced, fat, yellow-stained-T-shirt, dick of a landlord couldn't say where he'd moved to. If I thought that first night was hell, it was nothing compared to what followed; like Tartarus, torment and suffering followed me those two weeks. I'd choose the River Phlegethon blindly over the bane he put me through.

My resolve was running thinner than a fucking thread. Anger, concern, fear and a whole lot of other shit had built up inside me, and I was going to blow up like a volcano.

I was snapping at everyone in the office for just looking at me. Christine, my PA, had threatened to resign. I couldn't run my office without that woman. Well, I could, but she was too good at what she did, and keeping her mouth and nose out of private, illegal side jobs that crossed my desk. If she left, I'd have to put her under with all the shit she knew and turned a blind eye to. Yeah, I cared about the bitch. I would never admit it to her or even Richard, but Christine didn't deserve to die over the fact that *maybe* she could be a liability. I even managed to piss Richard off, snapping at him, telling him he was a two-faced worthless cunt for a small detail he missed on an insignificant job.

That guilt only added more fuel to my fire. So I took two days off, got boy Finn and his Asian friend to come and entertain my cock over a long four-day weekend. I worked those two subs hard and rough. Each motherfucking time I fucked one of them, Beo would pop up in my head, and then I'd fuck those boys even harder. Wasn't it enough that he had to haunt my thoughts every second of every day, but during sex too! This anger was new, different, consuming, fucking raw, and it was becoming dangerous for people to be around me.

It was the Sunday night of my fuck-fest weekend, and I was watching the two subs, high on weed, my dick too tender to fuck, and their holes not in any better shape. Finn was going at the Asian's throat, biting, kissing, licking and dry humping him on the leg. I had denied them both release until now, and the two were like starving animals. Finn lay out on his back with his muscular thighs spread wide, his long, fat cock pointed in the air. Asian boy growled and, in one swallow, engulfed Finn's dick down his throat.

Watching those boys going at each other, my thoughts wandered to Beo. What was he doing right now? It was raining again, and in a couple of weeks,

winter would be here in full force. Was he warm? *God, he was always so cold.* He'd felt like ice each time I'd met him, even when I kissed him. Did he have something to eat? Did he even have a place to stay? Would he accept me for who I am, what I am, for all the shit I've done?

I'd never even considered him becoming my submissive. If he wasn't into that, I'd stop. I'd fucking give up going to The Bark for a fucking hippie kid I barely knew. The warning signs had flared up and stopped, then flared again and again in my head. I couldn't pay heed to them because Beo fucking Moon was consuming me from the inside out and driving me out of my mind.

They say obsession is a dangerous thing, but Beo Moon wasn't just an obsession. He was becoming my fucking addiction. I'd seen the kid twice, kissed him once! It was fucked up. I even considered having him kidnapped, just to have him. Yeah, Beo Moon made some real messed-up shit spread through my mind. I even pondered if that old witch had placed a curse on me.

Sighing, I pinched the bridge of my nose, and heard Finn gasp as he came.

"My turn," Asian boy said, sneering and wiping the excess cum off his chin only to lick it from his hand. He lay back on the carpet and spread his legs for Finn to go at his cock. I'm sure if I hadn't drilled their holes tender, they'd be fucking each other into the next lifetime.

Finn was a fucking deity of male muscle and beauty. All toned and sculpted, like God had taken special care to carve him into existence. Beo had nothing on Finn. The two's beauty was as incomparable as heaven was from hell.

Finn was a vain and greedy little sub. A motherfucking whore, too. A Dom just had to say, "boy," and he was already spreading his ass in full glory to get some cock or fist down his hole. He was also in love with me. God, he wasn't the first sub that had begged me to collar him. I also knew a little shit when I saw it. Finn might have declared his undying feelings to me, but I knew he was more in love with the image of the power-hungry tyrant, and my fat-ass bank account, than the real me.

Beo knew I had money, and he was definitely attracted to me, yet he still pushed me away. It might have been that which had sparked my whole obsession with him. Fear had started swirling inside me that once I had him, had my fill of Beo's body, mouth and hole, I'd just cast him aside like I did with any other sub.

Why was I doing this to myself? Allowing him, a lowly hippie punk, to rule my head.

I looked at the boys again. The two subs were so entwined and content in each other that I felt neglected. I could have this every night. A different ass, or, perhaps, the same, if they were good and pleased me enough. Hell, I could have an orgy of boys at my beck and call for my amusement or servicing me. Commitment to one single soul and all this crap relationship shit that went with it, the emotional energy involved to maintain it, was fucking exhausting.

Fuck it.

Fuck him.

Fuck. Beautiful. Beo. Moon.

I don't need him. My life is the way it is because I chose it to be that way. I'm in control, and no one fucks with my head or my heart. So the next time—

*No, there won't be any motherfucking next time.*

I'm done being a slave to obsession and him.

"Boys!" I barked, and both looked up at me, Finn's eyes growing wary. He knew when I was boiling with rage.

"You think I'm paying for your weed and alcohol so you can fucking eat each other?" I reached for my boxers and pushed them down, exposing my semi-hard dick. "You thought I called your asses over here so you could have a motherfucking boy party?"

My gaze sliced from one to the other, and quickly both resumed their submissive positions. On their knees, chins against their chests, shoulders straight with hands clasped behind their backs.

"Sorry, Master Colt, we beg your pardon. We got carried away," Finn said.

He knew how to play a Dom. Hell, most of the giddy dumb fucks at The Bark who gave a shit about subs were in love with him. I guess, in a sense, Finn and I are more suited for each other than any other pair. We both manipulate people using our resources to our advantage. But a Svengali couldn't bullshit another, more experienced, Svengali. Finn learned that the hard way, evidenced by the scar on his chin. One I had placed there. He'd never attempted to fuck me over again. I warned you I was a special kind of fucked up.

Stroking my cock, and grinding my teeth from the tender fucking friction, I called the boys over. Both crept on hands and knees to my feet. Apologetic eyes gazed up at me, one from under black hair and the other from blond curls. "It's yours, boys; make Master proud." I grumbled and let my head rest against the

back of the couch, shutting my eyes. I knew whose mouth was whose. Finn knew I liked it soft after a couple of days of fucking, the Asian, not a fucking clue. “No fucking teeth!” I gripped him by his black hair, causing him to yelp. I shoved his head toward my dick. “Slowly, boy. Master wants it tender, with lots of tongue and lots of moist lips.” I released his hair and pinched his small ear between my thumb and index finger, twisting it slowly. “Unless you want a crop to warm up your already tender little fuck-hole, you better start obeying, you little shit.”

“Y-yes, Master Colt,” he hissed, while his ear turned redder than his cheeks. Slowly I felt his lips graze my tender meat, tongue every-so-often licking along one of the veins, and I let go of his ear, watching the two boys. There was just something about two hungry mouths worshipping my cock—it was primal, almost beautiful. But I wasn’t feeling it. Most likely due to my sac being spent from all the fucking.

My phone chirped, signaling a text. I had to reach for it, since I had a big meeting with a private client the following week. You didn’t keep him waiting. I was nervous to do business with the man, but the cut I would get out of shipping the large amount of cocaine to Russia wasn’t something you just turned your nose up at.

The screen showed an unknown number. As I tapped and read the text, my cock fucking jizzed itself.

*We Should Fuck. Beo.*

And my heart was happier than a fly sucking on shit.

“Get the fuck off me!” I growled at the two subs, abruptly irritated by them being here. I stood so fast, pushing the boys away, the Asian fell straight on his jaw, Finn on his back.

“Master, what the hell?” Finn dared to question and was up on his feet.

“Get the fuck out of here now!” I roared, ignoring him.

My blood was pulsing so fast in my ears that the world started to spin.

*Text him back, dickhead!*

I started texting, feeling like goddamn Richard button-fucking his phone in my office those weeks back.

Then I looked down at junior, all weeping translucent cum and swirling back like he had foreskin.

“Fuck!” I groaned.

How the hell was I even going to fuck that boy's ass with the way I'd behaved the last couple of days. My dick was already protesting. There was no fucking way it was going to happen.

“Fuck!” I bellowed like a kid throwing a tantrum.

“Master Colt, are you—”

I gripped Finn by the neck and snarled in his face when he tried to reach for me.

“You know my rules. You want to add another scar to the collection?”

He knew I didn't like subs touching me. I didn't do the snuggling bullshit, or getting all comfy and mushy in one another's arms. That shit wasn't me. My bed was mine. My room was not submissive territory. No sub had stepped into my bedroom, and none ever would. Finn had tried it once. That's how he got that scar, when I slammed his drunk face into the nightstand. Broke his pretty little nose, too.

I watched his eyes widen with panic, my fingers digging into his neck leaving red angry marks. “I said get out!” Spit came flying as I yelled into his pale face. I let go of my grip and closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath. I was losing it. Mental hospital here I fucking come, all thanks to Beo Moon and his four-word text.

“Finn, just leave, please,” I said gently, shocking even myself. I waited, listening to the two boys silently getting their stuff and removing themselves from my apartment.

Silence lingered as I gave myself a couple of minutes to calm the fuck down. I stared at the phone's display, the cursor blinking, waiting for me to type.

*Beo, no sex. Not yet, Babyboy, but I would love to see you, tonight. Please. I'll make dinner.*

I fucking stared at my own text, nostrils flaring. Wanting to press erase, I pressed send by accident.

His reply came in seconds.

*K. Send address. Will take cab.*

I sent him the address, then got my ass moving, cleaning away the scattered condoms, beer bottles and joint nubs. God, it looked like a fucking frat party hit

the place. All that was missing was lost underwear. I popped in the shower, washing away the stench of sex and weed that clung to my skin, threw on some lounge pants and a tight black shirt, ran my fingers through my hair and cleaned my teeth.

Stepping into the living room, I was heading toward the kitchen when my phone rang.

“Colt Maxus,” I gritted out.

“Mr. Maxus, it’s security. There’s an,” the man must have covered his mouth since it sounded hushed, “escort down here, called Beo Moon, wanting to—”

“You motherfucker!” I rumbled into the receiver. “This is your lucky day, you cunt. Because I swear, if that boy wasn’t standing there in front of you, I’d come down and wring your neck!”

“Sorry, sir. My mistake.”

“And next time he comes in, you don’t call, you just let him up. Got it, asshole!”

“Yes, sir.”

I slammed the phone down. Everyone knew the grumpy dick asshole living on the top floor, and no one in the building liked me, but that was their fucking shit to deal with. I owned this motherfucking building, so they couldn’t say jack.

A few minutes later, there was a tap on my door. I stood glaring at it, then the second tap came and still I didn’t move. I was fucking scared. That door kept us apart, and once I opened it, I would let Beo not only into my apartment but into my life and my bed. Never could I have prepared myself for him settling into my soul and staking claim to my heart—though that realization would come a lot later.

Dashing to the front door, my bare feet resounding on the concrete floors, I reached for the lock.

Beo was standing in my fucking doorway. The world could have ended, I could have lost every damn penny to my name, and it couldn’t have wiped the stupid smirk off my face.

A vintage, faded Star Wars T-shirt hid under an old 80s biker jacket, a couple of lost drops of rain still clinging to the leather. A clean pair of dark-

black waxed jeans, with no holes this time, gloved his legs. They were accompanied by black, worn leather military-style boots and a duffel bag clutched in his right hand and his guitar case over his left shoulder. That fucking beanie was pushed further back, allowing some of his black hair to hang over his forehead. A single, blindingly pink bandanna was folded and tied into a neckerchief. My own little Rockabilly looked fucking edible. But his eyes, they were tired, with dark crescents under them.

I was nervous as shit. “Come in,” I said in a taut voice, and coughed to clear my throat. “Please, Beo.” My heart was pounding a crazy fucking mantra in my chest.

He didn’t move, eyes raking over me, then back to mine before looking to the floor, rolling his pale, rosy bottom lip with his teeth. I watched his hands tighten on the straps of the duffel bag and guitar case.

My heart beat faster.

Was he regretting coming over? Scared? If he decided he didn’t want to be here, I wasn’t sure if I’d let him leave or fucking tie him up.

“Beo?” I croaked and broke the distance between us, towering over him. Slowly, sad brown eyes nervously looked up at me through dark lashes.

“Can I stay the night?” he said in a brittle whisper. So softly, I wanted to fucking cry.

Reaching for his face, I stroked two fingers along his jawline. Gooseflesh gun-fired up my arm, not just from how cold his skin felt, but from actually touching him.

“Yeah, beautiful, as long as you like,” I said, smiling to the point my fucking cheeks hurt.

“Thanks,” he sighed, closing his eyes. He dropped the duffel bag and literally crashed his head against my chest, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist, his fingers kneading into the muscles of my back. Then he sighed again.

I stood dead still for a moment, waiting for the anger to vent, for me to tear him off and shove him away. It never came. Instead, there was a serenity inside me. Something I rarely experienced in life, if ever. I finally placed my arms around his bony shoulders, pulling him tighter against me, and running my hands up his neck and under the beanie to stroke his hair.

“Everything okay, Babyboy?” I asked, a hell of a lot of concern running through my mind. Did Beo actually think he had to sleep with me to have a bed for the night, and if so, how many other men did he have to offer his body up to for a warm bed? My stomach crunched, spine turning to fucking ice and teeth clenching from fury at the idea of another man’s hands on him. What they would do to my boy.

*Shit, I shouldn't talk of him as mine.*

“Right now, everything’s perfect,” he said in a sleepy voice and scrubbed his cheek against my pecs and snuggled in closer. My anger died right down at his innocent gesture.

Yeah, yeah, fuck, I get it. Call me an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and a head case, but this was Beo in my arms, pressed up against me. I was fucking happy!

“What do you want for dinner?” I asked, wishing this fucking frog in my throat would just get.

Staring up at me, causing the beanie to slide off, and his hair to look just plain chaotic, he said, “Ain’t hungry, just tired,” and lowered his head against my chest again.

Wrapping my left arm firmly around his thighs and my right arm around his shoulders, I picked the hippie kid up and carried him, guitar and all, up the stairs straight to my bedroom and sat his ass down on my bed.

He blinked when I switched on the bed light, and finally focused on me with drowsy eyes.

Cupping his cheek, I said, “Just a second, going to go lock up.” Then left the room when he nodded with a smile.

It took five minutes to lock the apartment door, switch off the lights—checking that everything that shouldn’t be left on, or unattended, was off—and come back into my room.

Beo had fallen asleep. Jacket, boots and jeans neatly piled next to his guitar.

I should have been pissed. The whole idea of seeing him again was so we could get to know each other, and partly because my dick was out of action.

But I had to fucking smile at the pair of hairy, pale legs and white briefs below the Star Wars T-shirt as he lay on his stomach. Pleased that he was asleep and getting some much needed rest, I reached for the central heating and

turned it up a notch. Grabbing a faux fur blanket from the hallway closet, I draped it over us, as I lay down next to him. He turned and buried his face against the hollow of my neck, a pleased little sigh escaping from his lips. “Thanks,” he mumbled, and that was the end of it.

Watching him lay there, I pushed a lock of hair from his forehead, and counted the five random freckles on his face. He was imperfectly beautiful. The shape of his jaw, the smooth complexity of his skin. His lips slightly parted, his chest rising and falling. In the light cast from the side lamp, Beo looked young, underage young, and it shocked me how little I knew about the kid.

I leaned in, gently brushing my lips over his, kissing him goodnight, and the little shit kissed back, his upper lip slightly curling as he grinned.

I growled deep, and his smile grew.

My cock stirred and my chest expanded, my mind running a mile a second wanting to know—*What the fuck? Who are you, and where is Colt Maxus?* I switched that voice the fuck off, because Beo was here in my bed, with my arms around him as he curled up to me, and my heart was content. I was so motherfucking, goddamn happy.

The next morning, that happiness shit itself.

I woke disoriented with the heavy dread that something was wrong and missing. Glancing at the bedside clock, I saw it was far past nine a.m.

Cursing, I sprang up.

“Beo, I’m late, Babyboy. I’ll call—” I shut the hell up when I turned and my gaze fell on the empty spot where he should be.

I turned my stare to where he had placed his clothes; they, and the guitar, were gone.

Charging down the stairs, taking them two at a time to reach the hallway, I looked for his duffel bag at the front door, where we left it last night.

Nothing.

Beo was gone. Just slept in my motherfucking bed and left.

I had no idea what hit me in the gut from the realization ripping through my mind, causing me to fall back against the wall and slide to the concrete floor with my hands pressed to my face.

Rejection, sadness, hell, fucking disappointment? I had no idea. All I knew was that my heart hurt like it shouldn’t. It was confusing. My brain ached

thinking about it. One man couldn't feel all this shit so quickly for another human being. It was just downright wrong, making me fucking miserable. Was I completely in lust with Beo, obsessed to the point of love? Or was it that feeling where the world came to a complete standstill when he walked into the room and a smile graced his face?

I pushed myself up and protractedly walked to the kitchen, completely ignoring the smell of pancakes and the out-of-place yellow square paper stuck to the fridge. Reaching for the bottle of pain tablets, I froze. Glaring, my nostrils widened at the note the little bitch had left me. Snatching it from the metal, causing the magnet to fly and bounce across the floor, I crumbled up the piece of paper.

Who did Beo think he was, leaving a little note and just fucking disappearing on me? I was ready to discard the note in the trash, and whatever this shit between me and Beo was with it. Honestly, I was getting sick of this little fucked-up game; still, I hesitated. Sighing, I unclenched my fist, and decided to read it.

*Hey. Sorry. Had to leave. Thanks for last night. You don't know how much it meant to me.*

*Smiley fucking face.*

*Beo.*

*PS*

*Enjoy breakfast.*

*XOXO*

I glanced at the island in the middle of my kitchen. Stacked, dripping with syrup and blueberries, stood a plate of heart-shaped fucking pancakes.

I was going to kill the little fucker.

Beo's pancakes were fucking hell on a muscle building diet and addictive, just like the little shit himself.

Monday night came, and no Beo. I tried to call the boy, but each time the phone went straight to "The customer you are trying to call is [fucking] unavailable at present. Please try [the fuck] later." It continued till Thursday evening at The Bark, where I got the shock of my life, giving me my first gray hairs.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Four

*“There was one single man that could make me eat my own shit if he wanted to. As much as I love to stroke my own ego, he terrified even me. And the best part, he didn’t even have to try. His name was Hades.” — Colt Maxus.*

The Bark was private and secluded. Seated on a hundred acres in Greenwich, Connecticut, away from prying eyes.

It was a two-story mansion in the shape of a square, with a center garden and pool area for special occasions and the regular munches. It was like the virtuoso of Domination. The perfect place where Doms and subs could act out their natural roles as if it were the way of regular life. In simple terms, The Bark was a rapture for the BDSM community where we didn’t have to safeguard the lifestyle from society.

The mansion held forty rooms. The twenty on the ground floor were open to more involved play between numerous members at one time, or if a Dom and a sub wished an audience to watch or cooperate in their play. The upper twenty rooms were for intimate, more private play. Different rooms for different kinks. From medical examination rooms to the puppy pound, you name it, it was there. Four Dungeon Masters monitored each floor, giving The Bark a maximum of eight at any given time.

Getting a membership to The Bark was not an easy task for a Dom or a sub. A Dominant had to submit under one of the House Lords for a period of one month. A full psych evaluation, blood work-up, criminal background check, and an intense three-hour interview involving all ten House Lords was also required. That’s aside from the hefty joining fee and monthly membership dues. A Dom could pass all those requirements, but if one of the House Lords felt you didn’t belong, you did not belong. Doms who couldn’t afford the joining fee could offer their payment in time and service as a Dungeon Master or bartender, allowing The Bark to have so many at any one time.

Subs didn’t have it any easier. In addition to all the checks, they had to offer two months of domestic service to The Bark under the guidance of a House Lord. This absolved them of the joining fee; however, they still had to pay the monthly dues. Their interviews were also considered harsher and longer—a whole week—than those for the Doms.

There were three imperative rules that would never be broken at The Bark—the others could be bent under certain circumstances—no drugs, no drinking and playing, and lastly, it didn't matter who you were in your life outside The Bark. Once you pass through the lobby, you become either a Dominant or a submissive, and you leave your crazy at home. Because if you are banned from The Bark, you are banned from the lifestyle. The House Lords will make sure of that.

Driving through the main gate and up the concourse, I passed the motherfucking huge fountain with its little cupids pissing in the pond. I stopped at the entrance and got out of my black 1967 Ferrari.

“Master Colt, such an honor you would grace us with your presence tonight.” The valet—a Dom in training—raised a questioning brow at my gear.

It was more formal than what I usually would wear: a pair of black leather dress breeches, long-sleeved police shirt with Sam Browne strap, short biker gloves, traditional leather daddy cap, and twelve-inch biker boots. My attire sat snug around my body from the fifteen pounds of muscle mass I had gained over the last four months.

“Did Sir Richard step in this evening?”

The valet had a blush to his cheeks when he addressed me, “Yes. He had someone with him, a—”

“Brown-haired, green-eyed, hot piece of ass with dimples and cute as a fucking daydream, I assume?”

“You are correct.” His smirk widened.

I held out my baby's keys to the man. As he took them in his hand, I could see his eyes on my car. I growled, not letting go of the keys, “You scratch her, I'll whip your ass raw. Understood?”

“Yes, always gentle with the black fox.”

I had to snort at his comment. She was a sexy little fox. Ah, boys and their toys.

After receiving an infinity mark on my left wrist, which allowed me to play but not to drink, I stepped through the lobby into The Black Room. This was an enormous space partitioned into sections. The Black Room took up most of the front, to the left of it stood the entrance to the VIP lounge, or The White Room, and to the right of it was the common room, better known as The Red Room.

The board room sat to the left of the lobby. At the far side of The Black Room were stairs leading down to The Pit. A single large open space with a stage where a Dom could put on a show, a demonstration, or prove a point to his sub, or a submissive in general. Collaring ceremonies were also held there—even had a fucking wedding there once!

Admin was done at the offices of Clay Blackly, one of the owners, back in Manhattan. There were two other owners. Holding the biggest share was Luther Mark Jacaruso. A man I had yet to meet. Rumor said he was a private partner and had never once stepped foot in the place, but those same rumors said he was the Dom responsible for making the House Rules of The Bark and coming up with the strict requirements for becoming a member.

The third owner was Max Donovan, who was walking up to me. I knew all this because I sold them the property, shipped the interior décor, lighting and furniture, toys, crops (those that needed to be imported)—well, fucking everything, and I still do.

“Maxus, you old bastard.” Max’s big, black hand slapped me on the back as he turned and stood by my side. “How are you doing? Haven’t seen you here in, well, it’s almost been a month.”

“Work, you know, keeping me busy,” I lied. That hippie kid kept me from coming here. I was going out of my mind about that boy. Tonight was the first time since our meeting that I felt a remnant of my old self, hence the reason I came.

“Bull-fucking-shit,” Max whispered in my ear, “if you are so busy, Richard would be too, and he’s been here almost every night, negotiating.”

“I’m assuming a guest pass for James?”

Max nodded. The Bark didn’t give out many guest passes. They were fucking rarer than snow in the desert, but once in a while, if you knew who to speak to, and did a hell of a lot of convincing, you might get one.

I understood Richard wanted to get James a guest pass so James could scope the place out and see if he liked it. The Bark wasn’t for everyone, that was for sure. It could be a bit intimidating with the strict protocol. Seeing all these alpha’s walking around, their massive egos rubbing against one another, and I’m not leaving the Dommies out of this equation either. There were some women here that could intimidate the best of Doms. It just simply wasn’t a place for a newbie sub or Dom to be. If Richard was going to allow James to be

his sub full time, he needed to know if the kid would like to come here. Hence giving Richard an indication of how deep to go with James's training.

"Please don't tell me we're losing you in conversion to vanilla... Who's the unlucky boy?"

I couldn't respond, as I folded my arms over my chest and leaned against the wall. Max's words were so close to the truth it was frightening. Thank God, Max knew me well enough not to push the matter.

"Let me buy you a drink. I have business to discuss with you," Max said when I kept my silence.

I wasn't here for business. I was here to get a fucking reality check and to find the Colt Maxus that somehow went missing when a certain someone was scrambling my brains around. Plain and simple. And I sure as hell would never say his name again, ever!

"Sorry." I showed him the stamp on my right wrist. "But please do set up an appointment with Christine for next week, Max. Excuse me." I stepped away, turning to my right and entering The Red Room. You thought I was a VIP. Nope, not even a chance.

The requirements to get a membership were high enough. What it took to become a VIP, I didn't want to know. Something told me it had nothing to do with money, and I really didn't care. The Red Room suited me just fine. The boys and company of the Doms here were more my kind of thing. They liked it rough, and the subs could stand more pain than the soft little shits and do-goody Doms that graced the VIP lounge. Not saying there weren't some in there that could step up to being the kind of Dom I am, but the whole VIP status shit wasn't me. They didn't like me. I was a Dom. I took control and made a boy fly, then watched him fall and crash, leaving the tattered mess for one of the VIPs to come clean up. Still, those boys would come back begging for more.

The Red Room was dark due to the black-painted, high walls and low, glowing, black chandeliers. A deep blood-red carpet covered the entire floor, and black-leather, U-shaped couches were set about the space, giving an intimate feel to whomever's company one would find oneself in. Against the far wall was a small bar with one bartender. The whole setup of The Bark was made so that one felt relaxed. Often I would just come here to do exactly that. It was so different from the BDSM clubs and leather bars in the city, with their overly loud blasting music, crowded spaces, and bumping bodies.

The music flowing in The Red Room was a mix of sexy lounge and jazz styles, just loud enough that it became a relaxing background sound. Extra lighting came from neon tubes placed in horizontal grooves along the wall, which created an almost foggy feel with its classic 1920s style. Even the bartenders were dressed accordingly, in black leather vests and pants, white shirts underneath, with a bow tie around their collars to signify they were on duty.

The place was damn well worth every penny paid, twice over.

Seeing Richard seated on one of the couches with his face and bald head illuminated by the red neon lights, I walked towards him, greeting others with a nod along the way.

"Richard," I spoke, stepping up to them. "Boy." I ran my hand over James's brown hair, ruffling it up while he sat in Richard's lap. God, it was beautiful seeing these two like this. I just stared, smiled, and felt hurt.

I wanted that, wanted that with *him*.

"Colt fucking Maxus!" Richard sneered. "Where have you been the last couple of days? You've looked better, sweetheart."

*Hell. Goddamn fucking hell is where I was. Still am, evidenced by the restless sleep. And going out of my mind thinking about a fucking hippie kid.*

"So, James, you like The Bark?" I sat, trying to avert the conversation. Richard only gave a sigh.

"I do, Master Col—"

James froze in Richard's lap, blinking.

The boy grinned, "I beg your pardon but, Master Colt, you look fucking hot in your gear."

"That's two, adding to the other four lashes you have already earned tonight," Richard growled into James's ear. "I think you need reminding who you belong to, little boy."

I let out a loud whistle, causing both of them to look at me.

"You sure got him by the fucking balls, boy."

Richard's stare said it all. With his former affairs, he wouldn't have been bothered by the compliment to me, or to any other Dom, but James definitely snagged Richard big time.

"I'm sorry, Sir." James pressed his lips to Richard's throat, causing the man to tremble in his seat.

I silently laughed and shook my head, feeling the tension in my shoulders and back beginning to ease. Placing my right boot on my left knee, I stretched out my arms along the couch's back and closed my eyes, allowing the atmosphere and the presence of The Bark to fill me.

"You sure you're okay, Colt?" Richard asked, concern in his voice.

"Relaxing, trying to find my center." Richard also knew never to push a matter when I didn't elaborate. Several minutes had passed when I felt the disturbance of someone kneeling by my boots.

Finn had a unique smell. His scent, his pheromones, could turn any gay man on. Pheromones dictate our attraction to another on a sexual level, and it all comes down to our animalistic instincts and desire to mate. Unfortunately, I was highly enticed by Finn's fucking pheromones. Without opening my eyes, I snapped my fingers to the straining bulge in my leathers. Instead of going at my hardening cock, the little shit crawled up on my lap, rubbing his ass right on my dick, pulling a groan from my throat.

"Please, Master Colt." Finn's breath lapped at my skin. I was about to push the little fucker off me when he said, "I'm worried about you." I could hear in his voice he was being sincere. "Make me fly like only you can. Show them, and me, you're still the Colt Maxus that no one can compete with."

He knew how to stroke my fucking ego. Raising my head up off the back of the couch and coming face to face with the little cunt, I growled against his lips. "Room seven. Saint Andrew's Cross," I raised my voice high above the music, "and bring the Serpent's Tongue!" The Red Room fell to hushed whispers. I watched his throat swallow, eyes going big, as he shivered in my lap. Gripping his wrist, I could feel his pulse going wild.

"Scared now, little boy?" I placed my lips against his, forcing him to take a shallow breath. I had never kissed Finn before. "You poked the beast. You asked to play with the Titan. So don't give me the scared fucking attitude."

"Y-Yes, Master," Finn gasped, and I smacked my mouth over his, sucking hard on his lips.

He was definitely disoriented when he climbed off and walked away. It wasn't from that kiss. Finn knew as well as everyone what the Serpent's Tongue was: plain, simple, a kangaroo-hide bullwhip with the exception of a

forked elk-hide tip. It was created by one of the Toy Masters in The Bark before he passed away, and it was said to be the legacy he left behind. Bill Randal was also the man that taught me how to be a Dom, resulting in me earning my title as Master Colt.

Manipulating a bullwhip all came down to power. Not only for its wielder, but for those who watched, and the sub participating. A whip was its own enemy; it could make love to a sub's skin with a kiss, or it could savagely scar. It could make them soar, or ground them in fear, which all depended on the Master wielding it. One slip up could also cost me my reputation and status as a Master.

It was also one of the only items, if used, where I would personally bring the sub back from subspace. Dr. Martin Alexander was the only other Dom at The Bark that could wield the Serpent's Tongue.

News had already spread. When I stood, Richard did the same, giving me nod. As we advanced towards the exit of The Red Room, we were stopped by a sub. A white-haired boy named Damon.

There was one exception to the old guard's rules and most likely to most BDSM communities. The Bark had what we called the Alpha sub, who was also one of the House Lords. Damon was, in simple terms, perfection in the form of a submissive—a sub to stand as an example to all other subs at The Bark—but he was not without fault. As perfect as he was, he was also cold towards Doms. The respect was there, the honor to serve and the desire, but no love. I recognized his eyes. I saw those same steel-cold eyes every morning I looked in the mirror.

“Damon, good evening, boy,” I said in an even tone.

“Master Colt, Sir Richard,” he said with his eyes down. “It is rumored you are to put on a show tonight, Master Colt. It is requested by the House Lords that you do a demonstration instead.”

I had to smirk. Could the night get any better? It was just what I needed to forget about the hippie and take back control.

“Agreed. Thank you, boy. I assume that everything will be down in The Pit?”

“Yes, Master. If you would be so kind as to give us some time, a half hour perhaps, to set up and gather those wishing to watch?”

"Granted, boy Damon," I said, and patted him on the hair. I had admiration for Damon, maybe even a small bit of sympathy at knowing the same demons haunted his nightmares.

With a nod, he was off.

"Sir, sorry, but what's going on?" James asked.

Richard cupped his cheek, lifting James's eyes to his. "Master Colt is going to give a demonstration. Well," Richard chuckled, "more like put on a show to make his ego and status sparkle if you ask me, but that is what it is, boy. It's going to be intense and could be a bit too much. You don't have to watch, but I would like to be there for moral support. Just, James, baby," Richard leaned in closer, "I'm not Colt. I'm not the type of Dominant he is, okay? I would never take a bullwhip to you, boy. Paddle, crop or my hands, understand?"

"Are you two done mushy fucking each other?" I barked. "I've got a boy to whip and a hole to fuck, and I don't have the time to watch *P.S. I Love You*, right now."

Turning, embers practically blazing in his glare, James bit out, "I'll watch the old man throw out his back, with glee."

"No punishment for that, boy," Richard snickered. "Sorry, Colt. But you fucking deserved that one."

"Like I said before, James, I fucking like you." Even though I sneered back at the little fuck, my words were true. A sub rarely had the guts to stand up to me, even if his came in the form of disrespect.

I checked my watch, thinking on giving them twenty more minutes to set up, and the extra time for the anticipation to sink into Finn.

"Going to get some water. You love bunnies want anything?" I threw over my shoulder.

"One day, Colt, you're going to find someone that's going to knock you off your high horse, and I'm gonna watch you burn."

"And you'll be the one to pick me up, dust me off and help me back on my throne. I love you too, Princess Richard," I said, walking towards the bar in The Black Room.

I had just given my order to the barman when a familiar little voice came popping into my head, and I closed my eyes. I didn't need this. Didn't need to hear him, especially not now. Didn't need my subconscious to call him up right fucking now!

“Hi, Sir Smith, can I get a water before I go?” Each word, even down to the very syllable, sounded like him in my head. It wasn't enough that I had tried to shut him out of my brain, now I was imagining the little shit, too. I needed a fucking shrink to seriously check out my head, or I was definitely going to end up in the mental house. At that point, the bartender responded back.

“Hi, Beo. How are you doing, little man?”

How the hell would my imaginary Beo know Smith?

“Doing okay, just tired.

“Sir,” he added.

It was ridiculous and way too surreal to be my imagination. Opening my eyes, I turned to where the imaginary voice was coming from. My stomach clenched tight, my knees actually felt like fucking jelly, and I began to shake.

First, this was a fucking hallucination. Second, I was hallucinating. Third, a protective hand was placed on Beo's neck, and I lost it, growling, till I saw who the hand belonged to and went back to hallucinating and staring.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I could not even wrap my mind around it. The little fuck was standing right there in the motherfucking Bark, and I was about to let loose in molten anger, tearing every motherfucker in this place a new asshole, and most likely blowing an artery in my brain if someone even dared look at him!

*Fucking! Shit!*

The realization took my breath and caused my head to throb. Beo is here—yes, *Colt Maxus, you are not imagining or hallucinating*—because I could feel my own fingers digging into the flesh of my palms as I clenched my fists. If he knows the bartender, he has been here before, meaning he is a member!

The little whore!

In a blind rage, ready to reach for him and wring his little neck, I stopped when Dr. Martin Alexander stepped out from behind him, gave me a nod and placed his motherfucking hand on my boy's shoulder, touching him again.

Someone was going to die tonight, and I wasn't sure if it would be Beo, Martin or me.

“You ready to go, kiddo?” Martin said with his back to me, shielding Beo's sight.

*Fuck! He dares call Beo 'kiddo'!* I ground my teeth and clenched my jaw so hard I swore some of my teeth were going to shatter.

"Yes, Sir. Just a bit of dry mouth." Beo took a gulp of the water, still unaware that I was standing several feet away from him, killer blood pulsing in my veins.

"Sir, I think Danny likes you," Beo said.

"He is something," replied Martin.

"No, I mean really-really likes you."

"He... wait, he..." Martin raked his hands over his gray hair, tension straining back, shoulders and neck, causing the harness he was wearing to push into his skin. It seemed that, in that moment, he was having his own shocked revelation. Till Beo signed his own death sentence.

"He is the one I was referring to, Doc. So stop falling in love with me, 'cause it ain't never happening."

Martin let out a deep sigh, which sounded like something I was in desperate need of. But I was too furious to move, let alone make a noise or breathe.

"Beo, about that, kiddo. Yes, I admit, I had been, might even still be, in love with you, but I want you to know, I will never, never overstep that boundary with you."

Fucking perverted motherfucker! I gave a step towards them, my anger turning to sweltering rage, when Beo's next words froze me cold.

"That's why I love you so much, and can say the shit I want to say to you, when I want to... sorry, I meant, Sir."

"Beo, you've never cared about protocol, so why start now? I'll always be Doc to you, no matter what, right?"

"True." And they fucking hugged. Then turned and walked away like I didn't fucking exist!

I was about to go after them so Beo could see what happened to little slutty boys that didn't obey and respect protocol, and what the consequences were of pissing me off.

"Colt, we are ready for you." The tight voice of Aria spoke in my right ear.

I turned to her. The full-body catsuit, with its wet-latex look spanning tight over her huge breasts, would have any het or les sub begging. Some Doms, too.

But she was spoken for, as evidenced by her pup's leash in her right hand and the thing kneeling at her heels, all tight muscles, rubber vest and dog mask.

The House Lord narrowed her blue eyes as she gave me a look from head to toe, then swept her gaze in the direction Beo and Martin had walked off to, seeing them just as they disappeared into the lobby.

Tsking, she bayed, "Never mind. With the state you're in, you'd only bring that boy harm, and I don't think Finn is the one you want begging for your marks. I believe Master Colt has been heart fucked." She giggled.

Oh, that fucking psychologist bitch was going to get it, because she was right. The term "heart fucked" was a phrase used to describe a Dominant so baffled over their emotions they couldn't perform their role as a Dominant. It usually was the result of conflicting emotions of the heart. It could also mean a more serious conflict, when one Dom fell for another.

Her long blonde hair brushed my face when she turned and walked away, her little pup all too happy, shaking his dog-tail butt plug and crawling after her.

It wouldn't be fair to Finn. I would only be taking out my anger on him with the bullwhip. That wouldn't be pretty. Not to him, and not to my reputation.

For the first time, I couldn't get out of The Bark fast enough. Reaching the lobby, I snapped at the valet boy to bring my car. Impatiently, I waited. I didn't dare step outside, fearing Beo and Martin might still be waiting there. I know myself. I'd either cause a fucking scene, chewing the boy out, or worse, fuck him right fucking there.

The lobby's front door opened, bringing with it Beo's voice. "Just getting my beanie, Doc. Be back in a sec," he said, head turned to the side, eyes not paying any attention to what was happening right in front of him.

As he was turning his head forward, I stepped towards Beo. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sir." He didn't look up, and tried to step out of the way. I gripped him by the shoulders and thrust him against the door so hard that it rattled, causing the valet boy to stare at us.

I snarled in his face.

"You little bitch!" Beo's eyes strained in their sockets, from fear, terror or just plain surprise? I didn't care at that moment, my emotions were too raw, and all over the fucking place. "I warned you!"

His throat moved, eyes still dancing, pupils blown motherfucking button wide. "You are mine, little boy," I growled from my chest, and for some fucked up reason, my dick had to go hard.

"C-Colt?" he whispered, his eyes moving from the hat on my head to the leather dress shirt to my leather jeans, and then to the silver arm band on my left bicep.

"Sir?" *Oh, now the little shit gets it.*

"Master!" I corrected, and sneered when I saw the valet boy with Beo's beanie.

Pulling back from him, I placed my right palm over his chest, keeping him against the door and snapped my left fingers. "Give me that!"

Grabbing it from the valet boy, my eyes never leaving Beo, I rotated the beanie on my hand. "You want this back?"

Beo's eyes peeped at the beanie and returned quickly back to mine.

"When you come collect your discipline, I'll decide if you deserve to get it back."

I tightened my fist in his leather shirt and pulled him to me. Growling, I took his lips with my mouth, exploring and savoring his sweet tantalizing essence with my tongue. A soft little whimper escaped from him, and I growled louder, finally pulling away. Grasping the door handle, I gave him one last heated glare. I stepped outside, leaving The Bark and its maelstrom behind.

My fists shook while adrenaline pulsed through me, the voice inside me screaming at me to go back, pick him up and say "I'm sorry." Like fuck I would listen to that voice again. It's because of listening to that voice that I'm such a fucking mess.

"Martin," I said, stepping around his BMW and getting into my car.

I didn't know if he would come. It was just a fucking beanie after all.

Halfway through the city, two things struck me simultaneously: One, the news would spread throughout The Bark that Colt Maxus had turned away from doing a scene because he was a mental case and suffering from being heart fucked. Two, whatever happened between me and Beo would sooner or later reach the ears of the House Lords. Aria would put two and two together. One didn't handle a sub the way I just handled Beo; there were major repercussions for that.

I didn't care to think about why, in all the time he has been a member, we had never bumped into one another. I was still too raw inside: jealous, angry and hurt. Fighting against the urge to turn back and go find him. I was, plain and simple, a fucked-up mess.

Friday morning wasn't any better. I couldn't fall asleep the previous night, tossing and turning, pacing back and forth, or just sitting in bed, till I finally dozed off around two, only to be awakened by my phone ringing at three o'clock.

Upon finally picking it up, Richard informed me that one of our cargo vessels had been overtaken by Somali pirates, even though I specifically made it clear to the captains, no matter how many stops or how much fuel it cost, they would not sail the African East Coast line to get to India. Which only resulted in me wondering how many other vessels we had shipped to the East did exactly the opposite, pocketing the money for themselves. Internal investigation here I motherfucking come. To top things off, it meant I was going to have to get the authorities involved in my business. Luckily, Richard had informed me, there were no illegal substances being shipped on this particular vessel.

By ten a.m., I was hungry, I was tired, and I was fucking on edge, jacked up on caffeine. I seriously understood why people jumped off a building some days, because I had that exact thought during the course of the morning.

My door was flung open, slamming against the wall, and causing me to jump and spill the cup of coffee over my dress shirt.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed and spun around. And, I shut the motherfucking hell up.

He stood there filling my doorway, arms above his bald tattooed head grasping the top part of the doorframe, his biceps bulging, almost the size of his head, thickly covered in ink all the way from his neck down to his fingers. I was scared he would rip the doorframe out.

"You look like fucking shit, Samael!" Hades said, stretching, his white T-shirt pulling up above his navel and exposing part of his hard, muscled stomach. His leather pants were so low, I could see his black bush, and I think I heard the door frame crack.

"Hades, it's g-good to see you. Don't w-worry about the shirt. Got an extra," I stuttered nervously.

Don't say it. Do not motherfucking say it! I know what you're thinking, here I am, Colt Maxus, shaking in my own pants. Sweating a fucking river, feeling like my tie's squeezing the air out of me.

This man I'd be a bitch ass yappy boy for, because you did not fuck with Breno Hades el Oscuro.

Hades was the President of the Cerberus Motorcycle Club (better known as the Cerberuens), and Lord of the NYC underground crime circles.

Hades gave you one look and decided if you lived or died. He didn't ask if you wanted to fuck, he asked if you wanted his cock first then his knife, or just his fist and knife.

Motorcycle clubs, gangs and mafia alike kept low when the man and his boys rolled into their town. He was in league with The Dragon's Tongue, a Japanese world-dominant organized crime syndicate (and not to be confused with the aforementioned Serpent's Tongue). They were the crime gods of the motherfucking planet. Everything was done with their knowledge, and in all likelihood, they issued it. When dealing with those bearing the mark of The Dragon's Tongue—a symbol of a dragon swallowing its own tail, burned into their flesh—one knew to fear them. Hades' mark sat right under his throat; it was known the higher up the mark was on the body, the higher up your ranking among their hierarchy. Hades was fucking high up and respected, and I suspected probably part of their inner circle.

As he let go of the door frame, I watched the colossal giant walk into my office and sit in my chair. His hooded dark eyes glaring at me, he nodded to the right, signaling me to close the door. I obeyed.

His sweat smell was already leaving its mark in my office, along with the stench from lighting up a cigarette, using my coffee cup for an ashtray.

"So," he said in his deep voice, his muscles flexing, and threatening to pop out of his skin as he flicked off the ash in the cup.

"You and I, bitch, got us a little deal. This is how it's going to happen."

He ran his scarred, tattooed hands over his full, thick beard. Leaving the cigarette between his lips, he spoke, "Next Friday night, my boys will deliver the goods to your warehouse in the harbor. I'll call you with the time." He reached in his pocket and retrieved a disposable mobile phone.

"You switch this bitch on at ten tonight. I'll phone, then you switch it off and burn the motherfucking thing. I want you to be at the warehouse personally making sure my goods get the royal treatment I'm fucking paying you for."

“As for the payment,” he reached into his leather vest and pulled out a knife as long as my arm and started cleaning his nails with the damn thing. “Cash only. I will deliver it personally on confirmation from the Russians that they have received every gram of their shipment.”

“You’re safe, Hades. I’ve handpicked the men transporting the shipment,” I said, trying to reassure him.

“Sure, but I’d feel a lot happier if you took your big white-boy ass and personally kept my sugar warm. But I get it, you’re a businessman, and you need to run the show.” He took another drag off the cigarette and placed the end in the cup.

“Lastly, Sammy.” His eyes darkened and, baring his stained teeth, he licked his lips and brought his blade against the left side of his face. He tracked the tip along the scar that stretched from his temple down under his beard, to his chin. “You fuck this up, I fuck you up. I’m not talking about just killing you, *muchacho*. I’m talking about taking a hot knife and slowly skinning you alive, then hanging it up right in front of your motherfucking building, and—”

There was an uproar outside the office.

“You can’t go in there!” Christine shouted. “Someone call security.”

My gaze immediately turned to Hades. His face went hard, the kind of cold telling you there’s going to be payment in blood. My employees knew when he was here, no one came near the office, not even Richard, not even for a life or death emergency.

The commotion continued outside, and my heart pounded faster in my chest.

“You call the cops on me, Sammy boy?” He sneered, dragging his blade back and forth against his bearded chin.

“No, Hades.” I stood, my voice tight as a whistling kettle, sweat pearling down the sides of my face. “I’ll sort this o—”

My office door burst open, displaying a not so healthy looking, and not so happy Beo. My heartbeat skipped and stopped, and my blood pressure plummeted, all for different reasons. One, he was here. He was fucking here in my office. Two, as much as I wanted to cancel everything in my day and spend it fixing that scowl on Beo’s face, I couldn’t. Not until after I handled Hades. Beo looked like the dead, and shit, I was worried about him, but more so about what Hades would do to him for interrupting us.

My blood turned ice cold when Hades growled, "Motherfucker!" Hades stood.

"Beo! Get over here and give Daddy Hades a big old hug!"

My jaw dropped. Beo fucking grinned a huge shit-eating grin and, like a little puppy dog, rushed over and slammed his arms around Hades. "Daddy Hades!"

Kill. Me. Fucking kill me.

Hades' tree-trunk arms wrapped around Beo's smaller body. God, I thought he was going to snap Beo in half.

Hades picked Beo up by the waist and placed him down on my desk and stepped in between his legs. If I wasn't so fucking shocked, mouth hanging open, I'd be angry.

Beo looked up, arms still around Hades' waist, and the filthy bastard cupped my boy's cheeks!

"How you doing, little one?" Hades asked, and it was then that I paid attention to the man's face. His features were soft from the smile on his face. I'd seen Hades' smile. It's cold and cruel and sends ice down your spine. This smile... this shit was fucking warmth lighting up his face like there were fucking stars in the man's eyes.

"I'm holding up, Papi."

Hold this motherfucking shit up. Papi? Daddy Hades?

"How's things at The Bark, boy?"

That placed things more in perspective, but then right damn well knocked everything out of it. It couldn't be. Hades could never be a Daddy Dom. A Master, a Dom, maybe even a fucking sadist, but not a Daddy Dom.

"It's the same. How are you doing, Sir? Found a *little* yet?" Beo asked, his voice soft with real fucking respect in his tone for the monster towering over him.

Hades went silent for a second.

Running a large dirty hand over his scalp, Hades breathed out a sigh.

"No place in my life for that, boy. Can't protect a little with the life I'm leading. Gotta keep things at The Bark, where I know my dark shit won't place them in danger."

Beo reached for the man's big paws, taking both of them in his hands and fucking kissed Hades' knuckles.

"I wish it could be different for you, Sir. You'd make a little boy so happy."

"Aww, shit, Beo. You always knew how to make my heart bleed. You do that with all the men in your life?" Hades gave him a smile.

"No, just the special ones."

I was back to shaking at this point, not sure what to make of the fact that Hades and Beo knew each other, or that they shared a deep bond, clearly displayed in the way they interacted with each other, or that Hades kissed Beo on the lips right in front of me!

Gripping Beo by the hair in a tight fist, Hades pulled him against his chest. "You need money, Beo, you need food, a place to stay, you need me to fuck someone over for you—you call. You know you got that shit with me, so don't be scared, kid."

Beo went completely still in the man's embrace, and now the jealousy was cooking in me, only to be cut silent when ice-cold, dark eyes glared at me from my desk.

Hades pulled back, drawing his gaze to Beo. "What you doing here anyway?" Hades paused, looked up and narrowed his eyes at me again, then at Beo. "This cunt Maxus fucking you, boy? He your Dom? 'Cause you shit better say no, or I'm gonna fix someone's face with black, purple, blue and red, and that shit won't be makeup!"

"No," Beo chuckled. "Colt is..." Beo went silent.

I held my breath. What exactly was I to Beo?

"Just don't hurt him, Daddy Hades. I... I like him."

Hades let out a growl, "Sí, little one. It's your call." He pulled Beo against him then lifted him off the desk. "I'll just be a minute, Beo. Then you can have the man to yourself, sí?" Hades said, winking at Beo while walking him to the door.

Beo's hand had barely shut the door when Hades stepped right in front of me, gripped me by the dress shirt and slammed me against the wall. His face was so close I could see the dark, almost black, detail of his irises.

With his hot breath blowing on my face, he grunted with a warning in his voice, "One hair on that boy's head, one motherfucking hair, and I'll kill you

with my bare hands, starting with these fuckers right here!" He grasped my crotch, giving it a hard squeeze. "And it will be fucking slow, and you will be conscious as I rip off your sac and start scraping your insides out from there. We clear, dick?"

I couldn't move and would have pissed myself if it wasn't for him still squeezing my crotch.

He let go, and I pulled in a steadying breath, looking up at him, he beamed, but not in a friendly manner.

"So, you tasted Beo's baby butter?" he asked, licking his lips.

"His what?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

Hades roared, shook and rumbled with a dark laugh.

"His fucking cum? Boy's got some sweet juice in his cock. All warm and buttery thick."

Something inside me snapped. One moment Hades was on me, the next he was on the floor, me on top of him, breathing hard into his face.

"You listen to me, you oversized fucking piece of shit. Beo Moon is off limits to you and to every other motherfucker out there! He is mine, and I will be his heart and his soul. I will keep him safe. Are we fucking clear?" I stood, turned, adjusted my tie, and said softly, still holding my voice steady, but picking my words carefully, "I'll switch the phone on at ten tonight. Your shipment will be safe, Hades. But never again threaten me when it comes to Beo. I only want what's best for him."

Before I knew what hit me, Hades had me pinned to my desk with a large hand wrapped around my throat. I could smell the stale cigarettes on his breathe, our faces so close together his forehead touched mine. "You are either a very brave man, Colt Maxus, or extremely stupid," Hades said, an angry grimace on his face, but I caught something I had never seen with Hades, a hint of respect. I acknowledged Hades with a slight nod. Seeing this for what it was, an act of equality, Hades released me.

"Glad we see eye to eye on that, fucker. Here's a small hint: flowers, and that kid will go fucking crazy for you. Buy him flowers. Hell, it could be a weed sprout you picked from the sidewalk, he'd still think the sun shines out of your ass."

I waited till I heard my door open. For a moment, I stood with my back to the door, sweating and staring out of the window but not registering the sight

before me. Heated anger still burned in my gut, chest tight and my fucking heart pounding away like it was the last beat it would ever take.

Cold fingers wrapped around my fists and Beo's voice came, nervous, slightly scared, but troubled when he asked, "You okay, Colt?"

I wasn't. Not even a fraction, but I was done biting my tongue, done with this pussy-whipped shit I'd been the last couple of weeks. It was time Beo came face to face with Colt fucking Maxus.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Five

*“Colt was a master of seduction. You became his instrument, and he played you to his will, and he would play you dangerously beautiful.” — Beo Moon.*

Colt was angry, I could almost taste the tension in the room, and I could sure feel it from his clenched fists.

I detested it when people were angry with me. It always bothered me to the point where I became physically sick. With Colt, that anxiety was amplified tenfold. For some stupid reason, it hurt to know I was the cause of his anger.

With my chest going tight and my heart pounding unnaturally fast, I bit my lip and wrapped my fingers tighter around his clenched fists. “Please, Colt. Say something.”

Silence. His hard breathing only became more ragged. His back was drenched, and his blue cotton shirt was sticking to it. He smelled. God, his smell was like a heated aphrodisiac making my blood go primal.

Seeing Colt this morning, looking tired, his hair a mess and his beard untamed, my scowl went straight out the window. Then Hades—Oh my God! I’m not gonna get started on that man; he was as sweet as he was deadly. I could never say no to him. At least he respected me enough not to take things further after what happened between us. Going on Colt’s jealous fit on witnessing my intimate interaction with Hades, I could only assume he was about to go all fuming mad caveman on me.

I stepped closer. Pressed my face against his back, only to be overwhelmed by his intoxicating smell... musky, strong and so very male.

I wasn’t sure who I’d be facing when, or if, he turned around—Colt Maxus or his Dom side? That in itself was something that needed serious consideration. He wasn’t just any Dom, but *the* Master Colt.

He had a dark reputation at The Bark. If you were a sub looking for the right Dom to dominate and fuck you within a breath of your life, he was the one. Normally the softer subs sought out the more caring Doms. The hardcore boys took to the dark side. If you looked up Darth Vader at The Bark, you’d find the man whose back my face was now pressed against.

The Bark was one of those places you saw a new face every time you went, only to find out they've been a member for years. It came as no surprise I didn't put two and two together, or that we hadn't encountered each other there before. The White Room's members had a separate entrance from the rest of The Bark's participants. But they were upgrading, so last night was the first time I had used the lobby. I'd also never stepped outside of The White Room, and I didn't go there nearly enough to know everyone.

I knew I shouldn't be here. Seeing Colt again Sunday night was an accident, a mistake. Huge dumbass mistake. So then why was I here?

Aside from being pissed at him—'cause he had no right to take my beanie, that little piece of braided wool was the most precious possession I owned—everything felt right about Colt Maxus. He had something I needed, something I wanted from him, a void only he could fill. The minute he wrapped his arms around me, pulled me to him, and held me during that one night we spent together, safe, warm and cherished, I knew. It was the chocolate sauce on the ice cream, one I totally didn't expect or had ever experienced before with a lover... Colt felt like home. No one, not Doc, not Jane, and certainly no other lover, had ever made me feel that way. An intense sense of belonging, and the way he kissed, touched and held me, like a man starving for something, needing something, as much as I did him.

Maybe his angered state was telling me something, warning me against my desire. My gut turned, considering what to do. I didn't want to pull him into the road lying ahead. This was my opportunity to walk away. But would I, could I?

Drawing in his scent with a deep breath, I closed my eyes and gave his hand a cuddle. "I shouldn't have come, I'm sorry. Look after yourself. Okay." With one last squeeze I let go. I started to turn, when he gripped my wrists and pulled me up against him.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" he growled, and his breath blew against my face, causing a frantic thud as my heart jumped against my ribs. "What's with you and that piece of shit?" Colt's eyes had gone like emerald ice, sending a shiver down my spine.

"M-me and Hades?" His pupils were like pools to the abyss. "We go back three years. He was my first. We're just friends."

Colt's growl was a bestial sound I could feel in my bones. His hands tightened painfully on my wrists, and his face went white. "The way you two were practically eye fucking each other tells a different story!"

Shit. The man was scary when he got angry, and he was freaking me out. "Are you jealous of him?" I tried to pull myself free from his steel grip, but he wasn't having any. "Colt, please, we ain't together so—"

Another growl, this one vicious, while he pressed his forehead to mine, glaring at me with his green eyes. I went still. His words only amplified his effect on me.

"You are mine. MINE. I will make sure you get what you need. I will take care of you. I will protect you. It will be my name you're whispering in your sleep. My name you will moan when I fuck you through the goddamn mattress. It will be my hands roaming your body, touching you. My lips tasting you, kissing you, and it will be my bed where you sleep from today onward, I will lo—" He paused, pressing his lips into a taut line.

"You. Belong. To. Me. Do you understand that? Whatever you need, you come to me. Even if it's a fucking hug! I will give it to you. No more running off to places that can put you in danger. Where you could get hurt, raped, or, God forbid, killed! I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you!" Colt was wheezing at the end of his words, and I knew it was wrong of me, but I felt like goo in his hands.

"But we don't even know each other, and you, you're Master Colt. You don't call subs yours, you don't care—" He cut me off with a snarl.

"You think I would keep chasing after a boy every time he pushed me away? Every time he vanished on me? Get it in your fucking head, little Beo. You're different. You're special, and you are most definitely only mine!"

"Is this your way of telling me you care about me?" I whispered breathlessly.

*Fuck.*

He growled again and crashed our lips together. Colt's tongue thrust into my mouth while he grasped a fistful of my hair and pulled my head sideways to enter my mouth deeper, his right hand groping my left butt cheek, squeezing hard. I whimpered against his lips. My head felt dizzy, and my dick began to press achingly against my jeans. God, I wanted him inside me, taking me the same way his mouth and tongue ravished mine.

He pulled back, nipping my bottom lip between his teeth. "So sweet," he groaned, and took my mouth again.

I was winded, fighting to pull air into my lungs, when he released my lips, gasping, staring into my eyes. The storm that was there before had stilled to a

hazy look. My heart skipped a beat at his eyes going soft, damn tender, like I had become his entire world. Gently he released his hold on my hair and ass, and then I realized we had moved, and he had me pressed up against a wall.

Colt licked his lips, slowly, savoring my taste on them. He kept staring at me. Not knowing what to do, I lowered my gaze to his chest. He cupped my chin, forcing me to look at him again. "Don't," he requested in a warm voice, and goddamnit, fucking balls! *Beo just had to go lose it!*

"Colt," my voice trembled. My throat too thick to manage proper words, my lips tender and swollen from his bruising kiss. I could still feel the prickle where his beard had rubbed against my jaw.

"I'm serious, Beo. I want you so fucking much it feels like I'm going out of my motherfucking mind without you."

I didn't know how to answer his words, 'cause they cut both ways. It seemed he was feeling at least the same desire I was. We both wanted each other, and were fighting hard against the magnetism, or at least I was, and I understood the reason for his reaction. Colt was a possessive man, and that shit turned me on.

"You still need to be disciplined." His voice was low, and I recognized it easily... Master Colt. He pressed his lips gently to the side of my neck, causing my skin to pull tight with an electrical buzz. "But the question is how?" He whirled and sucked hard on my skin.

"No... no... spank, please, bruise easily." Damnit, I couldn't talk properly when he was doing things to my skin with his hot, wet mouth.

He pulled back, a scowl cutting deep on his forehead.

"No hard stuff, please, Colt. Your hands only, but not too hard, like I said," I whispered again. "I—"

"Yeah, I get it, Babyboy. You're fragile." He said it without questioning me further, and I was thankful for that. I didn't want my disease to ruin this perfect moment. Not this—my life, my abandoned dreams, flashed in vivid color—and my annoying conscience just had to ask the question.

*If this was your last day, your last hour, your last breath, who would you rather be spending it with? Those who loved you like family, who cared—it was like a lightning bolt streaking through my mind.*

*Colt.*

I'd spend it with him, in his arms. Him. The answer should have made me want to run again, but instead it only intensified the feeling of belonging, of home.

"I intend to make love to you tonight." Those whispered words shook the ground from under me. Him. Big, bad-ass Dom, Master Colt, wanted me, wanted to make love to me, a snotty little nothing. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" He ran his index finger along my neck and across the spot his mouth had been tenderly stuck to. He circled my neck with his heavy hand as though inspecting the area where he would place his ownership. "Going to mark you as mine." He dragged his teeth along my jaw, nostrils taking in my scent in a deep inhale. Tightening his hand, he growled again, "So that you and every other motherfucker knows who you belong to."

"Colt... I don't think that's wise," I argued in a whisper.

"And why is that, my beautiful Beo?" Colt pressed his large, hard body against mine.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* I shuddered from his words, or from feeling him pressing me up against the wall, or his straining bulge pressing into my thigh, or his scent? Hell, fuck it. It was everything about him!

I closed my eyes; *because I am desolation waiting to happen.*

"Look me in the eyes, Beo. Tell me this isn't what you want, and I will let you go."

"No!" I gasped, my eyes burning as I stared at him. I knew I was being selfish, taking this opportunity offered to me. This wasn't fair! I could stop this from happening between us, stop the misery and pain I might cause, yet, greedily, I took it, for both of us. I closed my eyes again, fighting back a sob that was threatening to break free from my chest. It was a hopeless attempt.

"Why are you crying, Babyboy?" His tongue touched my cheek, tracing the tear trail to the tear that had rolled down; his lips closed around it, kissing it away.

My heart pounded in my chest, faster than it had ever done so before, 'cause I could hear my blood roaring in my ears. Still I couldn't bring myself to utter a word.

"Talk to me, baby. I'm not a mind reader."

"You scare me, Colt. What I feel for you scares me."

“Beo. My sweet, beautiful, Beo,” he whispered against my face and the flood gates ruptured. I wept, sobbed and shook as he took me in his arms, smothering my face with wet, tear-stained kisses. With each sob, each cry into his chest, he held me tighter.

I was letting it all out. The anger at the Bitches. The pain of knowing what I'm doing. The fear of what lie before me. The hope that somehow something will go right. The disappointment of knowing that hope was useless. The feelings I'd been fighting. The desire to have him take and own me. The longing to be this man's every breath, 'cause he had become mine.

I was so caught up in my own mind that I hadn't realized someone had stepped into the room till I heard and felt the growl rumble from Colt.

“What is it, Richard?”

“They managed, Colt. We're out of the red. The ship's coming home, and the crew is unharmed.”

Something shifted in Colt. He tensed then relaxed, taking a deep breath and pulling me harder against him.

“Thank you, Richard. Now, if you will? My boy still needs his discipline.”

A long silence stretched before I heard the Richard man move, exiting the office and closing the door. I pulled away from Colt's chest immediately, uttering, “Sorry,” when I saw the wet stain against his shirt.

He placed his big hands on either side of my face and pulled my gaze to his.

“You're not going to enjoy this, boy, but you have to know, as much as it's going to hurt you, it will hurt me more. Your safe word is wolf.”

I blinked at him, my eyelids tacky from my tears.

A small smile graced his lips. “You want my cock?”

I was confused. I thought he was gonna discipline me. Usually the Dom stated the reason for discipline so the sub knew what he was being disciplined for. I didn't think sucking Colt off would be considered discipline, and I so wanted to taste the man. *And why the hell was I being disciplined in the first place!*

“Y-yes.” I blushed and looked down at his bulge.

“Well tough shit, Babyboy. This is your discipline. You think I don't want to feel your sweet fucking lips wrapped around my cock? Your warm tongue

worshipping my dick? We will both suffer because of you denying me what is mine. My pain will be your pain. Let this be a raw lesson to you, Beo Moon, that when I say you will be mine—you already are.”

I was a novice sub, thinking the discipline would only be for me to suck him off, and to be denied my own release. The first mistake I made was thinking Colt was just another Dom. He wasn't.

He was Master Colt for a reason. His title wasn't self-proclaimed, it was given to him by The Bark, which meant he earned it. That was my second mistake: he had more experience than most Doms.

“Touch it,” he commanded, his voice soft yet deep, but the authority in it rang clear.

Cautiously I stretched out my hand, seeing my thin, small fingers trembling. Softly I touched him, causing the big man to shudder and groan as I pressed my palm against his hard heat.

“Good boy,” he mused, his smile turning sharp, dark and twisted. “Now,” he licked his lips, “put your hand down my pants.”

My fingers jerked unzipping him and reached to free him from the white briefs bulging out of his fly.

“No, Beo. Listen to my words. Put your hand down my pants.”

I took a steady breath and undid his belt, seeing the dark stain growing on his briefs. The man was leaking precum, and I licked my dry lips, inwardly shuddering at the sight. I might have physically too, but I was trying to keep my cool. Once his belt was loose, I undid the button of his slacks, gently pulling his shirt up, and pressed my hand against his lower abs. Colt was hard and ripped. I wanted to tear open his shirt and see every inch of him, but his eyes caught mine, and as if he could read my thoughts, he uttered a simple command. “No.”

I suspected the man was going to allow me to touch him, feel him, but not see. The difference was, I wouldn't be blindfolded; the anticipation made my breath surge.

With my palm flat against his skin, I stroked the short hairs with my fingers. Slowly, I slithered my hand down under the waistband of his briefs, brushing thick pubic hair. My fingertips grazed heated skin, and for an instant I pulled back.

Colt clasped my arm and droned, “Touch it.” His chest expanded, pulling his shirt tightly across it, his heated eyes burning into mine.

Gently, I wrapped my fingers around him.

“Now feel it,” he said.

I did. He was fat, thick, warm and hard. Hell, was he hard. His veins bulged as I stroked my thumb over one. I shivered with a carnal need to have him deep inside me, but his cock also felt wrong. Small beads lined his penis, under the skin, and shifted slightly when I touched them.

He growled low in my ear. “I’m going to be inside you boy, hard and throbbing, going to make you moan. Each bead, bigger in size, sliding into and pressing on your canal wall, teasing your little boy cunt, making you whimper. Filling and stretching you. Going on your size, I bet you have small little nub, or has it been stretched like a whore’s?”

I swallowed hard. I knew about cock modifications. Hades wasn’t just the biggest man I’d had inside me, he had one hell of a Prince Albert, but these—I ran my finger over the beads again, drawing a convulsion from both of us—were different.

“No...” I said and shook my head at the same time, “haven’t had many Dominants before, only two.”

I was finding it hard to breathe while Colt had me pinned against the wall of his office, feeling his heat and pulse throb through his cock in my hand. Not knowing what to expect, I remained silent, not daring to move. Seconds passed, or it could have been minutes. I lost track of time as Colt stared at me not saying a word. Slowly he moved his lips closer to my ear, and I felt his tongue trace the outer shell.

“Can you feel how much I want you? Do you feel what you do to me?”

His words were a whispered rumble against my moist ear, causing my breath to catch in my throat.

I licked my lips, swallowed and tried to speak. No sounds passed them, only silent air escaped. I nodded.

Colt languidly pushed his hips back and forth, driving his engorged cock in my hand.

“Do you want to taste my cock? Feel me inside that hot little mouth of yours, filling it while I fuck your face, boy?”

A groan escaped my lips when he flicked my ear with his tongue. “I can’t hear you, Beo.”

“Yes, S-Sir,” I breathed, not even realizing how I had addressed him. “Please!”

“Well you can’t, little fuck,” Colt hissed, taking my earlobe between his teeth and biting down softly. Nerves short-circuited throughout my body. I gasped, trying to get air into my oxygen-deprived lungs.

Releasing my earlobe, Colt pulled back and wrapped his huge hands around my neck, pressing the balls of his thumbs softly against my carotid arteries.

“Your heart’s beating in your throat. Is it because my hands are around your neck, or because you’re holding my dick in your palm, or... because your little boy hole is clenching with nothing inside it?”

I wanted to growl, snarl and pound my fist against his chest. Every fiber of my body was buzzing with this man in my hand, feeling his length, imagining it filling me, stretching me, knowing I would be pleasing him. My hole clenched at the idea and my balls drew tight. How the hell was he even holding his shit together when I was about to drop to my knees and beg him to take me, but he would deny me even then. ‘Cause he knew I fucking wanted him.

He huffed, staring into my eyes. “A little fighter in you, boy, and yet you’re shaking.” Releasing my neck, he placed his hands on either side of my head along the wall. He leaned close and traced his tongue up my cheek. “This is but a fraction of the torment I’ve been through without you by my side. Seeing you last night...” Colt leaned in closer, his eyes darkened by the shadow of his hooded brows.

“Seeing the way you acted with Hades... My boy. My fucking boy in another’s arms, your lips on another man’s.” Colt took a deep breath, lowering his voice. “Beo, you should never tip the scale of that blade. I’m too scared of the consequences it might have.”

I tried to speak, but he gripped my jaw and thrust two fingers into my mouth and spoke three words.

“Stroke. Suck. Moan.”

My job was simple, obey. I gave his cock a firm squeeze, hearing his sharp intake of breath. His fingers trembled as he explored my mouth, tracing them over my teeth, tongue and between my lips and gums. I tugged on his cock with small, slow strokes, gliding my palm over his velvety mushroom head. Colt was wet and still leaking. I moaned at the feel of his juices on my palm, and smeared the silky wetness to cover his crown. Gracefully, I traced the corona of

his cock with my thumb. Colt's breathing blew heavy and fast against my skin, his legs wobbled as I continued to tease and move my hand to his base, and stroked back, brushing my palm over his broad head.

His thick fingers tasted salty, sweaty and somewhat like coffee. I moaned, but it was more of a whimper in my throat. My own dick was pressing hard against my cotton briefs, dripping in my pants.

With sudden force, Colt pushed his digits deeper, causing my head to fall back, and I felt his hot breath on the side of my neck. His lips grazed my skin, and he softly pressed them to my throat.

I shuddered, moaned, and gave him a hard stroke.

I felt the confinements of his briefs and pants being pushed down, allowing me more movement to make larger strokes. He pressed his tongue flat to my artery, holding it there, not only tasting me, but tasting the pulse of my heart. God, he already knew my heart was like a thundering herd in my chest, did he have to make it feel so intense by reminding me of it? Of course he did. He was proving a point.

It was then that the meaning behind my discipline hit home. He wanted to dominate my mind, infect my thoughts, force the already built up desires in me to tip over on a mammoth scale. I was his prey, and this chastisement was only to tenderize me, by amplifying my craving need for him.

I felt him snake his fingers in between the placket of my dress shirt, kissing my skin; I couldn't keep back the loud moan tearing through me.

He undid the buttons of my shirt, flayed the material back, exposed my right nipple, took it between his fingers and pulled. I gasped from the explosive heat, both pain and pleasure, jolting from my nip. A sob raked from me when he released my bud, and the crisp air in the room caused my tit to burn. A single finger traced the areola around my nipple, all while his lips still drank at my throat. His fingers fucked my mouth, and I stroked him slowly.

I couldn't hold back. I wanted to give this man anything in that moment, anything to please him.

Colt kissed his way from my throat, teeth scraping and nipping at my flesh, to my collar bone. Anticipation swirled in my gut, and my dick felt like it was gonna explode, 'cause I knew where his mouth was heading. Then his lips were gone, and my body gave an uncontrollable wobble. He was in control here, and I was giving him that control on a silver platter. I had allowed it to go too far.

*No, fuck that!* From the first night we met, when he looked at me, Colt would make me his. I would become his, and from that moment I belonged to him. But would it only be this? A heated affair, and once we were all burned out, could we hold onto what would be left in the ashes?

Tears burned in my eyes. My emotions were so heightened at that moment, I felt a sense of vulnerability I hadn't experienced in a long time. I wanted to be Colt's everything. Looking up at him, seeing the intense pleasure in his face, the possession in his eyes, my chin quivered trying to restrain my emotions. The elation I felt in my soul, knowing that I would be his, even if only for a short breath of my life, caused my heart to lunge in my chest.

"Fuck, Babyboy," his words snapped me back to the present, "I know your dick's screaming for release, but take your discipline like a man. Those tears in your eyes are not going to sway me for a moment."

He pulled his fingers from my lips, scooped up my tears, and sucked those fingers in his own mouth, coating them with his spit, then offered them to me again.

I took them willingly.

Lowering his head, his nose brushed my skin, his tongue tracing a moist trail around the dark part of my nipple, slowly flicking over the bud. The moment I felt his teeth tenderly biting down, I gripped his cock hard. Holding my nipple and rolling it between his fangs, he pulled.

I cried, hissed, and growled? Fuck if I knew what that sound was that escaped from my throat, but it wasn't anything close to human... it was hot.

I couldn't hold myself together any longer, my knees were weak, my stomach turned, and desire liquefied like magma in my gut. Colt growled as I stroked him faster. He pulled out his fingers and grasped a handful of my hair.

"Stick out your tongue, boy," he demanded in a hurried breath.

Colt's lips closed around my tongue, sucking on it, meeting my strokes with his thrusts.

I closed my eyes, his scent clogging my mind. His lips blowing my tongue, and his cock swelled and leaked more while his thrusts quickened, fucking my hand.

Releasing my tongue, he took my lips and thrust his tongue into my mouth. He kissed me savagely, with pure raw hunger, as he tried to dive down my throat. I felt him cover my hand with his, and together we stroked.

*First stroke...* he snarled into the kiss. *Second stroke...* he gulped a breath. *Third stroke...* Colt thundered into my mouth, "Beo!"

Wet heat burst from his swelling cock. He shook, and hand tightening in my hair, eyes wide, pupils blown out, he stopped kissing.

I pushed my tongue into his mouth and took control of the kiss.

He was panting, blowing air out of his nostrils, but not pulling back or stopping my hand moving on his slippery cock. Finally, he pulled back, gripping my wrist, and brought my hand, covered in his cum, into view.

His gaze burned dark with heated desire when it reached mine. He leaned in, tracing his tongue over my hand, scooping up his cum and taking it into his mouth.

Colt fucking cleaned my hand of his own spunk, even going so far as to take my fingers into his warm mouth and suck them spotless.

Letting go of my hand, he looked me in the eyes. "Good boy, Beo. Such a beautiful, good boy." Then he kissed me slowly, sharing the aftertaste of his cum with me, and I went downright giddy inside at his flavor.

I pulled away from him. "Colt, I need to tell you something."

I held my breath as he looked at me. This was the epic moment, the true test, not just for me, but of him and whatever this was. Monday morning they were going to do a bone marrow biopsy, the fourth one since I started feeling sick again. My counts had been dropping slowly the last three weeks, but last Sunday there was a rapid drop in my white blood cell count, and I knew Dr. Mahajan would want me to start on chemo again.

"I..." *Come on, Beo, you have to do this. It would only be fair.* "If you want me, then there are conditions."

His eyes flashed at me, his upper lip twitching slightly. Colt Maxus didn't seem like the kind of man that took things with conditions.

"Whatever it is can wait till later. Right now," he tucked himself away quickly and fastened his belt, making sure my eyes stayed fixed to his gaze, "I want you to listen to me. I've never desired someone as strongly as I do you." He took my hands in his, and, God, the man brought them to his lips. Kissing each knuckle gently, he said in a thick voice, "I've never had someone that was mine."

*Well, balls!* That slammed my whole speech out of me and turned my world inside out.

“You’re going to get your stuff.” He pulled out his car keys and worked a set off the ring. “You’re going to go back to my place, and get something to eat and relax.” Colt placed the set of keys in my hand and folded my fingers over it. “Then, when I get home, we will talk.” His thumb brushed over my fingers, making my heart race again.

“I will have a blank temporary contract pulled from The Bark’s database, and modified as we see fit. Then, Babyboy, I’m going to make love to you until you forget your fucking name.” He yanked me to him, his green eyes moist and pleading, and his next words shattered me.

“Don’t run away, Beo, not after this. I don’t think my heart can survive it this time.”

I couldn’t tell him. Not after he said that.

Colt released me and fished for his wallet, taking out two hundred-dollar bills and pressing them into my hand.

“I’m not a whore,” I whispered.

He softened his eyes, cupped my cheek and leaned closer. His breath blew over my ear as he spoke, and the hairs on my neck tingled.

“No, you’re not. You are my whore. My queer pussy. Mine.” He leaned closer, brushing his lips over mine, and growled, “Mine, Babyboy,” before shoving his tongue in my mouth.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Six

*“Motherfucking fuck!”* — Colt Maxus.

*God, Beo. What the motherfucking shit did you do to me?* It was supposed to be his discipline, but his submission, his gentle hand on my cock had me so hard I could fuck a hole through my motherfucking office wall. If it was another sub, they would have stroked me fast and hard, giving me a quick release. Not Beo. Slowly his fingers traced over my shaft, worshiping my meat, brushing my crown, feeling every fucking bead, touching every ridge, and smearing my precum over and then back to my base.

His eyes like a little puppy's, beautifully big and soft.

He wasn't just sweet, he was tender, and then it hit me. With Beo, bad-ass, aggressive Master Colt wasn't going to work.

What the fuck was I thinking, demanding to give discipline? I knew the rules. Things need to be stated, said and agreed upon beforehand. But no, Colt Maxus had to go and lose his fucking shit. Watching him leave my office, with that beautiful glow to his cheeks that I was responsible for, that shit made my chest swell. Me. I did that. Mine. *Shit*. I was so motherfucking heart fucked it wasn't funny!

I slammed down on the couch in my office, raked my hand through my hair and pulled.

Again I was a fucking mess, but this time... *Beo, oh God, please stay. Don't disappear on me. I'm not sure what I would do.*

A knock on my door made my heart fucking skip a beat, only to slam right back down at seeing Richard's head peek in.

“What?” I shouted.

Richard wasn't having any of it as he came in.

“Could ask you the same fucking thing, Colt. *My boy?* Don't make me laugh. You're just telling the kid what he wants to hear.”

I moved before Richard could blink, grabbing him by his lapels and picking him up off the floor.

“Don’t go there! Beo is different. You don’t get to say shit about him, and you better watch your motherfucking tongue or, I swear to God, Richard, I will slam your skull into a bloody pulp.”

I set him down. Richard knew the extent of my anger issues, the core of them. He had tried countless times to get me to seek help. This time, I needed to listen. If I was going to allow Beo to be a part of my life, I didn’t want him to be on the receiving end of that kind of storm. Nothing would be left standing in the end.

“What’s her number?” I snapped moving around my desk to the phone.

Richard stood, unmoving, where I left him.

“Richard!” I growled. “The psychologist you said I should go see, what’s the bitch’s number?”

Richard turned, gaping at me.

“You’re fucked up, Colt. Total motherfucking messed up in the head.”

Letting out a heavy breath, I slumped down in my chair and pressed the balls of my hands to my eyes.

“I know. I fucking know, Richard. God, you know what you said last night. You were so fucking right, you have no idea.”

Running his hand over his face, Richard paced back and forth. He was the one that stressed over my shit; the one that cleaned up when I fucked up.

“Colt, you know I love you. I care about you. Damn it!” He paused and anchored his arms on my desk, gazing at me. “But your shit... it’s not going to get solved by just one session. It could take years of therapy. You might never get over what happened... I still have nightmares of that day I found you. We were thirteen. Fucking teenage kids, Colt.”

“So what are you saying, Richard? That I’m broken, unfixable? Unable to give that boy what he needs? Unable to have what you have with James?”

Richard let out a slow breath, turning his back to me, clearly trying to find the right words.

“I’m confident you will be able to provide and care for him, what bothers me is—” another slow breath “—will you be able to love him? The kind of love he deserves?”

He turned to me. “I’m not going to tell you what to do. Just promise me this one thing... You will call when this shit goes nuclear between you two.”

Richard shook his head and left my office. For a moment, I sat thinking about what he said, what his words really meant. *The kind of love he deserves.* Beo deserved that. Feeling him cry against me because he was scared of what he was feeling, because he was scared of me? I couldn't deny it—it hurt like a motherfucking son of a bitch. Maybe I am incapable of loving Beo the way he needs, but I sure as hell am going to give it a try, *and fuck you, Richard!*

I knew it was wrong, I just did not give a fuck about forcing this on Beo. The idea that someone else would be providing for him, making love to him, holding him. Goddamn fuck it! My blood felt like it was sweltering, just thinking about it. He was mine, and I would take him down with me if I couldn't have him. Mine, or no one else's.

Feeling a lot calmer, I stood and picked up my phone, pressing zero, calling Christine.

“Boss, I'm sorry. That kid, he just—”

“Sugar-lips, listen to boss man and listen well. You get on your phone and you buy me every motherfucking rose in the vicinity of Central Park, and have them delivered to my apartment. I'll call security and let them know about the delivery.”

“Yes, Mr. Maxus...” She paused.

“Yes, Christine, your boss is feeling just fine,” I said, and placed the phone down.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seven

*“Midnight Blue, out of sight. Always so close, but never part of my right.” — Beo Moon.*

The late afternoon air brought a chill to my bones.

I knew Colt had given me the perfect opening to walk away, but no matter how much I thought it was the right thing to do, I wasn't strong enough. God, this was so unfair. I sniffed, swiping the tears from my face.

I had to tell him. Would he hate me in the end, when things became unbearable and horrible? Would he hate me for not being honest upfront? There would be resentment, but whose: his, mine, or ours? My thoughts left me breathless, anguish and pain constricting my chest.

I couldn't do it. I'd only known him for a short time, yet I couldn't go back to a life without him. Being away from Colt felt like ulcers etching raw pain into my soul. *How do you tell someone you're falling for them and in the same breath say you're dying?*

I was sitting in Jane's house, a place I had called home for so many nights when I hadn't had one of my own. Even when I slept over at Doc's place, and he insisted on giving me a key, a bed of my own, and let me come and go as I pleased; those places didn't bring me the same feeling I had when I was in Colt's arms.

I opened my palm to find Colt's condo keys had made an imprint in my hand. It was just a key to Colt, but to me it was a promise. One I had accepted under false pretenses, but a promise that from now till whenever it would be, I had a place I could call home, and a man that, maybe, I could call my own.

“Beo, please tell me what's wrong!” Jane screamed hysterically, tears dripping from her face making her makeup look just plain shitty—again, all my fault. I was hurting inside. For the first time in my life, Jane was there on the outside looking in but not seeing me. I caught her words, felt her anguish. I just did not hear her.

“Fine! I'm calling Martin!” She stormed out of the drawing room to hunt for her phone.

I didn't have the emotional strength to stop her.

Growing up in an orphanage was different. You didn't have *your* stuff, it was *our* stuff. You watched your brothers and sisters come and go. You learned to love them, only for them to leave, and when you said good-bye you weren't sure if it was for now or forever. The orphanage hadn't been my home. It was a temporary place of living. A home ain't a house of four walls or the stuff inside. A home was a place you could return to. No matter how raw the bad under your skin, the darkness in your heart, or who you were or who you came to be. Home was the place you felt safest, most cherished, most valued, and once you lost that, it was hard to find again. Colt, in his single act of selfish overprotectiveness, had given me something I had lost and feared I would never have again before I left this life.

Jane, Magpie, Doc, Hades, even Colt. Not even my mother was ever mine. They would never truly be mine. Borrowed. Living on borrowed time. Sharing them just for these last breaths I had left to take. Sniffing my last tears away, I stood to pull on my hoodie and turned, only to come face to face with a massive chest covered in a tight green dress shirt, nipples protruding against the cotton from the cold air outside.

"Doc! Mother of all things, you'll poke my eyes out with your nips. Put them away already," I teased and wrapped my arms around him.

"Beo," he whispered, and ran his hand over my forehead, pushing back my hair.

"What's the matter? Jane called. Said you won't stop crying and won't say anything. Did Dr. Mahajan give you bad news? Does she want you to start chemo again? Did you go see your father?" Doc's tone became bitter, almost angry, with his next sentence. "Did Luther say no?"

I took a step back. "Luther? Doc, why would you call him Luther? Do you know...?"

I wasn't dumb; I knew there was no way Doc would have been able to get all that information on my father. From personal stuff like medical records and family tree, to his involvement in The Bark. Doc had to have known my father. I'd suspected when I discovered that Doc and my father grew up in the same town, went to the same private school, and attended the same university.

Still the anger bubbled up in me.

"You knew!" I roared. "All these years, you knew! Every time I told you my Christmas wish was to know my real father. Every birthday, the single wish I had was to know who he was, and you knew. You fucking knew!" A new set

of hot tears ran down my cheeks, fueled by my heavy, emotional heart and this knife piercing its vulnerable flesh over and over again. Doc closed his eyes, a painful expression on his face.

“Yes, I knew, Beo!” He clenched his fists.

“Your father didn’t want you. I was the obstetrician who did the C-section on your mother and brought you into this world. I paid for that procedure and for your time in the NICU. I gave you the name Beo Moon!” He took a step towards me. “I took you to the orphanage. I protected you from him! From that monster! You know what he said?” I could see the angry tremor in Doc’s face.

“That you were a disgrace to his name. A mistake that should have never happened. A drunk night with a stupid red-haired woman!” Doc started to shake before me. “He wanted your mother to have an abortion, but she didn’t. She came to me, begging and pleading for help. By seven months, she couldn’t keep you anymore, and it was either her or you, so I performed the C-section. By the time the treatment started, she was too weak. Her body didn’t have the means to fight off the infection, and she died.” Doc’s neck and face were an angry red, and I had never seen such anger from him before. “I swore to her you would be taken care of. That I would keep an eye on you. I wanted to tell you, but each time I looked in your eyes, I saw him. How do you tell a child that his father never wanted him?”

“Your father was my best friend, Beo. My best friend!” Doc’s livid eyes met mine. His lip trembled from clenching his jaw.

“I’m sorry, Doc.” I sniffed, stepping up to him, and lowered my voice. “You know, you did good by me.”

“I tried, Beo.” A tear slid from his left eye. “I would have taken you in as my own, but back then I couldn’t afford to. I was too young. When you reached the age of five, I came for you.

“I could have taken you out of the orphanage, but I would never have been able to give you what you had there.” He placed a big paw over my heart. “That place, you belonged there. It wouldn’t have been right of me to take you from where you were needed, or to take from you what you needed. You were, and always will be, a big brother to those kids, Beo.”

I knew what Doc meant. The other kids at the orphanage looked up to me. Regardless that some were older than me, like Jane, they still called me big brother Beo. Now even little Magpie did too. To them, their sanctuary of safety, hug of comfort, place they could return to, was me. I was their home.

"Now what's all this crying about?" Doc asked, taking me by the arm and sitting next to me on the couch.

Shit, I didn't know what to say. Doc was one of the Doms that didn't like Master Colt. Oh shit, this was going to get ugly.

"Beo, stop biting your lip. Out with it, boy."

Doc wasn't the person I should be talking to about the men in my life. I was responsible for those beautiful gray streaks in his hair when I told him about Hades and me.

Jane came in, makeup gone, and placed a tray with three cups of cocoa down.

Then her gaze must have landed on my duffel bag and guitar next to the archway of the lobby. "You're leaving?" She folded her arms across her chest. Doc's head whipped between us. I gave Jane the shut-the-fuck-up-not-now glare.

"What's going on? Would one of you please explain?" Doc said, slightly annoyed and totally worried. He turned to me. "Beo?"

*Nope. Beo's not gonna say jack.*

"Beo's met someone," Jane said. Jane didn't know Colt's name, so that would be as far as this conversation went, or so I hoped. Jane continued, "I thought you said you weren't going to get involved with this guy, Beo?"

"What guy? Who is this man?" Doc stood, fists balling at his sides.

At the same moment, my phone had to vibrate on the coffee table, flashing "number unknown." My heart pounded as I reached for it, but Doc was quicker. Snatching it, he answered.

"This is Beo's phone!"

I wanted to crawl away and disappear into the couch, 'cause there'd be just one man calling me, and that'd be Colt. *Fuck my life, thank you very much. Nice knowing ya too.*

A growl, similar to the one I had heard from Colt back in his office, came from the phone, and I dared to look up at Doc. His eyes were like daggers; whether they were towards Colt or me, I had no clue.

"Don't call this number again, and stay away from Beo!" Doc snarled and killed my phone, snapping the small morsel of plastic in half. The poor secondhand, ten-dollar flip phone stood no fucking chance.

“What do you think you are doing?” Doc cracked at me, still clutching my shattered phone. “You know how I feel about that man. You should have never gotten a membership at The Bark to begin with, and now of all the times, Beo, you want to fall for a man—” *Blah blah blah*.

I stood. “Are you done?” I interrupted his tirade.

Doc froze, and his eyes went wide at my tone of voice. “Excuse me?”

“Doc, it’s been nice, but you ain’t gonna tell me who I can and can’t date, and the Colt Maxus you think you know ain’t the man I know. He makes me happy.”

I could as well have taken a knife and stabbed the man, twisting the blade while I was at it. Doc’s hand reached for his chest and covered his heart.

I was breaking his heart. Been there, got the T-shirt, twice it seemed now. But I was reaching for my home. The one that felt safe. The one that I didn’t deserve. Doc was never my home, but he deserved better than this. Better than me walking out on him.

“Beo,” he said, short of breath.

“This is what I need right now. Not you lot telling me this and that, what I can and can’t do. I’m a consenting adult of sane mind. I’m well aware of his reputation, and I’m well aware of what is happening inside my body, but I’m not going to stand here and allow anyone to take away my last shot at some happiness. That’d be on me and on my terms.”

’Cause this was my last round.

There would be no other. Before the end of winter I might be... I couldn’t finish the thought.

Doc’s face had gone pale. Jane let out a hurt sob. Hell, this was still my life, and I knew my words wounded and hurt, but they weren’t in that office. They hadn’t seen the way Colt looked at me, felt how he kissed me.

“You two are the only people in my life that I would have hoped could understand.”

“Beo, it’s not that. Colt—”

“No, Martin!” I said angrily. “You’re jealous, always have been. Even Hades, the guys after him. You always found a reason why I shouldn’t be with them... then who should I be with?”

Doc only stared at me.

I turned to Jane. "Jane, do you remember when we were kids, we would wish upon the Midnight Blue, on those shooting stars?" She knew, nodding, as another tear slipped down. I didn't need to say more. "I have found my home again."

Doc literally fell back onto the couch.

Jane wiped her tears from her cheeks and gave me a tight smile. Doc wouldn't understand what my words meant. We were close, but not the way Jane and I were.

Turning to Doc and bending my knees, I knelt down before him. He averted his eyes from me, and as I reached for his hand, he barked in a taut voice, "Don't." It hurt to hear the disappointment in his tone.

"Doc," I said, placing my hand on his knee. "You still have a place in my heart. Just 'cause I'm with another man ain't meaning that he has taken your place. No one can take your place in my life. But you have to understand that I ain't got the same feeling you have for me. If you love me, find it in your heart to at least try to understand. I want this. I need this." I clenched my jaw waiting for his answer. Nothing came out of his mouth. He wouldn't even look at me. I reached for my broken phone still in his hand. He didn't even want to let that go.

*He needed to let go.*

*I needed to let go.*

Standing, I gave his knee a soft squeeze and then went for my bag and guitar.

Stopping at the front door, I turned, moving my gaze to Doc. He just sat there staring at the opposite wall. I looked at Jane. Her eyes showing sadness and happiness, she walked up to me, her hands trembling.

God, she was trying to hold her shit together. When she reached me, I knew that question in her eyes: *Why now did you have to go fall for someone?* Shrugging, I gave her a sad smile and pulled her into my arms. "I'll see you Monday," I whispered and turned.

As I reached for the front door, Doc's words were colder than the crisp air hitting me from outside.

"You sound so sure of yourself that Colt is whatever you think he is, Beo. Don't let the door hit your ass on the way out."

I've never heard Doc's voice hold anger like that. My response was typical Beo style. "Still love you, Doc, no matter what." I closed the door behind me.

I wasn't just closing the door. It felt like I was cutting out a part of my life. It hurt.

Fresh tears stung my eyes. Clutching Colt's keys in my hand, I took a deep breath, taking in the crisp air and the smell of autumn. Stepping off the stairs and onto the sidewalk, I turned and looked at Jane's brownstone. I took in the sight as best I could through heavy, teary lashes. God, the colors, the smells, the feel. I knew this would be one of my last chances to experience this. See the golds, bronzes, and vivid greens. Smell the afternoon rain splashing onto the world, and Mother Earth breathing out the smell of wet ground.

Would I miss this? Would I remember it, or over eternity, would I forget?

Where would I end up after...? Hell, Purgatory... Heaven? Or would I become part of the Midnight Blue?

Averting my sight from the beauty surrounding me, I reached for my beanie only to graze my hair. I sighed and clutched Colt's condo keys tightly again.

Sister Mary once said, "The people that shape you rest like heavy stones in your heart. Unmoving, not changing, just there."

Sister Mary was the orphanage mother, but she was also, once upon a time, my home.

*"A house is not a home,"* she would say so often, and now I could appreciate it for what it meant.

By the time I was twenty, old age and Alzheimer's had taken its toll on her, and it was on her deathbed she knitted me that beanie. I had never cried so hard in my life once she was gone. Which reminded me, I still had something to do.

I had barely walked a block—'cause I needed to get some fresh air before I got on the subway—when I heard a familiar voice and cringed.

Wendigo was the vice president of Cerberus Motorcycle Club. Like Hades, their president, Wendigo was as deadly as he was erotic. I mean the kind that made your nipples go hard and your cock or your pussy wet from just looking at the man.

"Beo!" he growled in his smoky, rich voice, clamping a strong grip on my shoulder and rotating me to him.

I looked up at his flawless face. His sharp, prominent, chiseled jaw was glazed with a short growth of dark scruff. I felt myself drawn into his liquid whiskey eyes. A person could get lost in Wendigo's eyes. His dark eyebrows, more perfect than a Calvin Kline model's could ever be, raised in question, looking me up and down.

"You know your lips are blue?"

I snapped out of it. "What?"

He reached for my face, gently pressing the back of his warm hand to my cheek.

"Jesus, kid," he snatched his hand away, gripped me on the front of my hoodie and started zipping it up to my neck, "you're colder than a dead body on ice."

I was too dazed to notice as he hauled me with him, 'cause Wendigo never touched anyone with his bare hands. He always wore leather gloves. It was just a thing of his, but he had actually touched me and—*oh balls*, he pushed me in the direction of the big bald man with the Cerberus dog emblem embroidered on the back of his leather jacket.

"Your stray's freezing himself to death."

Hades turned so quick that my face slammed into his chest as Wendigo shoved me towards him. Immediately Hades looked down at me with cold, dark eyes. They always gave me a shiver and made my heart gallop in my throat. His lips pulled tight, holding my stare.

"You need a shave, Daddy H," I squeaked. His hands cupped both my cheeks, and he ran his right thumb over my bottom lip with a bit more force than necessary.

"Me and you got some beef to settle about that fucker Colt Maxus." Hades wasn't happy. I could read it from his body language, but unlike Doc—who was jealous at the same time—Hades was only concerned. "You know why I was there. You know what shit I'm into. You really want to get involved with someone like that?"

"Hades, I know. I get that, but..." I bit my lip. Hades didn't know. Like I said, there were only a handful of people that did.

"And what's up with you lately? Every time I've seen you this year, you're motherfucking thinner than a club whore on Biker's Coffee. You're pale, Beo."

In the blink of an eye, Hades' face went carnal. "You motherfucking using!" he snarled, gripping me by my red hoodie, lifting me, guitar and all, off the sidewalk.

Hades was very critical when it came to drugs. Ironical since he was one of the major suppliers to the dealers.

"Beo, you know my rules! Don't fuck with my heart! I'll take you to a fucking rehab myself!" Hades was angry, but not just angry—something else too.

"What the motherfucking shit are you bitches pissing on about?" someone grunted from our right.

Hades glared at one of his boys, and he set me down. The man went white, nodded and walked off. The veins bulged on Hades' reddened face. He turned to me again, eyes darker than I've ever seen them before. He growled, causing the air coming out of his flaring nostrils and mouth to make a faint fog as it met the cold.

"I'm not on meth, Daddy H. Not on any illegal drugs." More of his boys stepped out of the building. One of them quickly placed something behind his back. I saw the red dot marks of wet blood on his white shirt.

"Take a walk, dicks!" he barked to his boys, and the seven men, except for Wendigo, stepped out of earshot.

"Beo, kid, tell me," he whispered, his voice softer but still with that gravel roughness to it.

"I'm sick, I'm..." I swallowed, focusing my eyes on his chest. "I'm dying, Breno."

His sharp intake of breath sounded like someone had just planted a fist in the man's gut. The next thing I knew, I was being smothered against his chest, his arms almost breaking me in half. My feet were off the ground, and his face was pressed to my neck, wet, hot tears soaking against my skin.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen this side of Hades.

"They got to fix you, baby, got to make you better. I'll pay. Whatever it costs, I'll pay," he sniffled.

Goddamnit! If this was the reaction I was getting from Hades, what would Colt's be?

"Can't breathe." I pushed out and his arms relaxed slightly, sliding me down his body till my feet met concrete.

"H, listen to me," I whispered in his ear, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"What you got?" he droned.

"Cancer, big guy. Beo's got cancer, and it's not the type chemo's just gonna fix this time around. My mom had it, died from it. I had it when I was seventeen—Hey!" Hades picked me up again, walked to the side of the building and planted his ass on the wet concrete steps with me on his lap. He looked me straight in the eyes, a wetness clinging to his.

Don't let them watery eyes fool you. Like I said, this big daddy teddy bear wouldn't think twice about gutting someone that screwed him over.

He took my hands and covered them with his, rubbing them warm, and brought them to his lips, blowing hot air into my palms.

"Shit motherfucking fuck, Beo." Hades just stared back at me with pity in his eyes. He knew how death worked, "*When it's your time, it's your time*," he always said. I reached into my jeans pocket pulling out the pink bandanna. Hades raised his eyebrows as I folded it.

"What the motherfuck you think you're doing?" he growled when I wiped his face.

"Shut up, old man. You're already turning granite in your leathers, and your brothers know you like boy pussy. So don't tell me you ain't enjoying the attention."

His smile was as huge as it was wide.

"I'm glad I was your first," he said, gazing at me.

"Hey!" I poked him in the chest. "I was drunk, and you took advantage of me." It wasn't true; I was the one that came on to him. "And besides, no one could take your leviathan inside them without some encouragement."

"Oh, my tongue in your little boy hole wasn't enough?" he growled; his voice went very soft and it scared me, 'cause Hades didn't do soft. "I'm here for you, kid. Whatever you need, you call. No matter what day or time. I'll make a plan to come see you, baby."

"H, we gotta fucking split. Cops are gonna be here any fucking minute," Wendigo said, not looking like he was ready to move at all. In fact, knowing the Cerberuens, they'd most likely stay for a fist fight with the boys in blue.

"Fine." Hades stood, helping me to my feet and took off his jacket. My eyes went wide when he held it out for me.

“What?” He flashed his teeth. “Don’t fucking gape at me. Put the fucking thing on!” He shook his jacket, causing his massive biceps to bulge.

“Hades, I can’t take this. It’s yours. It belongs to you and the clu—” Hades grabbed me by the front of my hoodie, pulled me to him and slammed his lips over mine, forcing his fat tongue in my mouth, and I froze.

He pulled back, took hold of my wrist and helped me into his jacket. It was warm, smelling of leather, smoke, and him. “We good?” he asked with a scowl. I gave a nod.

The other members started their Harleys.

Hades shouted to Wendigo over the roar of the engines, “Take Beo wherever he needs to be and meet us at the safe house.”

Hades’ command was supreme. You objected to it, you got your face shattered in. Trust me, I had seen it with my own eyes. You’d think I would be scared of him? I was, but I also knew when not to push him. Ruffling up my hair he gave me a wink, climbed on his bike, blew me kiss, and off he went.

“Where to?” Wendigo said over his shoulder, taking slow strides to his motorcycle. I could hear the sirens screaming in the background.

“75th and 5th, Manhattan,” I said. Guitar case on my back and duffel bag on my lap, I wrapped my hands around Wendigo’s waist.

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When we stopped outside Colt’s apartment block, I climbed off the Harley, giving Wendigo a peck on the cheek.

“Motherfucker, kid. What the fuck!” His face went bright red, eyes bulging in their sockets as he looked around at who might have seen.

“Always wanted to do that,” I smiled.

“I’m no queer, okay!” he growled.

“Ain’t mean I can’t give a handsome man a thank you kiss.”

Snarling like a godforsaken angry wolf, Wendigo gritted his teeth and glared at me.

“Ain’t you just adorable?” I winked and turned, moving into the front lobby of the building.

The security this time was a heavy-set, beautiful African American woman, her skin the color of milk chocolate. She was on her cell phone, but watched as I came in the door.

“Gurl!” Her eyes went wide when I walked closer. “I’m gonna have to colls yous back. Heaven just walked in through the door and that shit’s cuter than Bow Wow!” She placed down the phone, flicked her hair back and straightened her uniform. “Suga’, what’s yous doin’ hea?” she asked me, my cheeks glowing.

“I’m Beo.” I stepped up to her and extended my hand.

“Mmm mmm mmm.” She smacked and licked her lips, shaking my hand.

“Boy, yo mamma neva fed yous?” She fluttered her long eyelashes at me.

“Ain’t got no mamma, ma’am.”

“Ah hell, no! Yous can’t be that sweet and be callin’ me ‘ma’am.’ Janice.” She reached for a clipboard for me to sign my name. “So who’s yous visitin’?”

The last time I was here, all I got was an ugly look from the guard. Till Colt practically climbed through the phone and bit the man’s head off.

“I think I’m moving in.”

“Thinks? Baby, yous ain’t sua?”

“Well...” I paused, not certain what to say. “Mr. Maxus gave me his keys and told me to get my stuff... so I think that means I’m moving in.”

“Mr. Maxus! Suga’,” she shook her head, and spoke in a cautious tone, “I’m just gonna coll the old fart and make sua. I ain’t wantin’ ta be in that man’s bad juice.”

Nodding, I gave her a smile.

“Suga’,” she said after several seconds, and I turned to her, “The devil wants ta speak ta yous.”

She was holding the phone receiver out to me, her hand covering the microphone.

“He mad?”

She let out a long breath and whistled, “That man, he’s always maad.”

Taking the receiver from her, I answered.

“Colt.”

“Beo! My fucking heart!” he growled and let out a hard breath.

“Colt, I’m sorry. I went to get my stuff. I’m here now. I’ll see you later, okay.”

Exhaling into the phone, he said, "Don't scare me like that again, Beo. Please, Babyboy. You mean too much to me."

Well, that placed a huge smile on my face.

"I'm sorry, Master Colt," I whispered.

"When you get into the apartment, go to my room. In the second closet from the door, at the bottom, there's a large leather bag. Open it, choose one, and wear it for me, Babyboy."

My heart started to race, 'cause he didn't say what would be in the bag. I panicked a little, hoping it wasn't women's underwear. 'Cause I get some people are into that, but I ain't.

"Beo!"

"Sorry, Master."

"Be good. I'll see you in a bit."

I gave the phone back to Janice.

"I dunno what that glow ta yous is, Suga', but that man don't deserve no sweet white choc'late like yous."

I only smirked at her.

"Off yous goes," she said, nodding. I moved to the elevator, my mind too preoccupied with Colt's request.

Reaching his front door, I stood for a second in the dark hallway. He was on the top floor, the penthouse to be exact.

Sliding the key into the lock, I slowly turned it, feeling a tingle run down my spine. Last time I was here all I cared about was feeling him hold me.

I had just opened the door and stepped into the massive cold space when a phone rang. Dropping the duffel bag and placing my guitar down, I rushed after the sound, crossing the concrete floors into the kitchen and picking it up on the fourth ring.

"I'm here, Colt," I said.

"Suga', ain't Colt callin' yous, it's Janice. Boy, I dunno what yous did to that man, but yous sua got him by the sac. Someone's comin' up and damn, gurl, yous one lucky white boy." She ended the call.

Hearing the approach of footsteps coming from the hallway outside, I moved to the front door and froze. I couldn't see who was carrying the flowers, but—fuck, flowers. Roses and, fuck me, there were just so many of them.

Red and misty pink.

“Yo, anyone there?”

“Y-yes,” I said unmoving, my chest too tight to breathe, my fingers clammy and my heart—shit, I don’t think it could beat any faster.

“You Mr. Moon?”

My surname sounded odd on the man’s lips; people rarely said it to me. All my life it’s only been Beo.

“Mr. Moon, yes, is here. I mean, that be me,” I squeaked.

“Where can we put them down? I need your signature.”

We? As in there was more than one, more—*Mother of God!* Four more men stood behind the first guy, with equally large bouquets of roses covering their faces.

“In the kitchen,” I told him, still squeaking.

My hands shook signing the proof of delivery. The man handed me an envelope, nodded, and they left.

Closing the front door, still too dumbstruck to even say anything, I returned to the kitchen and just stared.

I think an hour had passed before my feet started protesting.

Opening the envelope, I pulled out a plain white, crisp card, nothing special about it, and flipped it open.

*I’m sorry for being a dick this morning. I shouldn’t have disciplined you, Babyboy.*

*Forgive me?*

*Colt.*

I swallowed, feeling tears sting my eyes. I wasn’t gonna cry no more, I swore to myself. But I never anticipated meeting him or having this strong desire of want towards him.

Or thinking he would do this.

I looked at the roses again, placing my hand to my chest and feeling my heart that still hadn’t calmed down.

Did I feel overwhelmed? Yes.

Was I scared? No, I was terrified. Death was slowly, surely, creeping up on me. A throbbing in my head, ice in my fingers, pain exploding through my gut. A reminder of my illness. It hurt to move.

I wanted to run again. Despite the fear, my feelings were growing stronger towards Colt. This was it. My last chance at having something with someone, even if it wasn't love, and I wasn't expecting it to be. It was only a question of time till everything came crumbling down and shattered into millions of pieces.

Stepping out into the hallway, I found the iron stairs leading to the upper floor. Colt's penthouse was, I guess, the physical persona of him. The walls were gray, bare concrete. The same with the floors. Some of the support pillars were bare, rusted iron. The furniture was either gray fabric or dark repurposed wood. Typical modern industrial design. Raw, masculine and cold. The living room was just one enormous open space with high ceilings. A felted, raw-wool carpet dominated the room and covered some of the floor. Light filtered through a colossal window which had a view overlooking Central Park. The amount of light, along with the gray color scheme, gave an almost ambient fog to the place, and it was quiet. So quiet I could hardly hear the NYC traffic. The kitchen had black cupboards and repurposed wood countertops along with stainless steel finishes. Nothing stood out in the open; everything had its place. There were no knickknacks or ornaments standing around, or paintings on the walls.

Reaching Colt's bedroom, I paused, taking it in for the first time. All white with an enormous bed covered in crisp white sheets that hurt my eyes. Moving to the bedroom closet he instructed me to find, I stared at it frowning 'cause there sure was no door handle to pull it open. It took me several minutes to figure out I had to press gently against the white wood. Emitting a *click* sound, the closet door swung open.

His smell engulfed my nostrils and little Beo liked it. Like, a lot.

Shaking my head at my hardening cock, I pulled out the heavy leather duffel bag. I set it down on the bed, unzipping it to see the contents. I swallowed. I should have known: dildos, butt plugs and cock rings. A fucking power bottom's Heaven.

*"Pick one, wear it for me."* His words ricocheted in my head.

Shit. So many choices. What more could a boy ask for? Digging through the bag, I had no other choice but to remember how he felt, his fat cock in my hand. I smiled. Not gonna be stretching my boy ass too much for him, 'cause I wanted to feel his cock do most of the stretching. To feel each inch of his hard

rod slide into me. To feel him pulse inside me. And those damn beads still had my mind reeling.

Finding one that would give me the smallest stretch, I saw it was not just a butt plug, but a cock ring combo. A small stretch of latex that would run along my taint held the cock ring attached to the plug. The plug itself was not wide but long, a curving tip at the end, with three coiling ridges down the length. The thing was going to hit my love nub permanently, and with the cock ring attached to it... I shivered.

*Sweet torture and pleasure.*

Shoveling through the rest of the bag, making certain there were no others, I found a small bottle of lube. With the butt plug–cock ring and the lube in hand, I went in search of the bathroom.

I discovered three more bedrooms along the way. One had a spare bed, and there was no doubt in my mind that it was set up for the purpose of having a sub tied down to it.

*Playroom?*

With a secret smile and a spring in my step, I passed the second bedroom that was redesigned into an office. The last, a home gym. Images of Colt working out flashed in my head. His body all soaked, belly hair sticking to gleaming skin, his smell *maxified* from working out. I ran my hand over my jeans, moaning at the images of my tongue trailing down his stomach, swirling in his belly button. Shaking my head, I closed the door to the home gym.

I knew Colt had money, but going by the size of the place, the fine detail and the quality of the furniture, bedding and carpeting, he probably had a lot more cash than I imagined. Stepping onto the marble bathroom floor, I found that the towels hanging on the railing probably cost more than what I could make from singing a week's worth of venues.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a gold digger or a sugar daddy chaser. Maybe, if I knew I would have a full natural life, I would have taken an opportunity to be something, made something of myself. Having money, to me, didn't mean much. Sure you could go out and buy something when it broke, didn't have to worry about making enough to pay all the bills this month. It sure as hell ain't money in a man that would make me fall for him. I was grateful to the Bitches for only one thing—knowing the most precious thing in life was something no one could buy. I might not have much, but there was a hell of a lot of love in my life.

The bathroom was huge, the tiled shower so wide that I couldn't resist stepping into it. As I stood in the center and stretched out my hands, I couldn't even reach the walls. The bathtub was set several feet beyond the shower. Custom built, going on its size. That shit was big enough for at least three people of Colt's bulk. *Now that baby had my name on it.*

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Feeling all warmed up from the bath, my muscles a bit more relaxed, I glanced at the plug. Pep talking my way into the whole matter.

He wanted me to wear it, for him. It would make him happy. As a submissive, to serve my Dominant. But Colt wasn't mine yet.

Did I want him to be? Hell yes! Giving a man full power over you, knowing he holds that gift with honor, and would use it without hurting you. Giving that control to someone that meant what Colt meant to me. My body broke out in goose bumps just thinking about it.

And Little Beo was already fucking liking that idea.

Taking a deep breath, I squirted some lube into my hand, smearing the translucent liquid over my palm and fingers, and coated the plug.

With my one hand on the bathroom basin, I reached around and traced a finger down my crack, pulling in a deep breath, clenching my hole at the whispered touch. Images of Colt's hard dick, veiny and rigid, sprang to mind. That large mushroom crown pressing against my opening. Or would he place his tongue there first? I moaned out loud at the thought, knowing how he kissed somewhere between hard and rough with gentle passion. Would he do the same, making out, with my hole?

"Jeepers, Beo! Get a hold of yourself, dude." I scowled and snatched my finger away. It didn't help to banish the images from my mind. The whole point of my discipline was for him to dominate my mind, and now that I had no distractions and needed to have a toy up my ass, it wasn't easy.

I picked up the plug, ran it down between my ass cheeks, feeling it. Just feeling it there. Slowly I pressed the tip to my nub, quickly reaching for my already painfully hard dick and wrapping my fingers around my base to stop the tingle in my balls from erupting out my cock. A slow burn started as I pressed the tip in, my heart beating in my chest. I held my breath and tightened my grip on my dick as the first ridge went in. The tingle in my balls only increased.

By the second ridge, I was panting hard and dripping on the bathroom floor. Taking a deep breath, I pushed hard, feeling the last ridge slip past, holding the plug in place. I hissed and stood on the balls of my feet when the tip touched my prostate.

*Just breathe, Beo, just breathe. You. Can. Do. This.*

My legs buckled, and I had to grasp the bathroom basin with both hands as I tried to calm down. Cursing, I realized I should have put the cock ring on first. Now it was going to be a bitch of a problem.

Standing as motionless as I could, I averted my thoughts to the bone marrow tap waiting for me on Monday, and what I was going to have to spin to tell Colt when I started to throw up after the third session of my treatment. It worked, and Little Beo calmed down.

Bending to my knees, I took the cock ring, pulling it across my guiche and hissing. This was going to be hell, 'cause pulling on the thing just made the tip of the plug press harder against my happy spot.

Biting down on my teeth, trying not to tip over, I managed to get some more lube and slip the ring over my dick and sac.

Finally standing, huffing awkwardly, my eyes spotted something in the washing hamper. Snatching the shirt out, I pulled it to my nose, overcome by Colt's ripe, musky scent. If I wanted him to be mine, then maybe wearing this when he arrived home would give him a bit of a surprise. One of my own making. I never said I wasn't a dirty boy.

Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, I packed the lube away and put the bag back into his closet. Finding a jock strap in my duffel bag, I slipped it on and looked for the controls for the central heating. I found them in the living room and turned the heat up. Seating my ass on the sofa, which wasn't such a brilliant idea, I waited for Colt.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eight

*“The precious moment when you realize you’re calling him ‘your boy’ and not just ‘boy’ anymore.” — Colt Maxus.*

“Richard, I don’t care!” I said. Unlocking the front door and stepping into a dark apartment, my chest pulled tight.

Feeling the heat wash over me and the smell of flowers drifting in the air, I relaxed.

“Yes, I’m still here!” I snapped into the phone. “Those fuckers can bitch and moan as much as they want! I told them not to take that route, especially because of the danger. So no, Richard, you can tell each of those dumb dicks they aren’t going anywhere until I have some fucking answers, and Richard...” I paused, licking my lips, “go fuck James. The boy’s been staring at you the whole time, making love to you with his big, green eyes.”

Richard grumbled something on the other end that I couldn’t hear. “Bye, boy,” I said and killed the call. Closing the front door, I walked into the living room.

Flipping on the lights, I almost dropped the Chinese food at the sight before me. My breath stuttered, my throat closed, and my heart pounded away like a racehorse upon seeing Beo curled up on the couch, asleep, a butt plug and... I had to step closer to get a better look, but fuck, that was my T-shirt! Pride struck and rumbled in my gut at the vision before me, causing my dick to harden instantly. Sexy, sweet and beautiful. I caught myself thinking how much more beautiful he’d look with my collar around his neck.

Quietly, I placed my briefcase and food down on the coffee table. For a moment I stood staring at the beauty that was Beo. So soft, so thin—well, I was going to do something about that. My boy needed to eat! If it meant giving him a little belly, I’d be happy. Slowly and silently, I sank down on the couch next to him. Looking at his ass—two pale, perfect globes, covered in curling, little, fluffy, black hairs—my cock throbbed.

“Beo?” I said softly. He didn’t respond except with the deep rise and fall of his chest. Smiling, I watched him sleep. I was fucking exhausted myself, but I’d made a promise to my boy.

*My boy, my fucking boy!*

Reaching for him, I traced my finger along his thigh, only brushing him slightly. Beo let out an adorable, sleepy-puppy growl and curled his legs under him. The position spread his butt cheeks, showing me the piece of latex attached to the butt plug that stretched towards his cock and balls. I smiled. My boy had guts. The plug was designed to tease a boy's prostate while keeping the blood trapped in his cock. My already-hard dick dripped for him. Bringing my lips to his glute, I gave it a lick, causing him to moan in his sleep.

Well, a man could only watch so much before his need got the better of him.

Gently but firmly, I flicked the end of the plug with my finger. Beo jerked up, eyes blinking like he had just been struck by lightning.

"My poor boy," I teased.

He rubbed his eyes several times before he turned to look at me.

"Master Colt."

Growling, I reached for him and pulled him onto my lap, taking his lips. Beo opened his mouth and placed his hand against my cheek, fingers gently grazing my skin. I shivered at his delicate touch.

God, he was so different from any I had had before. Repositioning him with his ass on my lap, legs spread and knees placed on either side of my thighs, I trailed my hand up his hips and under the shirt, working my way up to his nipples. Brushing them softly with my thumbs caused his beautiful, small pink nips to peak. His eyes were closed. Moving my lips over his, my tongue explored his sweet taste.

Releasing his mouth, I spoke hoarsely, "Tell me, how can I make you happy?"

Beo swallowed, licking his lips in a slow slide as if trying to taste what my kiss left behind. He looked up at me, his big brown eyes going puppy soft. *Fuck!*

His plea—because it wasn't a request—ripped the rug from under my world, causing everything to crumble down around me.

"Make me yours, Master Colt."

My fingers shook. Hell, I was shaking as I traced my hand over his cheek and laced my fingers in his hair.

I pressed my lips to his and spoke against them, "Kiss me, Beo."

It was slow, everything about him was slow. He placed small kisses, his tongue tracing between my lips and, cautiously, he entered my mouth. His fingers sketched down my neck, causing my skin to pull tight and, sneakily, I felt my tie being gently uncoiled. My fingers twitched in his hair, wanting to take him forcefully on the carpet, but I willed myself to relax. I wanted to be buried balls deep in his warm boy hole, but I also wanted this. The sweet, pure innocence as he sucked at my mouth, taking my breath with his sensual kiss. Pulling away, he again gazed into my eyes, his Adam's apple moving slowly as he swallowed.

The hunger in his beautiful eyes sent my pulse racing.

"I want to make love to you, Babyboy," I said in a thick voice. Beo trembled in my lap and swallowed, with cheeks glowing.

"I'd like that, please, Master Colt," he whispered.

How the hell I was keeping calm with the boy in my lap only God knew, but each time I'd been this close to him my anger had stilled. It was there, but not roaring, just quiet.

Pressing his face to my neck, I reached around and took his ass cheeks in each hand, slowly spreading them. "Breathe, baby," I said, running a digit over the plug and working my fingers to grip it. Slowly I pulled it out. Beo gasped when each ridge rubbed his ring, his moist breath blowing against my skin. Finally feeling the plug come out, he gave a sigh.

Running my fingers down his crack, I whispered in his ear, "There a specific reason you chose this plug, boy?"

He took a moment to respond. "Yes, Master Colt. Want to feel you stretch me, not some silly plug."

Growling, I picked him up and placed him on his feet. "Going to take the cock ring off now," I said, groping his jock strap. Beo was hard, his dick stretching the material of the jock with a big wet stain in front.

Narrowing my eyes, I grinned. I couldn't resist. Leaning forward and taking the tip of him into my mouth, I bit down gently on his crown.

Beo hissed, pushing up on the balls of his feet. Slowly I increased the pressure, pressing my tongue against the material, tasting his salty precum.

"Master, please," he whimpered above me. Groaning, I gave his head a hard suck, working my fingers past the pouch of the Jock and gripping his silky balls in my fist.

Releasing his cock from my mouth, I stared up at him. His eyes were closed, bottom lip rolled between his teeth, forehead glistening with perspiration, his chest raising and falling in quick breaths. My boy was high on endorphins.

“Were you touching my cock?”

Beo frowned and looked down at me. “Yes, little boy?” I gave his nuts a tender squeeze. “This cock’s not yours anymore. It belongs to me.” Another squeeze caused him to rest his hands on my shoulders. “Only my hands get to touch it. So answer my question.” I added a growl.

“Well no, but if you wanted me too,” he grinned down at me, “you should have just said so.” His tease, fuck, it was hot and brewing my already burning desire to fuck him. It was going to get him into so much trouble.

Letting go of his balls, I worked the cock ring loose without exposing him. Tossing the thing next to me, I leaned back against the couch. My piercing eyes gazing over him.

“Strip for me, boy... slowly, shirt first.”

He hesitated, closed his eyes and slowly pulled the bottom of the shirt up, exposing a tight stomach and pale flesh. A trail of black hair grew from his groin leading further up.

Pressing my palm to my bulge, I bit back a groan, captivated by the naked torso before me. That river of hair sprouted straight up in the center of his abdomen, stopping just under his chest. His eyes caught mine, a deep rosy color flashing in his cheeks going down to his neck and chest. He bit his lip.

“Stop doing that!” I rumbled low. “Biting your lip is only going to land you in trouble, boy.” His blush only deepened.

“Jockstrap, boy,” I thundered.

Hooking his thumbs in the waist of the jock, and fucking grinding his hips to a silent tune, Beo slowly pushed down. His cock went motherfucking batshit crazy as he pulled the jock off. It didn’t just bob up and down. It sprang like a jack-in-the-box being set loose, going in all directions, dripping and flinging a fat pearl of precum against his thigh. I gulped, licked my lips and growled.

“Fucking come here now!”

Beo’s head shot up, his eyes big.

With shaky legs he stepped closer. He had barely reached me when I wrapped my fingers around his dick and gave it a hard tug. Thick and flamed pink at the tip, his foreskin wrapped tightly around the sharp-pointed narrow head. Gripping his cock in my palm, I started rubbing deliberately over his little slit with my thumb. Over and over again.

He was trying to hold it together, that much was clear from his trembling chin, the conflict in his face, and the clenching of his ass as his legs wobbled with the strain of keeping himself standing.

“So the two Doms, Martin and Hades, I would assume.” I didn’t care to hide the jealousy in my voice, but Martin and Hades, of all people, having this boy and not me? It set a roaring blaze of envy coursing through me.

Beo shook his head, gritting his jaw as I continued to rub his slit.

“No, Doc...” He swallowed, voice unsteady. “Martin is just a close friend, Master Colt. He...”

Beo took a deep breath, yet I didn’t stop my torture on his cock.

“Martin’s known me since I was five years old.”

That made me stop, glaring up at Beo.

“Explain.” My command was nothing short of a bark.

“I’m an orphan, Master Colt. He was the doctor doing the yearly rounds, and we became friends. I don’t feel the same way he feels for me. He’s been in love with me since I was sixteen.”

Letting go of Beo’s cock as the storm inside me rose to the surface, I clenched my fists. “He ever force himself on you?”

I was too terrified of what Beo might say, scared of what I might do.

Looking down at me, he reached for my clenched fists, taking them in his hands and wrapping his fingers around them.

He spoke in a bare whisper, “He would never do something like that, Master Colt. I love him, but more as a father or older brother, and he respects me too much to take matters further. Doc would never hurt me.” Beo’s eyes pleaded with me... Martin was an important figure in his life, and he needed me to accept that. I couldn’t say that I would get comfortable with the idea, but I wasn’t going to demand Beo have no contact with his friends, no matter how much I wanted him all to myself.

Sighing, he let go of my hands and knelt before me, resting his cheek on my thigh.

“Hades is different. He... Well, we met before he and I became members of The Bark.” Beo started to play with the material of my slacks.

“I’ve never seen him there. How long have you been a member, because I sure haven’t seen you there before either?” Something stirred in me, an aching for calm. Stretching out my hand, I ran it through Beo’s hair, immediately feeling the storm backing down.

“Been a member at The Bark for two years as a VIP. So has Hades. We have a separate entrance to The White Room, and I never left The White Room. Last night I had to use the front lobby ’cause they were upgrading. But Hades was never my Dom. I was at a bar, and he happened to be there. I had a bit too much to drink, and one thing led to another and he became my first. That was three years ago, Master Colt. Hades is another friend, more like a big brother to me. We haven’t slept together since.”

“And the two Doms?” My voice was less aggressive now that I was stroking my boy’s hair.

Letting out a long breath, Beo spoke in a low tone, “Both are members of The Bark. The first was the House Lord I served under, GrandMaster Hans. He never fucked me, but the other, Sir Felix...” Beo trailed off, and I stilled my hand in his hair.

“He... was a bit too enthusiastic, moving too fast, demanding too much. He was so adamant that we belonged together that it scared me. I didn’t feel the same about him, not... not the way I feel about you.” He looked up at me, my chest pulling tight. The tears rolling down his cheeks nearly killed me.

Watching him, his eyes sucked me in. I dared not speak at that moment, not even to force a single word from my lips. Too afraid it would come out as a squeak. I fucking needed to be inside my Beo.

“On your knees, Beo, arms folded and head resting on them, ass in the air,” I said and let go of his hair.

The sight of him presenting the position I asked for stole my breath, banishing all thoughts from my mind. Standing behind him, his little rosy-pink hole presented for my viewing, I sucked two fingers into my mouth and coated them with my spit. Bending on my knees, I traced the two along the crack of his ass.

Beo let out a gasp, his little hole clenching at my touch.

“Your boy pussy hungry, baby?” I said in a dark voice, and blew over his hole.

Beo moaned, scrunching his ring again, and arched his back.

I chuckled low. “Definitely a hungry little boy hole, all pretty and pink.” I ran my thumb around his anus. “Babyboy, this little butt ring of yours...” I swiped my thumb over the folding skin, watching the pink flesh whiten where I was pressing against it. I heard him whimper when the tip of my thumb sank into his small opening. “Motherfuck, Beo!” I hissed as my thumb was swallowed by his hole, my slacks and briefs long wet from my own precum.

Kneeling, I pressed my digit deeper. I licked and kissed around my thumb while fucking his hole with it. Beo trembled, pushing back, causing my thumb to go as deep as it could. Pulling it out with a pop, I gripped him by the thighs and planted my mouth over his hole, plunging my tongue inside him. Beo let out my name in a yell, shaking as I started to shove my tongue in and out of his hole, teeth ever so gently scraping against his delicate and sensitive flesh. I reached for my belt, undoing it while I ate out his sweet boy cunt. Popping the top button, I pushed my pants down past my hips, and released my throbbing cock. I was fucking wetter than—God, I think if I’d had a pussy I’d be soaked.

“Master Colt, please,” he cried, fucking sobbing. “Take me, Master. Please!”

“Not yet,” I growled against his hole, and returned my lips, sucking hard on his sphincter.

The frustrated growl from Beo’s lips spurred my own. Still lip-sucking his hole, I reached for the buttons on my dress shirt, my fingers trembling and just plain not doing what I needed them to do.

Standing, and at the same time reaching for my shirt, I pulled at it. Buttons flew as I ripped it open, then tossed it to the floor. My eyes focused on Beo’s ass, his glossy little hole slightly clenching and opening—fucking begging me to fill him.

“Hang on, baby,” I said and went for my briefcase. Digging in the side pocket, I felt for a condom and a sachet of lube. “Going to make you feel good, boy,” I droned, kicking off my shoes and pants, not bothering with my socks. I spat in my hand and stroked my cock, mixing the spit with my precum. With my other I tore the condom wrapper carefully with my teeth and slid the latex on.

“Master,” Beo hissed, “move your old man ass, or I’ll fucking finish on my own.”

The nerve of the little shit.

Tearing open the lube sachet and emptying it out in my hand, I lowered myself behind him again.

Taking my open palm, I gave him a quick slap right on his hole.

“Fuck!”

“Yeah, baby, fuck. You just earned yourself a spanking.”

“Was counting on it, old man,” he teased.

“You’re playing with fire, boy,” I warned but couldn’t keep the grin back.

Running my hand over his crack, I worked some lube around his hole and spread the rest over the condom.

“On your side, baby.”

Beo quickly turned, and I lay down beside him. As I gripped my cock at the base, Beo lifted his leg to his chest.

“You want it slow?” I gradually ran the tip of my cock between his cheeks, hearing him whimper. “Or you want it hard and fast?” I smacked his hole with my cock repeatedly.

“Slow, please, Master Colt,” he breathed.

“Your own death sentence, boy.” ...*and fucking mine*. After all this, all this built-up desire, want and anticipation, with both our cocks screaming for release, he still wanted it fucking slow. And I gave it to him. Gently pressing at his entrance, feeling his heat as the tip of my cock slipped in. His hole constricted, pulling a groan from both of us. I placed my hand behind his right knee and slid in deeper, feeling the first bead rub and pop past his hole.

“Fuck!” he hissed, and I growled, bringing my lips to his ear.

“Like that, boy?” I pulled out.

“Ye—” His words were cut short with a gasp as I pushed back inside him, slipping in to the fourth bead, then I pulled out all the way.

“Colt, please,” he cried, tears dropping from his eyes. I pulled him, repositioning him on his back. Beo’s eyes snapped open, looking at me as I towered over him.

“Not going to last long, baby,” I said, glaring back.

He swallowed, wrapped his arms around my neck, and crashed our mouths together. At the same time, I pushed into my boy, hearing him gulp into my mouth as I pushed the last bead past his ring, and felt his hole clamp on my cock.

“God, Beo! So warm, so hot,” I panted into his mouth. His tongue lapped at mine, his lips red and swollen from my beard, but he kept kissing. His fingers dug into my back as I snapped my hips back and forth, moving in and out of him. I could feel the carpet burns beginning to sting my knees, but I didn’t care. I was already too fucking close.

“Gonna take care of you, Beo,” I said between kisses and thrusting into him. “Wanna make you happy, Babyboy. Wanna love you.” I knew what I was saying, but I was blaming it on the height and ecstasy of the moment. Beo shut me up after those words, kissing me hard.

I could feel it burning in my balls, tingling along my dick as the beads did their job. Each time I pressed into him, hitting his love nut, the boy’s eyes went fucking huge.

Fast and unexpected, I started to spill before I felt my orgasm explode from my groin. Biting down on his bottom lip as the pleasure sparked across my body, dumb-fucking my mind, as my lips stopped moving. Beo eyes went soft and tender, causing my breath to disappear, and he pressed his lips over mine, entering my mouth with his tongue. I still moved in and out of him, feeling the friction on my sensitive cock, but unable to bring myself to stop until I shook and lowered myself gently to him. Sweat drenched my back as I lay there, hearing Beo take shallow breaths. I moved, pushed myself up on my hands and slipped out of him, watching his mouth form a silent O.

He hadn’t come. I was sort of expecting it; not everyone could instantly come from having their prostate stimulated half to death. Taking off the condom, I knelt and watched Beo. He still had his eyes closed, chest rising and falling, his body hair sticking to his damp skin.

“Spread your legs, Babyboy,” I whispered.

I took two fingers and gradually worked them into his hole. His slippery, stretched hole allowed them easy entrance. Gripping his cock with my free hand, I glanced up at him. His eyes were still shut. Bending over, I took Beo’s cock into my mouth and down my throat.

“Master Colt!” He tried to sit up, but I placed my hand on his chest, holding him down. “Master, no, you don’t have to, I can—” I growled with him in my mouth, the vibration causing Beo to whimper and then go silent.

I sucked my boy, running my tongue along the bottom of his dick and sliding my fingers in and out of his hole, coming back in each time to press against his prostate.

Fuck he tasted good, yet slightly bitter.

Beo’s hands curled in my hair as I sucked harder, faster, to get his nectar out of him. He groaned, balling a fist in my hair, and gasped in warning, “Gonna shoot.” I didn’t stop, or slow down. I wanted my boy to come down my throat.

Feeling his canal clench around my fingers, I pressed hard against his prostate, my eyes gazing at him. His head rolled back, hips snapped up, pressing his dick deeper and flooding his seed down my throat. I swallowed each and every drop he had to give, not holding off even after he was spent. With hands stretched out at his sides, and deep, slow breaths coming from his lips, I let his flaccid cock slip from my mouth and slid my body over his.

“Can’t promise you I’m going to be this sweet next time, Babyboy.” I kissed his neck, working my way up to his lips.

Beo just looked at me, a content little smile on his lips and a look of delight in his eyes.

“I meant what I said, Beo. I will take care of you.” I cupped his cheek and took his lips again.

After a long moment, I reluctantly let go.

Standing, I held out my hand for him and pulled him up against me.

“I brought Chinese, go fetch us—” I couldn’t finish the sentence because the little shit’s fingers were walking up my abs and stroking the outline of my chest.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, meeting my eyes.

I swallowed. I’d received compliments before, but this one—not something any other man or sub had ever uttered to me—struck me right in the heart.

“Thank you,” I said hoarsely and cleared my throat. “Now go get us some plates, boy, then I want you back here in my lap.”

*Oh fuck!* Beo pushed up on his toes and gently pressed his lips to my cheek, and whispered, “You’re welcome, Master Colt, and thank you for my flowers. That was epic nice of you.”

I watched him walk off, naked, to the kitchen.

What I ever did to deserve him, I’d never know. I will never be able to answer that, but maybe someone knew I needed him more than he needed me.

Placing the chop sticks on the empty plate, I outlined my expectations to Beo and briefed him on how the penthouse was run. This included when he could expect me home in the evenings and when the house help came in. I stipulated a time when I expected him to call, and this was when I found out Martin had “murdered his cell phone.”

“We’ll get you a new one tomorrow morning, baby. Now there’s one rule of my own before we go further.” Beo looked up at me. His head was resting on my lap, body stretched out on the sofa.

“My bedroom is off-limits. You will sleep in the spare room.” I kept quiet, staring at him, waiting for the anticipated “Why?” Honestly, I wasn’t too keen on him asking because, with Beo, I feared if he asked I would tell him. He never asked. Only said, “Okay,” and gave me a small smile.

“Now,” I reached for my briefcase and pulled out the contract I had pulled from The Bark’s database and changed to suit our needs, “before we go into this, Babyboy, I need to know, do you really want to? Because when it comes to me as a Dom, things are whole lot stricter. Beo?”

He glanced up at me, my heart pounding so loud I wouldn’t be surprised if he heard it.

“I do, Master Colt.” He sat up and turned to face me. “But I also want a lover, not just a Dom. I want what we just shared. I want what we shared back in your office, and sometimes I want a bit of both at the same time.”

I gave a curt nod. It was a reasonable request; not all parties joining into a BDSM contract wanted 24/7 submissive and Dom roles.

“You mentioned no hard punishment because you bruise easy... have you always?”

Beo looked down at his fingers, a wary expression on his face.

“Okay, anything else I need to know?”

"I don't like restraints, but I can endure them for my Dom," he said, which was expected. Beo was a sensual lover, complete with touch, taste and feel. He needs to be held, to know his Dom's presence. He craved that with every breath. Domination through pain wasn't going to work, but deprivation of one of his senses would drive the boy to desperate begging. I could use that against him as discipline and punishment. His next words did shock me.

"I don't have a very high sex drive, Master Colt."

"Oh," was all I said, all I could say.

"I'm sorry." Beo turned, sitting with his back to me, knees pulled up to his chest and arms wrapped around them.

Reaching for him, I ran my hand down his spine, stroking back and forth with my fingers. "Do you think that's all I want from you, Beo?"

He shrugged, then turned his head. "No, but what if I don't—" I pulled him into my lap.

"What if nothing, Babyboy." I smiled, not giving a shit how glossy my eyes looked. "You stole something of mine. You have it now, and you need to keep it safe."

He frowned, looking confused. "Master?" Again, expected.

I placed a finger against his lips, looking him straight in the eyes. "You got the key, Babyboy. The key to my heart. You just need to learn how to unlock it."

I kissed him then, hard on the lips, not telling him that he had already done so. It might have been the moment our eyes met in that room back at the charity event, or hell, it might have been when Beo gave me an innocent kiss on the cheek that I had fallen for him. But, in that moment, I knew, I just knew, my heart beat and pulsed because of him.

"There's just one other thing, Master Colt," he said wearily. "Mondays, I usually spend with a friend. It's been a tradition of some sort."

"Okay, so you want Monday nights to yourself too?" I asked, snaking my fingers in between his cheeks.

"Sometimes, it would depend on how the day goes. And of course, when I have a gig..."

"That's how you make your coin?"

Beo nodded.

“Fine, but listen to me, baby.” For no other reason but that I could and because he was fucking mine, I held him tighter to me. “I can’t take care of you if you don’t let me, so when I give you money, use it.”

His forehead wrinkled as he took his bottom lip into his mouth again. That fucking image was burnt in my brain and would taunt me every time I thought of him.

He nodded slowly.

Handing him the contract, I said, “I’ve already signed, but you can read through it first. I just need to make a call,” I added, seeing it was five to ten.

Leaving him on the couch, I took the disposable phone Hades had given me and made my way to my home office. The sole purpose of the office was for me to work from home, but I never did reach that point. Now that I had Beo, it might come in handy.

Why Beo? Of all the boys and men I had had in the past, why him? What was so different about Beo that gave him this strong hold over me? I wanted him here, next to me. I wanted to hold him tight, smell him as I drifted off to sleep. The first night he was here, I wasn’t thinking straight when I brought him into my room and slept with him in my bed, breaking the rule I’d made for myself. I had never felt calmer than when he was present. My mind was clear, the anger dulled. Fuck, I swore a lot less with him close to me. I smiled at that thought.

But I wasn’t ready. Before he could come into my bed, Beo would have to know the ugliness of my past, and I didn’t know if it would push him away or draw us closer together.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Nine

*“If evil had a face, it would be Finn’s.”* — Beo Moon.

I was still reading the contract while he made his call. The basics were covered; spanking was marked as soft limits, “hands only” added in brackets. The others—crops, whips and floggers—were placed under hard limits. Bondage was added, but he was so precise with the wording that only items with soft restraints were included. Hoods were marked as hard limits, ball gags and chastity belts as soft. Everything made to suit my needs more than his, except for one part: I wanted Colt all to myself. For the first time, I wanted to be just outright selfish. I wanted to be the only one he pushed his cock inside, the only sub pleasing him.

“Everything okay, Babyboy?” he said, standing at the end of the couch.

I nodded, “Can I have a day to think it over, Master Colt?”

Colt tensed and his eyes darkened. I could hear his teeth grind, see the tick in his jaw. He looked plain scary and unhappy. But he nodded. “You ready for bed?”

I stood and walked to him, reached for his hand and looked into his eyes. “You’re upset, Master. Please tell me if I did something wrong.”

His emerald gaze held mine for a moment, and then he looked away. “I was hoping the contract would be up to what you expected, Beo,” he said in a low tone.

“It is, Master, except for this part.”

I brought the paper up to him, pointing to the closed relationship part that was not ticked.

“Beo!” he growled, causing my heart to thump against my chest.

“Master?” I bit my lip again, knowing he had told me not to. It was a bad habit. *Shoot me.*

The next thing I knew, the contract was snatched from my hand, thrown to the floor, and I was picked up in his arms with him glaring at me. “You are mine, Beo. No one gets to fuck you except me, and if you need me to prove that to you, I will. That said, the same goes for me.”

“You mean—” I was silenced by his warm lips and wet tongue taking possession of my mouth. I shook in his arms, my dick starting to go hard again.

“The only reason I left it open was if you—” He clenched his teeth, arms tightening around me.

Slowly I touched his face, stroking his jaw. “Only you, Master, no one else. Please.” The fire in his eyes was as petrifying as it was heartwarming.

“Get some rest, Babyboy,” he said, and took me to bed, tucking me in and closing the door.

Lying in bed curled up in a ball, I listened to the silence with a yearning for Colt in my heart. I needed to feel him against me, 'cause the separation hurt. Colt felt right when he was touching me, kissing me, and I felt like his, like I belonged. I thought I could handle this—being away from him, knowing he was just down the hall. He said if I needed anything I could just knock on his bedroom door, but I wasn't prepared for the emotions consuming me—the cold raking my skin, the emptiness eating at my soul. I found myself thinking when I did tell him—'cause the time would come—would I be able to live without him if he pushed me away? I bit my lip again, and closed my eyes.

An hour later I heard the door open, and I froze. Seconds later, the sheet moved, and I was pulled by strong arms right up against him, but he was wet, sweating cold and shaking. I wasn't sure if he was sleepwalking or conscious, and I was certain he'd been crying. It worried me. Did he cry in his sleep? Was there something in his past that still haunted him?

“Hold me, Babyboy. *Please*, I need you so bad,” he said in an anguished voice.

I turned, pulled him to me and clutched him tightly. I forgot everything I was thinking about and just focused on Colt. It was a protective feeling—the fact that he needed me—warming me from the inside, consuming the cold I had felt a short while ago. Sleep came easily then.

Saturday morning came. I woke in his arms, his face pressing into the hollow of my neck, his sweat smell filling the room. I tried to peel myself free but gave up when he growled and smacked me on the ass.

“Stay!” he commanded. I was slowly beginning to accept that Colt might be different from the Dom everyone thought he was, not knowing at the time that it was because of me. What we shared during those moments was not love. It was something else. Yes, it had the delusion of love on the surface, but its

origin was far darker than either of us could have thought. For us to break it, we both needed to break away from each other.

The day was spent running errands, getting me a new phone and—can you believe it?—a fucking suit. I hated to wear the damn things. They made me feel stuffy and proper, and Beo Moon was never made to be proper. I was a freakin' hipster!

Standing in front of the mirror while the tailor took my measurements, I saw Colt glower at the man whenever he touched me.

When the tailor had finally made the adjustments, Colt asked him, not so politely, to go with a simple, "Leave!" from his lips.

Turning, I scowled at him.

"What?" Colt barked, fists balling in anger that was also displayed in his red face. "He was touching you. Goddamnit!"

"Master, he has to. It's his job," I said, curling my arms, trying to make the material relax. "Are you going to be this jealous if I give Richard a happy birthday kiss?"

His eyes went wild as he marched up to me, nostrils flaring while he breathed into my face, and his lips pressed into a tight line. "You don't want to do that, Beo," he warned.

"Okay," I replied warily.

Leaving the tailor, things only got worse. Colt didn't want me speaking to anyone, or looking at anyone for that matter. I know I said his possessiveness was a turn on, but hell, only to a point, not freaking demanding it.

Sitting next to him in his car as he parked outside Richard's home in the Hamptons, he placed his hand on my thigh.

"I'm sorry about today, Beo," he said, not looking at me but gazing past the dashboard.

He turned and looked at me. I covered his hand with mine. "Colt, I get you want me. You want to own me, but there are times when other people will touch me, hug me or want me speaking to them. Hell, you ain't even met Jane, and I'm scared you'd want to rip her apart, 'cause she and I are very touchy with each other."

"She is a woman."

"Okay, but that's beside the point. People are gonna touch me—"

"I said I'm sorry! What more do you want?" he boomed.

My heartbeat flew to my throat at his tone.

Sighing, he pushed my hand away and brought his fingers to his forehead, rubbing his temple. "I'm sorry, okay. For the first time in my life, I'm happy—really, really happy—and that's thanks to you. I'm terrified of losing that, losing you."

I couldn't reply 'cause his words slammed me in my gut. This was a mistake, a huge fucking rip-your-heart-out mistake. Once disaster struck, once the inevitable happened, I was gonna hurt this man, and I was going to be responsible for what was left after I was gone. I started to sweat. I needed to run, needed to end it right now or—

"Baby, what's wrong?" His finger grazed my cheek, wiping away a tear I wasn't aware had seeped from my eye.

*Always with the crying, Beo; you're so fuckin' weak!*

"Nothing. Just you, and your damn perfect words." I forced a smile, leaned over and kissed him. "Just try to ease up on the jealousy, big guy. I'm yours. I want to be yours and only yours." I took his lips, more tears streaking down my face, because I didn't know who I was trying to fool the most, Colt or myself.

As Colt climbed out, I reached for my door only to find it locked. I was about to turn and ask, "What?" when he stepped up to the passenger door and opened it, holding out his hand.

I blushed, not able to help it, at taking his hand, and he helped me out, locking the door behind me. With the gift bag in my one hand, Colt turned and took the other. I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're gonna do the whole parade, ain't ya?" I beamed at him.

"Fuck yeah!" He smirked, fist pumping the air. I only gaped at him. "Too much?" he asked, his eyebrows joining in a grin. I shook my head, laughing. He escorted me up to the front porch, fingers still entwined in mine, and pressed the doorbell. Moments later, Richard stood in the doorway, all rosy cheeks.

"Fucker, get on in here—Well, well, well... Who is *this* beautiful creature?" I could clearly hear the man was drunk. His eyes raked over me, whiskey glass in his hand spilling some of the liquor.

Colt's hand tightened in mine. "Richard, this is Beo, *my* submissive."

It seemed Richard sobered up at Colt's words as his eyes bulged in their sockets.

“Happy birthday, Sir Richard,” I said with a nod of my head.

He swallowed, wiped his mouth with the napkin he held in his hand, and stepped aside so we could enter his home.

Richard's house was big, beautiful and homey, but despite the warm, soft glow of the lights, it felt cold. Colt asked for my coat as he took off his own and handed it to Richard.

I shook my head. “I'm a bit chilly, Master Colt.”

Cupping my cheeks, he gazed into my eyes, whispering to me, “You don't have to call me Master, Babyboy. Not all the time. I'll tell you when that's appropriate.”

Moving closer, feeling his warmth radiating from him, I pushed up on my toes touching my lips to his. “And if I want to?” I asked, brushing my lips to his in a whispered kiss. My eyes were immediately drawn to his, the green flames blazing in them.

His tone was low and serious. “You, Beo Moon, have me by my fucking balls, and it scares me, boy.” He took my lips hard and rough. I was barely aware of Richard closing the door behind us and leaving us alone.

Pulling back, he spun me around, hooking his arm around my waist and walking us to the living room. I placed the gift bag with the Brazilian cigars we got Richard on a table containing other gifts. There weren't a lot of people, but these folks with their fancy sparkling dresses and rich-ass suits made me feel uncomfortable.

“Want something to drink, Master?” I asked.

Colt nodded and let go of me. “Anything you can find without alcohol in it would be perfect. Thank you, boy.” That kind of threw me off. Never took Colt for someone who didn't drink.

Seeing the bar, I spotted a waitress standing behind it.

“Um, hi,” I said.

“Good evening, sir. May I get you something?”

“Beo's fine, please. You got anything non-alcoholic, maybe a Chai Blossom?”

“Yes, and thank God. These people are so stuck up.” She immediately covered her mouth. “I'm sorry. Please don't tell my boss I said that.” The girl couldn't be older than twenty-one.

I smiled. "Babe, I don't even know who your boss is, and yeah, pretty stiff prunes the whole lot of them if you ask me." We both knew how stuck up the upper class crowd could be, and man, could they bitch and moan about the smallest shit.

She finished off the drink with a star anise and lemon peel. I just hoped Colt liked it.

Handing me a napkin, she asked, "Anything else?"

"Water, in a cup, please." 'Cause I always broke the glasses.

She frowned but got a silver paper cup and filled it up with plain sparkling water.

"Don't let them get to you, babe," I said as I took the water and Colt's drink. "Most of these folks got more issues than you and I combined. Your life might not be as flashy and glamorous, but I ain't be tradin' theirs for all the love in my life."

She gave me a sincere smile. Turning, my eyes landed on a silhouette in the far corner of the room, the light causing deep shadows over his face. Handsome guy as much as I could see of him. His eyes were focused to the center of the room on a man laughing loudly and chattering away... Richard.

Colt had told me Richard Flinór was his business partner, but first, his best friend. I could only assume the man was James, his body language attuned to Richard, his gaze following his every move.

Colt stood speaking to a fat, bald-headed man and a woman so tall and stiff she just looked awkward. As I walked up to him, her eyes raked over me. I clearly saw the displeased expression in her face as she gawked at my paper cup.

"Beo!" Colt draped his heavy arm across my shoulder.

"Your drink, big guy." I knew from accompanying Doc and his Dom friends and their subs to social events when to use the proper etiquette. People in the lifestyle had that way about them, that look in their eyes labeling you a Dom or a submissive. The woman and man now staring at me only looked put off. Handing Colt his drink, I said, "Gonna go talk to James, babe." I gave him a kiss on the cheek only to have my mouth filled with warm tongue and be sent off with a pat on the ass.

Stepping up to James, I paused and stared. The dude was charismatic and mouthwateringly hot. The sprinkling of freckles under his eyes and across his

nose only complemented his appearance. His eyes were hooded under thick, prominent eyebrows, and his honey-brown hair was slicked back and cut short at the sides. Slightly shorter, he looked a little older than me.

“James,” I said, trying to sound passive.

He didn't move, arms still folded across his chest pulling the purple fabric of his dress shirt tight as a glove over his slender yet muscular frame.

“I'm Beo, Colt's sub.”

His dark green eyes snapped to me. Lips parting like he wanted to say something, when the sound of glass shattering as it hit the floor made him clench his jaw.

I turned to see Richard turning red, booming drunkenly above the sound of the music, “No one died, just my drink. I'll get another.”

James's voice cut like ice next to me. “And another, and another, and another. So you and Mr. Big Bad?” he asked, changing the topic before I could say anything.

“I guess.” I joined him and mimicked his attempt to pose as wallpaper, my eyes down.

“He is looking at you, you know,” James said with a bit less ice in his words. “Well, glaring is more like it—and eye fucking you to the wall,” he added.

“Are his eyes burning fire again?” I asked, feeling my cheeks getting warm.

“By the looks of it, yeah. And his dick's feeling the moment, too.”

I looked in Colt's direction. His predatory eyes met mine, his tongue swiping over his lips. Someone was talking to him, but he wasn't paying attention to them. Staring down his body, yep, the man was tenting and not even bothering to hide it. Tracking my gaze back up, he took a sip of his drink, still glaring over the glass. Lowering it, he gave me a toothy grin. Gooseflesh riddled my skin as he narrowed his eyes and *bit his fucking lip!* Heat engulfed me from my gut, making the bow tie around my neck feel like it was choking me.

“B-bathroom?” I asked in a small voice.

“No, bro. That man's gonna fuck you in half, the way he is looking at you.” James stepped in front of me, shielding me from Colt's gaze.

"I need some air." He grinned, reached for my hand, and walked me to the kitchen and out the back.

Maybe I needed the air more than he did, 'cause damn, it felt good to breathe again.

Taking a large sip of water, feeling the bubbles tickle my throat, I gazed at James sitting quietly next to me on the patio furniture. He stared out into the black night, heavy emotion dancing across his face. His eyes looked tired now that I could see them clearly, full of sadness and regret.

"You okay?" I asked, ready to change the subject when he sniffed.

"No..." he whispered. Bending forward, he ran his hand through his hair.

"It's getting worse each day. I watch the man I love change, and I don't know how to help him. I don't think I can do this any longer."

I assumed he was referring to Richard's drinking, but I couldn't say anything. I didn't know either of them.

"That's all I do these days... cry, and it's not doing anything to help him."

Stupid Beo had to go ask, "Have you talked to him about it?"

James looked up at me, pain cracking his face. "Sorry, never mind."

I dropped it and kept quiet. We sat for a long time outside, just gazing out over the lawn, until James asked, "So, the Big Bad Wolf. How's that working for you?" My chest drew tight, and I choked on the mouthful of water I tried to swallow.

"I'm not sure. We haven't really done anything but make love."

James snorted next to me so hard he had to grip his stomach. "Dude, I'm sorry, but that man... You saying love and him in the same sentence, it's hard to believe."

"And what would you know!" I snapped at him. "Why does everyone always have something bad to say about him?" I went silent as James stared at me.

My anger wasn't just unwarranted and unnecessary, it was also very un-Beo.

"Sorry," we both said at the same time, looking at each other and smiling.

"Colt's different, James. He makes me feel safe, cherished. For someone who's had that and lost it, and then to find it again... I'm willing to hold on to it."

“Not sure what you meant there, but if he makes you happy, who am I to judge?” He perked up an eyebrow.

“It’s not just that. I think we make each other happy when we are together.”

“James! Boy!”

“Oh God!” James rubbed his forehead. “Beo, it’s been nice, but I can’t guarantee I’ll see you again. A guy can only take so much.”

“Fucking James!” Richard’s shouting increased.

I nodded at James as he got up. He had barely stepped into the kitchen when I heard him snap, “What?” and an argument broke loose between them. I waited for the voices to drift off, and saw a light go on the second floor.

Stepping into the kitchen, I could see the place was cleared out. Only the three waitresses gathering glasses remained; the rest of the guests had gone. I silently wished James well, thankful that at least Richard had waited till the end of the party before starting the argument. Seeing a platter of sushi, I grabbed a California Roll and shoved it in my mouth. I swallowed it, not thinking much of it. As I washed it down with a sip of water, I instantly got a cramp in my gut and a burning in my throat. I shouldn’t have done that, shouldn’t have taken that food.

“How’s James?” Colt spoke in my ear. I had been too lost in my attempt to keep the piece of food down to even notice him coming up behind me. He spun me around. His pupils were unsteady. He took my lips, and I could definitely taste the strong tang of alcohol in his mouth. My stomach flipped, and I pressed a hand against his chest.

“Sorry, wasn’t prepared for that,” I lied quickly, feeling my stomach coil from the sushi and water.

Colt cupped my cheeks making eye contact. “My kisses not good enough? You need something better, boy?” I swallowed, not from his question but at the rise of bile in my throat.

“No, Master.” I took a gulp of the water and spat it back into the cup, coughing and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Colt gripped my wrist, causing the cup to fall to the floor. He pushed my back against the wall, rubbing his bulge against my dress slacks. It wasn’t his fault I was nauseated. He moved in to take my lips again, but I turned my head.

Growling, he clamped his grip painfully on my wrist, and spoke in my ear, “You’ve been sucking James? That why Richard blew off on him? He caught

you two, didn't he? That's why you won't kiss me!" He snarled in my face and increased the pressure around my wrists.

"Colt, *please*. You're hurting me. Stop!" I managed to get out.

"Answer my fucking question, Beo!" he roared, his alcohol breath hitting me straight in the face.

"No, Master," I whispered, and he let go, releasing his hold on my wrists.

Immediately I stepped away from him, dashed out the kitchen to the back porch, fell to my knees and puked. My blood rushed in my ears, my head spinning. Choking, I tried to let the rest of the nauseous feeling pass. Colt never stepped out after me, and that fucking hurt, but going on his alcohol breath he probably had one too many, and maybe it was the reason he didn't drink. My heart broke for James. I stood and glanced at the second floor window. The light was off.

Richard was a handsome man. His physique leaning more to that of a sports model; lean and long in comparison to Colt's bodybuilder form, but no man was good looking enough when he was drunk at the same time.

Walking back into the house, I found Colt waiting on a couch. He didn't look at me as I came closer, only stood and walked to the front door, his coat already in his hands. I followed him outside. Richard was nowhere to be seen. Nor James, so I couldn't say goodnight.

Stepping out to the car, Colt was leaning against the passenger door.

"Beo," he said in a defeated voice, "You didn't deserve that. I'm sorry for acting that way. You okay, baby?"

The nausea had passed, so I nodded, lying to him and myself again. Why, I don't know. How many more chances was I going to give him before I really paid heed to everyone who'd warned me against him?

That night, Colt appeared in my room again. I'd already fallen asleep when I was awakened by being pulled against him. His body quivered, breaking out in a sweat.

"Hold me, Beo. Please."

And I did.

I woke up alone on Sunday morning, put on some sweatpants and my hoodie, and made my way to the kitchen. I found Colt naked, seated on the couch, gazing out the window.

“Beo, come sit here please. I need to talk to you,” he said when I stepped closer.

I knelt before him with my hands clamped around my back, keeping my gaze lowered. I found myself focusing on his dick, hanging heavy over equally heavy and low-hanging balls. I swallowed. Even semi-hard it looked thick. I definitely knew now how it felt, but this was the first time I had actually laid proper eyes on his golden member. A fat droplet of precum stringed from his slit. Damn, even his dorsal vein was fat. The basilisk—’cause that *thing* had to have a name of its own—perked up, its flat, big head swelling and filling with blood. My heart raced faster.

“Stop looking at my cock, Beo,” he growled, and I brought my gaze to his. His eyes were red and tired, dark shadows lining his periorbitals. I had to bite my lip, however, at the pink blush on his cheeks as he grabbed a pillow, and, like an awkward teenager, placed it over his now hard cock.

Colt cleared his throat. “I fucked up big last night. It’s not like me. It’s the reason I don’t drink, baby, and I give you authority to stop me and remind me of last night if you see me with alcohol in my hand. In fact, I’ll add it to the contract. I don’t care who’s around, even Doms and Masters, you stop me. The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

I wasn’t sure if this was just a trick to lull me, ’cause after each time he acted crazy, sweet words came from his lips.

“Now,” he stood, the basilisk full length and hard, “suck me, Babyboy. Master wants you to taste his juice.”

Slowly I leaned forward, giving his head a lick, causing him to take a deep breath. I closed my lips around his mushroom head, giving him a suck, and at the same time flicked my tongue against his slit.

The man went feral, pushing himself to the balls of his feet, hands turned to claws, coming for me, and his breath hissing past his lips.

He grabbed my earlobes, pinching them with his thumbs and index fingers, forcing me to stop working my lips over his head and be still. “Going to fuck that pretty face of yours real good, Babyboy.” Without warning, Colt thrust down my throat. I gagged, nostrils flaring as I tried to breathe with his dick filling my mouth. He pulled back and pushed back in. “Look at me, Beo,” he said with a shudder. My eyes teared from straining them upwards. I forgot to breathe when I saw the fire in his eyes—different, warm and zealous.

Colt's chest rose and fell rapidly, and his breaths and thrusts quickened, his left hand cradling my chin while the right fisted my hair. Snapping his hips, he exploded down my throat, releasing a loud roar of my name into the penthouse.

Still fucking my throat, I savored every morsel he had to give.

Colt pulled out of my mouth and fell back on the couch, holding his hands in open invitation for me. Eagerly I climbed onto his lap. Colt cupped my cheeks, with his thumbs rubbing the tears from under my eyes.

"Just look at you," he said, tracing a droplet that must have escaped from my lips, and taking it into his own mouth, "all teary-eyed with swollen lips, my beautiful Babyboy." He pulled me to him, taking my lips and kissing me, sliding his tongue around and exploring my mouth till his tummy gave a rumble.

Colt smiled against my lips. "Breakfast, Babyboy. Time to feed me," he said and led me, with his hand in mine, to the kitchen.

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I was seated on Colt's lap with my legs spread over his thighs, and my bare feet resting next to them on the leather sofa. I could feel the censorious stares from across The Red Room, but it couldn't compete with the comfort I had having Colt's arms around me.

He'd left Sunday morning after brunch and returned with a chest harness and a new leather jockstrap for me. Then he'd commanded me to go sit in the corner for an hour for calling him an old man on Friday evening. Afterwards he'd spanked my ass; my butt cheeks still had a tender sting to them as I sat in his car on the way to The Bark.

Stepping into The Red Room was like stepping into the BDSM version of the *dark side*, all red and richly dark interior. I liked it. The atmosphere here was relaxed, unlike The White Room, which felt more stiff and cold. The Doms here were loud, laughing and barbarous with their mouths. The White Room was more for the elegant, sophisticated class, proper and shit. If you swore in that room, a hush befell the place. Here, every other word was a cuss word. Some I'd never heard before, others making my cheeks glow crimson.

"Behave, Babyboy," Colt admonished in my ear as I rubbed my bare butt cheeks against his growing dick. My jockstrap had a zipper running down the front, and it was causing major discomfort to my cock.

“Well, Master, your basilisk is licking my butt,” I said innocently and pressed my back against his warm chest. He groaned, causing his chest to vibrate, and tightened his arms around me.

“I think he likes it, Babyboy.” His left hand found my right nipple, rubbing it gently while he kissed his way from my ear, down my neck, to my shoulder. We both went fucking hard. My dick throbbed, 'cause Colt had me wearing a damn snap-on cock ring. He grasped my neck, and pulled me back, taking care not to choke me. I felt the tug of the leash attached to the metal ring on the front of my harness pulling me back. Once he had me snuggled tight against him, Colt's lips found mine. His left hand slid down my body, stroking my body hair, passing the hem of the jock, and gripped my dick. His own rested between my ass cheeks, drooling precum and causing a wetness, giving his cock an easy slide as I deliberately stroked him with my ass.

“I can come just like this, Babyboy,” he said into my mouth, running his tongue along my lips before pressing his tongue back in. The way his hand was working my cock, neither of us was going to last long.

I panted from Colt's hand moving faster on my dick, giving it a tight squeeze when he ran his palm over my cockhead. I couldn't help the whimper escaping my mouth when Colt nipped gently at my bottom lip, rolling it between his teeth, and let go. Fire sparked in my groin and my breathing increased as he ran his wet mouth all along my throat, resting to suck on my Adam's apple, causing a shudder to run through my overheated body.

“Please, Master. I need you,” I whispered.

“I know, Babyboy,” he replied, licking my chin and thrusting his tongue into my mouth again, all the while not letting go of his tight grip on my cock. I latched onto his tongue and sucked, desperate for some part of him.

“Excuse me, Master Colt,” a fearful voice sounded in the distance.

Wrenching his mouth from mine, Colt turned and glared at the offending sub who had disturbed him.

“What. The. Fuck? Are you suicidal, or are you just plain dumb as dirt?” he growled.

It was a House Rule that no Dom may be disturbed by any sub if they were in a scene with their submissive or conversing with other Doms. He could only be approached by another Dom.

“I'm s-so so... sorry, Master Colt,” the poor guy stammered. “I... I...”

“Spit it out for fuck’s sake, boy, before I gag you for the night!”

“I... Master Martin,” my eyes went wide at hearing Doc’s name, “wanted to know if you and your sub would care for a drink?” the sub said as fast as he could. I don’t think he even breathed until he got all his words out.

“Master Martin sent you?” Colt asked.

“Yes, Master Colt.”

It came as a complete surprise to me when Colt told the sub to thank Doc, and requested a bottled water for each of us. Even more surprising was that Colt had acknowledged Doc by accepting the offer and using it as an excuse to stop our make-out session, much to my disappointment.

“Stand, boy,” Colt demanded, his Dom voice telling me exactly who was addressing me.

I automatically obeyed him.

Wrapping the leash around his hand and tucking the basilisk away, Colt led me to The White Room. I could feel every eye burn into my flesh as we entered. My heart thumped hard against my ribs. The room went quiet as we walked up to the black Victorian couch where Doc and two other Doms were seated. The White Room was nothing more than a large parlor in gothic Victorian design with white walls and equally white, indulgent carpeting. The furniture was black on black, the couches covered in black satin, giving it an almost purple appearance. The Baroque architecture and patterns on the support pillars and moldings were painted a matte black. Heat came from four porcelain heaters and a large fireplace in the center of the far side of the room.

I was so focused on keeping my shit together that I didn’t notice Colt had come to a stop, and I nearly walked into him.

“Gentlemen,” Colt greeted in a deep, venomous tone I could feel down to my gut.

There was general greeting and nodding by the Doms, the tension spiking when Doc asked Colt to sit beside him.

This wasn’t a casual invitation—this was a challenge and declaration of power, property and egos. Fucking Doms!

“Don’t mind if I do,” Colt growled in response.

I had a suspicion Colt’s sudden urge to bring me here was for one reason. Colt was staking his claim, and Doc had just given him the perfect opportunity

to do it—right here in The White Room in front of the VIPs. The thought made butterflies flutter in my stomach and goose bumps form over my skin. This man, this powerful, sexy-as-fuck Dom wanted me so badly that he would go to these lengths to claim me, and do so publicly.

Colt sat down in the wingback chair next to Doc's and gave a slight tug on the leash. I silently went down and knelt next to him at his boots. Resting my hands on my thighs, I took a deep breath in and slowly released it. The conversation around the table faded into the background as I calmed myself and tried to sink into my headspace. I realized that kneeling at Colt's feet was allowing me to let go. This was where I belonged. Not even Doc's disapproving glare could take away the sense of beautiful, welcome peace that surrounded and filled me. I felt Colt's fingertips gently brush the nape of my neck, and I eagerly leaned into his touch. His thumb caressed me as his fingers traveled up and into my hair.

"May we join you?" a familiar, yet unwelcome, voice enquired, and I immediately tensed, as did Colt.

Sir Felix stood not far from me, and behind him none other than The Bark's biggest whore, Finn. My body stiffened as I witnessed Finn gracefully lower himself on the other side of Colt and discreetly run his finger along Colt's thigh. It made my hackles rise and my skin crawl. I clenched my teeth to stop the growl from escaping. I knew about Finn and his poison. He was a little *Sith* cunt compared to other subs. He didn't care if you were exclusive to your Dom. He would flaunt his tight ass, flex his perfect, muscled body, and easily get what he wanted—even fucking Martin couldn't resist the shit's charm. And now it seemed he had set his eyes on my Dom.

I knew he was going to go out of his way to bait me, and I was determined to stop him in his tracks. I didn't have to prove anything to the club whore, and I would not play his petty games.

"It's been a while since I've seen you here, Colt," Felix said as he sat, completely unaware of Finn's fucking fingers. "Your supposed sub keeping you too busy to grace us with your presence?" he asked cordially, but anyone could hear the sarcastic undertones in his voice.

"Not supposed, Felix. Unlike you," Colt flicked at Finn's fingers, causing him to pull back his hand, "I asked Beo to submit to me exclusively," Colt responded rather smugly. I think Finn actually threw up in his mouth at those words.

I suppressed a small smile and lightly rubbed my cheek against Colt's leg to show my pleasure at his words.

"Or could it be, Master Colt, that you needed to train such a little novice, before bringing him into The Bark? I've subbed for you long enough to know how high your standards are, and I doubt anyone of Beo's caliber would ever be good enough."

"Finn," Sir Felix said, but that was all the admonishment he received.

"Sorry, Sir," came the response from Finn, not sounding apologetic in the least. "I just feel that Master Colt can do so much better than a street urchin who can't even abide by simple Bark protocol, even if Master Martin let it slide."

"Enough!" bellowed Colt. "You were never mine, Finn. I never wanted you, and Beo is more capable than you give him credit for. Maybe you could learn from him."

"Do not address my boy without my permission," Sir Felix growled at Colt.

"Well, *sir*, if you cannot control what comes out of your submissive's mouth, then permit me to show you how," Colt responded harshly. "I will not tolerate your sub, or any member of this club, belittling or disrespecting my boy, and definitely not in my presence."

Colt's outburst went straight to my cock. This time his possessiveness over me turned me on, 'cause it was different, not fueled by jealousy or fear, but pride. Being edged just moments before without release was becoming an agony for me, and I tried to adjust my jockstrap, pressing the palm of my hand hard against my aching bulge.

"Take your hand off what's mine, Babyboy," Colt said as he glanced in my direction. The table fell silent.

It was rare for a Dom to utter pet names in the presence of others, and rarer for Colt to state it and to do it so boldly.

My sideways view of Colt took in the growing bulge of his crotch, and I knew he was getting as turned on as I was. My gaze lingered on the knee-high leather boots and leather pants hugging powerfully muscled thighs. Recalling the powerful thrust in his thighs as he fucked me Friday night, I groaned, burning with the desire to have him fill me up from behind. My hand strayed back to my dick, and I rubbed, not able to stop the little moan that escaped my lips.

"It would seem the sub has very little restraint," Finn commented snidely.

"I have little need to know your sub's opinion, Sir Felix, but it would seem my boy cannot control himself and might need to be reminded of who his body belongs to."

"Hrumph." Doc loudly cleared his throat in disbelief and mumbled something under his breath.

I smiled secretly to myself, because, yes, Doc knew me too well and knew that I, Beo Moon, could write a book on self-control.

Colt stood.

"On your feet. You seem to have no qualms about disregarding my authority in front of all these Tops. It seems only fitting that they witness you yield to the Master you belong to."

I rose, standing shyly before Colt, and clasped my hands behind my back. Colt went down on his knees. I was shocked, my breath gone and my heart knocking against my chest, and I was pretty sure I wasn't the only one that gave a gasp.

He leaned forward. Gripping me by the hips, he brought his lips to my skin, stuck out his tongue and traced a moist trail from my navel to my hip. He kissed my hipbone in a searing kiss that forced me to snuck at air.

"Master," I moaned as he moved to my left hip and repeated the kiss. With his mouth, Colt worked his way up, teeth and scruff scraping against my tender flesh, nostrils flaring, blowing hot air on my flesh as he made his way to my left nipple. Covering my tit with his mouth, he sucked while his tongue flicked at the bud. I tightened my grip on my arms, clenched my jaw, digging my fingers into my muscles to hold onto myself 'cause, shit, I was slipping.

"Close your eyes," he said in a warm breath against my throat as he gripped me by my harness and wrapped his free arm around my waist. His lips covered mine and gently lowered me to the coffee table seated in the center of where we sat. I was barely aware of the drinks being taken off the table when his tongue came into my mouth, and my mental hold crumbled.

My back kissed the cold surface of the wood, causing a shudder to rake my body. It was then that my heart lunged in my chest in anticipation, and my thighs quaked.

Master was going to fuck me right here, in front of them. Right in their faces.

“Give me your hands, boy,” Master growled. Unaware that I even did it I heard Master’s belt being worked loose, the leather warm as he held my wrists to each other and wrapped the belt around them, pulling it tight through the belt buckle.

I was pulled up by the belt against him, his warm bare chest touching mine, and I felt him lower my hands over his neck.

Master took my lips again, trailing his fingers down my spine, sending sparks to my skin. Master found my crack and slid a finger in-between my cheeks.

I panted into Master’s mouth from the first stroke of his finger, moaned at the second, and when he pressed inside me, my glutes contracted at the unprepared penetration, causing my hole to clench around his thick digit.

“Who do you belong to, Babyboy?” Master asked with his sweet words.

“To my Master,” I said in a whisper.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Ten

*"I was losing my shit. I was fucking losing my shit with Beo."*

— Colt Maxus.

Beo was in my arms, where he belonged. Like walls settling on their foundations, my world was complete.

"Isn't that so, Babyboy?" I asked, taking his mouth again. There was something primal about this. Having an audience, showing them he was mine. Pride simmered in my veins. Honored to be the one to claim him, for him to grant me that privilege, knowing he could have another, and yet he chose me. His hole clenched once more around my finger and then *magic*. My boy became like clay in my hands. His breathing eased, his heart slowed and his hole relaxed, allowing my finger to slide in and out of him as he pressed back on it, fucking himself.

I was aware of the differing gazes upon me—admiration, shock, envy, spite and anger—but I didn't care. All that mattered was my precious boy in my arms and making him mine.

Gently I placed him down, lifted his bonded hands from around my neck and turned him to face the audience. Beo was unaware, slipping into that place some subs went, but I didn't want him to go into subspace. I was a dick, selfish and arrogant, and I wanted to be his whole fucking world.

"Beo, baby, listen to me," I whispered in his ear. He gave a pleasurable moan. "On your knees, on the table. Just like Friday night. Master wants your hole," I said, keeping my voice soft as I spoke to him.

My fingers trembled, my heart stuttering to burst from my chest. I've had submission before, but not like this, not so completely, willingly offered in adoration to me. It stole my fucking heart.

With shaky legs, and in a trance, he climbed up and went to his knees, arched his back, lifting his ass in the air, and laid his hands above his head. He let out an agonized groan as I swept my finger over his exposed hole. That groan grew louder as I ran my tongue over his sweet entrance. I nipped at his tender flesh, licking each little sting and driving myself out of my fucking mind with need. Lapping at his anus, I slowly pressed my tongue into him and stilled when he pushed back and started fucking himself.

Palming his jock, I unzipped the front, hearing him gasp as his cock sprung free, slobbering precum over my palm. I was losing myself in this moment with him, and mentally I cursed for the predicament I'd placed us in. I was still a Dom and I had an audience. I needed to mark my territory so these fuckers knew to keep their hands off.

"Open your fucking legs, boy," I demanded, "and don't even think of coming until I give you permission, or you won't be allowed to come for a week!"

"Yes, Master Colt," Beo said in hushed tones, opening his trembling legs. Beo tried to dig his fingers into the wood. Finding nothing to hold him steady, he gripped the edge instead.

"I'm here, boy," I said standing, zipping down my leather jeans and exposing my cock.

Pulling a condom wrapper from my pocket, my eyes met Martin's. Such jealousy burned wild in those gray-blue eyes that any other man would have backed down. I only narrowed my gaze at him, meeting his stare.

*Yes, fucker, I won. So eat it.*

Rubbing my own precum over my cockhead, I rolled the latex over my dick.

Running the tip down Beo's valley, I heard him groan.

Slowly, with only my spit as lube, I pressed into my boy, feeling his hole swallow my cock. It was something else, seeing my dick disappear down his ass, watching it slide back out and back in. His hole clamped down hard when I was balls deep. Feeling him tremble with each slow thrust was nothing but heaven. I was beginning to realize that when I was with Beo, when I was inside him, nothing else mattered other than hearing my name on his lips, his next quavering breath, that sweet beautiful moan that fried every nerve receptor in my body.

Pulling on his harness, I crashed him against my chest. I climbed on the table, spreading my thighs on either side of his, causing him to sit on my cock and filling him as deeply as I could go. We both shuddered as my tip pressed against his prostate. Beo leaned his head on my shoulder, turned and pressed his nose against my neck, breathing deeply.

"Fuck me, Master... please?" he begged.

I roared, snapping my hips and slamming hard into him. Beo cried out so loud, Martin was up off his seat, fists clenching, white knuckles at his sides. My eyes cut to his, and I growled, thrusting into Beo again, this time only a whimper bolted from my boy's lips.

Coiling the belt and his leash in my hand, I fucked my boy, hearing his cries going silent, his mouth pressed against my neck and nostrils snuffling at my skin as he breathed with each plunge. My eyes challenged Martin to dare step in and stop this. I was only met with a single wet tear rolling down his cheek. I sneered at him in victory, taking Beo's lips like a deranged animal, kissing my Babyboy hard.

Sweat gleamed and dripped down my scalp, and our bodies rubbed against each other. I felt the increased sensation in my sac.

Beo's dick was hard, straining backwards to his belly, smearing precum as I moved inside him.

His submission was breathtaking.

"Beo..." I whispered into his mouth when he stopped kissing. My boy was slipping into subspace again.

"Come back to me, boy." I slowed my thrusts, clenching my ass from the torture and the burn as I edged myself. "Don't go there. Master wants you here with him," I growled and bit his lip. When Beo's eyes snapped open, beholding me with soft tenderness, I couldn't help myself.

"I love you, Babyboy," I said, not caring who heard because it was only meant for Beo.

He responded by pushing his tongue into my mouth, moving his hips and fucking himself on my cock. Reaching for his dick, I wrapped him in my palm, allowing him to fuck my hand and fuck himself. Pleasure rippled along my spine and spiraled through into my cock as Beo worked his channel along my length, hissing as each bead rubbed his anus.

His cock swelled as he panted against my lips. Releasing his mouth, the belt and the leash at the same time, I wrapped my arm around his torso, plowing into him hard, fast and deep.

"Come for me!" I rumbled in his ear, unclicked the cock ring, and bit down hard on his shoulder. I felt his little ring clamp around my shaft, pulling a growl from me. Fire jolted in my balls, and I cried out, tears pooling in my eyes as I pumped into his boy pussy wantonly, hitting his prostate over and over again.

“Now!” I snarled against his skin, digging my teeth into flesh and—fuck, Beo’s cock burst, spewing white, creamy cum streams, like icing, over the black table. I fucked him through his orgasm. My body shuddered, trembled, and my cock erupted, shooting cum in the condom as if it was the Fourth of fucking July!

“Master,” he whispered, sagging against me while my cock finished emptying. His head pressed to my chin, tears freely flowing down his face. “My Master.”

“Mine, all mine, Babyboy.” I pulled out and took his lips while our bodies began to piece themselves together.

A short while later I was standing in The Black Room, waiting on Beo to get back from the restroom, when a large hand squeezed my shoulder. Being six-foot-seven, I towered over everyone except motherfucking Hades. Turning, I had to look down at the shorter man, but instantaneously showed my respect by lowering my gaze.

“GrandMaster Hans,” I greeted him.

“Look at me, boy,” he said in a stern baritone voice that still made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. He was the only Dom that ever addressed other Dominants as boy or girl.

“Your title is well earned, Colt. But you didn’t own that boy out there tonight, so stop smiling and get a grip, old fool. I will say this: you did manage to make a couple of enemies tonight, not that that would bother you.”

I frowned at the man. He always spoke in riddles. “Master, with all due respect, I don’t quite understand what you mean.”

He laughed, that easy laugh of his with that glimmer in his eye.

“Little trick of the trade that’s a real bitch to accept. Our boys own us more than we will ever own them.”

“Master Yoda!” Beo said in a chirpy, slightly raspy voice. I had to raise an eyebrow at the scene playing out before me. GrandMaster Hans scooped Beo up and wrapped those grizzly, hairy forearms around my boy. Beo planted a big wet smacker on the man’s bald head. I think it shone even more when Hans went pink in the face.

“Still with the *Star Wars* references, boy?” Hans growled and placed my boy down.

Surprisingly, I felt no jealousy as I watched the play between them.

I felt a tug on my arm, and turning, I came face to face with Finn. “What the fuck you staring at?” I growled low, keeping my voice between us.

“You’re infatuated with him. It’s why you’re having this new mood swing.” The little shit actually bared his teeth at me. I was so ready to strike him until his next words stopped me dead in my tracks. “Till you have your fill of him, Master Colt. Then you’ll come back to me.” He swiped a tear running down his cheek and turned away. “You always come back to me.”

I watched him walk away to the back rooms, grinding my teeth because fear was a deadly thing so easily created. And I was scared, scared if the time came and I grew tired of Beo. What then?

Pain lanced through my chest thinking about it, knowing how I’d act—all coldhearted and cruel. I couldn’t bear the thought of the pain that I would see in Beo’s face. It left a bitter taste in my mouth. I prayed that day would never come. But it did sooner than I expected.

Monday arrived, and I was hesitant sending Beo off in the morning, dropping him in front of a brownstone. Sitting in the car, I watched him interact with a rather beautiful blonde woman and a little girl that jumped up and down when she saw Beo. My heart warmed at the sight, seeing the smile on Beo’s face. But I was also jealous, tightening my hands on the steering wheel. Fuck if I knew why—she was only a child—but I was.

And I seriously needed help. This jealousy was beginning to turn in my gut, and I didn’t want it or anything else to be the end of me and Beo. I set up an appointment with Aria for Thursday morning. To worsen matters, Beo didn’t call when he was supposed to, only texted saying he was running late and couldn’t call, and would see me at eight that evening. Luckily, I was too swamped at work, having a hearing with the crew, and private meetings with the men I assigned to handle Hades’ shipment.

Richard avoided me like I was the flu. I didn’t think much of his drunken parade Saturday evening. Hell, it was the man’s birthday, but the hurt in his eyes, the sorrow. Something was up between him and James. I had a feeling it was more than the fight they had and his declining of my invitation to join us at The Bark. My heart hurt for Richard.

That evening I had barely stepped into the penthouse and shut the door when the phone rang. My heart pounded as I rushed for it, hoping nothing had happened to Beo. It was security.

“Mr. Maxus, there’s a boy—”

“Send him up,” I said, sighing and placed the phone down. I was too tired to fight with the new security guard. I assumed he was referring to Beo. Five minutes later there was knock on my door. Frowning, my shirt half-unbuttoned, I walked to the door thinking Beo must have forgotten his set of keys.

It wasn't Beo. Motherfucking Finn leaned against the wall, dark shadows under his eyes. His always perfect hair was shaggy and wild looking. He peered up at me with red eyes and lowered his gaze.

“What the fuck do you want?” I asked, too exhausted to growl.

“I'd like to talk, Master Colt, please...” he said in a haunted tone.

“Make it fucking quick,” I snapped and turned, walking to the kitchen.

I stood with my back to him, shoved two pain tablets in my mouth and downed it with a gulp of water. Finn wrapped his arms around my waist and pressed his face against my back.

I slammed the glass down so hard that it shattered. Spinning, I gripped him on his sweater and shoved him backwards, causing him to stumble to the kitchen floor. He began to fucking sob.

“You wanna bitch?” I raised my voice. “Then you bitch, but you are not doing it in my penthouse, on my fucking kitchen floor.” I stepped toward him.

“All I wanted was you. All I ever wanted was to be your boy. The first night I laid my eyes on you, I knew you were the man I wanted to be with. I thought you wanted the little whore, the dirty bad boy. But no! You had to pick him. Why? Him of all people! He's shit, scrawny, weak and pathetic, and you allow him to touch you?” Finn stood, tears running down his face.

I clenched my jaw and balled my fists, but anchored myself on the spot.

“What happened to the man I knew? The Colt Maxus that took what he wanted and didn't give two fucks about anything. The man that manipulated and blackmailed people. The man that had no problem taking someone out to get what he wanted. The man I love.”

“Get out!” The voice threw both Finn and I off and silenced us. I looked up to see Beo standing there. The exact image that had flashed in my mind the previous night that I didn't want to see on his face was there, and I was unprepared for the twist the knife brought with it when it pierced my heart.

“Beo,” I said, but I never heard his name leave my lips because motherfucking Finn challenged my boy.

“No!” Finn turned to me, anger radiating in his face. “Seriously, he calls the shots now?”

“I said get out!” Beo growled, a nasty sound from his lips. My eyes were drawn to him again and this time I took in his appearance. He looked weak, like he would drop any second, and I didn’t think it was from hearing what Finn had said to me.

“I said, get the fuck out of this apartment!” Beo took a step closer, and Finn turned to him.

“Who the hell do you think you are, coming into my life and staking claim to what is mine? You are nothing but a little poz kid seeking cock. You should just roll over and di—”

I clasped Finn by the back of his neck so quick and with so much force he yelped. I didn’t give a fuck as I hauled him down the hall and shoved him out the door.

“You never come near me or Beo ever again... You might not live to tell that tale, little boy!” I growled and slammed the door. Walking back to the kitchen, I could still hear Finn’s crying coming from beyond the front door.

Stepping into the kitchen, my heart pounded like a fucking monster against my chest. Beo was huffing. The back of his T-shirt was drenched in sweat as he gripped his stomach and leaned on the island with his other hand.

“Baby?” I said, my voice shaking, and reached for him. The moment my trembling hand brushed his neck, he turned away.

“Don’t touch me,” he said. Slowly and in pain, he walked out of the kitchen and down the hall. I heard the click of the guest room door closing.

My heart stung with each painful thud it gave in my chest. I had to rest my hand against the wall as I made my way to the guest room.

Rubbing my palm over my face, I held my breath and listened. Silence grimly greeted me.

Cradling the door handle, I stopped. My breath became uneven, and I dropped my hand. I leaned against the wall next to the door and slid down to the floor, arms resting on my knees, head pressed back to the wall.

I sat there, seeing the image of Beo’s face—the pain in his eyes—and the image of him walking away.

“Beo,” I said, my voice sounding brittle. “Babyboy, I wanted to tell you, but not like this.”

I took a deep breath, knowing that what I was about to tell him, only one other person knew. I was going to tell Beo everything, even the things Richard never knew, and once those things were said, I couldn't take them back. Life is a gamble. The stakes are high, but once you put your heart out there, the line of caution blurs and you don't think straight. My throat felt dry. I licked my lips and spoke from the heart.

"I don't know if you're listening, Babyboy, but find it in your beautiful heart to hear me. Whatever you think of me thereafter is your choice, your decision, if you want to leave. But *please*, just listen. When Richard and I started our little empire back in the day, neither of us could comprehend where we would be today, or the price involved to reach the power and money we have now.

"Honestly, if I knew back then what it would cost, I'd have pursued a career as an entomologist. Can you imagine, me and insects?" I chuckled into the silence, knowing it was only because I was nervous. "You see, Beo, we live by a different sets of rules than normal people. You swim with the sharks, it's eat or be eaten. You think the government runs this show? Fat chance. It's the crime lords that run this world. Ancient orders that have existed for millennia. It goes deeper than drugs, weapons and money. It's dominance over who rules, who holds the most power over you. When someone holds power over you, Babyboy, you'd do anything to become more powerful than they are, and if that means you have to take them out..." I paused, took a deep breath and said, "Yeah, I had others killed. But it was either I kill them or they kill me. I'm not saying I'm some big bad mafia boss, but I'm no saint either.

"I was a hungry, tyrant newbie, riding the wave of endorphins along the way to my rise in power. By the time my wisdom came, Richard and I were so deeply involved we couldn't step out. You don't just step out from that world. The master whose strings you dance to is the one who holds power over you. When he uses that power to protect you because you are valuable to him, you respect him. Hence how I came to know Hades. He's much more than just a Motorcycle Club President, Beo.

"I know," he said stepping out of the room and standing before me. Gently he sat down opposite me, crossing his legs.

My gaze caught his. There was compassion, understanding and concern in his face when he gave a small smile. Beo reached for my hand, and as I allowed him to take mine, he entwined our fingers.

A strange feeling blossomed in my heart. It was different from what I was feeling for him—stronger. A little seed he planted there, and I realized how close I was allowing Beo to get to me, not just physically but emotionally. We sat in silence as he held my hand. I had more to tell him, but I was frightened to open up this part of me. I wasn't sure if he would want the wreckage left behind afterwards. Even I wasn't sure what the extent of that wreckage would be.

"Why, Beo?" I asked. His head lifted up, a silly, adorable, little frown on his forehead.

Pulling my hand from his, I looked up at the ceiling. "There's something else I need to tell you, and again, I ask you to listen." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, fighting to slow my heartbeat that was galloping like a motherfucking racehorse.

"Growing up, Babyboy, I had anything and everything I could wish for—money, toys, food, luxury—you name it. But I never had love."

Swallowing, already feeling the moisture burn, I closed my eyes, trying to force the tears back.

"My father was a monster, Beo, my mother a demon. The reason I don't drink is because I don't want to become who and what my father was. He would drink alcohol like it was water. He would always have a bottle of whiskey in his hand, from the moment he woke up to the moment he slept. My mother always said he should have married and fucked the bottle."

I shook my head and licked my lips.

"He'd get drunk, and then he'd get angry. When he got angry, he took it out on me." I forced myself to look at Beo, his brown eyes soft and wet. I pulled in a pained breath at seeing my boy shed not one but numerous tears for me. But I started this, I needed to finish it.

"Sometimes I'd get beaten so badly I couldn't see out of either of my eyes for days. He broke my nose so many times I lost count. I became angry at the other kids my age, wondering how they could laugh and smile so innocently. Didn't their fathers do that to them? Then how could they still smile? When you're beaten to the point that you black out and wake up in a pool of your own piss and shit, bruised and broken, you remember the words he'd shout as he hit you with his fists. *What a pathetic child you are, how weak you are, how worthless...* and you start believing it. I hated other kids. I was jealous of them and started to shut everyone out."

“But he was nothing compared to her.” Beo’s eyes went wide at my tone, but I forced myself to continue.

“I think I was around eleven when it started. She would come into my room, take a belt and wrap it around my neck, and then she would pull down my PJs and take off her gown. She would rub herself on me, and if I couldn’t get hard, she would choke me. I tried to hit her, push her off, and begged her not to, but she always said, ‘*Good boys don’t hit their mommies. Good boys do as they are told, and all boys do this with their mommies.*’ Some nights, she would rub herself...” I swallowed, forcing the bile in my throat to go down. It only burned where it stayed in my gullet. “She forced me to lick h...” My fucking voice broke. *Empty*. I was numb.

“Master.” Beo sniffed and wiped at his tears. His eyes didn’t hold pity, they held heartache. *It broke me*. He fucking cried for me, a monster that didn’t deserve a single tear.

Sighing, I forced myself to tell him the last part.

“When I was thirteen, they pushed me too far. Beo, I was a boy, a fucking kid. My father had already beaten me earlier that day, and I knew she would come for me that night. So I waited for her atop the stairs, and when she reached the top saying, ‘*Come to Mommy, my little boy,*’ I ran at her and I pushed as hard as I could. My father heard her scream, but I was ready for him too. He thought I was a kid, that I was weak. That I knew nothing! That I was capable of nothing! When he reached the top of those stairs, saw my mother lying at the bottom with a broken neck...” I looked away from Beo, not able to face him as I said, “I pulled the fucking trigger, screaming at him, ‘*Who’s weak now?*’ Richard was our next door neighbor’s son. He found me sobbing hysterically at the top of those stairs. The authorities wanted me evaluated, but Richard’s father didn’t want them to, and later he managed to adopt me. The night Richard found me, he held me in his arms. It was the first time I was held with compassion... as a child should be.”

Beo grasped for my hand, pressing my bigger fingers against his thinner ones. Before I could pull away, he laced his fingers with mine and quickly crawled between my legs and laid his head on my chest.

“I get it,” he said in a sob. “I ain’t saying what you did was right, but I understand. You were a kid. You didn’t know what to do. You were a teenager, just discovering things about yourself, discovering who you were, and you were terrorized by the people who were supposed to protect you, supposed to love

you, and one night they pushed you too far.” Beo’s hands clawed at my shirt, pulling on it when a shudder rippled through his form. “They already had, and you shattered. You did what you had to do to survive. I get that this wall you have up, this macho image you carry around, is your defense, big guy. It’s what you cling to, to not relive that.” He snuggled closer and pulled my arms around him, pressing his face to my neck.

“Beo, there’s one last thing, Babyboy,” I said with my lips pressed against this head.

It was late; the hallway had plummeted into darkness, and the cold had seeped into the penthouse, but with him close to me I felt warm.

“No submissive, hell, no man has slept with me in my bed or even been in my room because I still have nightmares when I sleep. Night terrors and night sweats.” I squeezed his hand. “I still piss in the fucking bed at night.” He squeezed my hand back. “But the first night you slept here... It was the first night, Babyboy, the first time in my life that I didn’t have a nightmare, a night terror, that I didn’t piss in my own bed. You standing at my door, holding me, was the first night I felt a calm in this storm always raging inside me.”

Beo gazed up at me, wet tears reflecting the light they caught from down the hall.

“So why, Beo, do you reach out to the darkness and touch the single dim light that’s left in this chaos inside me? Every time, you are gentle, soft and caring. When you look at me, you see the fucked-up shit I am—the cussing, the fucking swearing, my short fuse. Still when I look at you watching me, you still seem to think there’s some decency inside me, some good. There’s no fucking good there, boy. There’s only this... monster—a self-righteous motherfucking son-of-a-bitch monster that doesn’t know the first thing about giving love or receiving it. So why do you care?”

He dropped his gaze, a last tear making its way down his cheek, and it took all my strength not to taste it. *Let’s add sick bastard to that list.*

“We can’t help who we fall in love with, Master, but we can believe that, somehow, we can try and make it better. Because even a villain deserves a chance at love. And what if that is their redemption? What if I am your shot at saving you from damnation by loving you?”

“Beo,” was all I said and covered his lips with mine.

We made love that night, a slow burning passion in my bed, in my bedroom, and he fell asleep in my arms. He had witnessed the ugly, heard the

blackness, and still he clung to me. He didn't judge me. He didn't think I was weak. Despite all that, he still wanted to be mine.

Tuesday I didn't go to work. I wanted to spend it with my boy, but there was something slightly off with Beo. Whenever I'd catch a glimpse of him, there was a shadow on his face, some sort of deep internal struggle going on inside.

When I'd ask what was wrong, those shades would disappear and a smile would grace his face. "Nothing, Master. Just thinking." I didn't pay much heed to it, but I was worried about him. Hell, when wasn't I? He wasn't eating properly, and he was getting thinner. Thoughts started swirling in my mind, and I remembered Finn's comment. That one little word, "poz," kept rooting in my head. I didn't know Beo's status. If he was HIV positive, why wasn't he on antiretroviral drugs?

I left the conversation for Wednesday evening as I had planned a scene for us that night. Evening came only for big brown eyes to look up at me and say, "Master, I'm really tired. I'd like to go lie down."

I gave a cordial nod. Here I had planned out an entire scene, and he dismissed it, and I allowed it. Watching him walk to the bedroom, the feeling gnawed at me that he was hiding something.

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"You're extremely jealous around Beo, especially when you are in the company of other people. You feel they're a threat to what you two have and that you will lose that. I want to say to the point of obsession and overprotectiveness," Aria said, peering over her glasses at me on Thursday morning.

I had told her what she needed to know—that I was abused and raped as a child, how me and Beo met, what it felt like those weeks before he came to my penthouse, how I disciplined him without real reason or right to do so, and that I told him about my past Monday night. It was one long session. I was scared at first, stepping into her consulting room, that I wasn't going to say anything, but there was a weight lifted from my shoulders after opening up to Beo, which made some parts easier to tell her than others.

"I'm speculating that your overprotectiveness is of the unhealthy variety. I understand, as a Dominant myself, that we tend to be protective about our submissives. It's a natural trait in some Doms, to a certain extent. However, this is something minor to the current issue, and I'm not talking about the trauma

you experienced as a child. That is going to take time. To start, we will address the present and move further back.”

Nodding as I agreed with her, I already felt exhausted from the three-hour-long session.

“Your relationship with Beo, and this has something to do with your childhood trauma, do you believe you are in love with him?”

I glared at the bitch. What kind of question is that? “I don’t believe. I knew I was in love with him from the moment we met,” I barked. I held my lips as she gave me a stern look.

“Is it this intense, strong and overpowering compulsive feeling that you have to possess him? That no matter what, you have to have him, no matter the consequences? That whatever follows, he has to be yours, but also accompanied by intrusive thoughts?”

She was so spot on it scared me. “Yes... isn’t that what love is?”

She took off her glasses, placed them down and stood. Walking around her desk and sitting next to me, she folded her hands over her thighs and said in a gentle voice, “No, Colt. It’s called limerence, an infatuation or obsession with another. It has the illusion of love on the outside, but in your case it is spurred on from your trauma. A longing to know love. To have someone love you and love them back. I believe Beo represents your younger self, maybe not physically, but the fact that he looks weaker than he is. Now, yes, I know you’ve had subs before that were smaller and weaker than you, and you would ask, why Beo? I think that deep down, when you first met, you did fall in love with him, but somewhere along the way that feeling got damaged and turned into limerence. This is the part you are not going to like, but if you care for Beo, then both of you, in order to break the effect of limerence, need to break away from each other for a period of time. I mean no contact. No speaking, not even phone calls or text messages, nothing. You need to go back as if both of you never met, never knew the other existed.”

She placed her hand on my forearm. “You are not the first Dominant that has fallen into the trap of limerence. You won’t be the last, but you two need to break apart before you hurt each other. That is my suggestion to you. Pick a date, meet up after a period of time and see if you two still feel the same for each other. But *this* is not love, Colt.”

I didn’t know if I should be angry or furious, crack the bitch’s skull against the wall or rip her spine from her body.

“By the look in your eyes, you really want to slaughter me, don’t you?”

Anger twitched in my face, but I slowly nodded.

“It’s expected. I’m stepping in, telling you to give up the one thing you have longed for your entire life, and I’m telling you to let it go. It’s natural that you want to fight it. But remember I’m trying to help you, and let me tell you,” she blushed, bearing a silly, smug smile on her face, “true love is more than what you’re feeling right now, and a hell of a lot stronger.” She let go of my forearm.

“I’ll give you a week before I schedule another appointment, but, right now, don’t run to Beo. Wait and think about what I said, because if you go to him now, what I just suggested will be banished from your mind.”

She stood and walked to the door, pulled it open, and held it for me.

As I made my way past, I was still too angry to say anything because if I did, I would only spew poison from my mouth, and I wasn’t trusting the twitchiness in my hands.

“You have my number, Colt. Call me if you need to talk,” Aria said and went back to her desk.

Sitting in Central Park, I gazed at the world around me, and I pondered on that saying: take time to stop and smell the roses. In the twenty years I’d been living in New York, I had never just sat and watched the world around me. Usually I was filled with jealousy at the easy life these people had, but this time I didn’t feel jealous. Because this time, when I looked closer, the young couple walking on the path holding hands were not walking close, not speaking to each other, or looking at one another. They were together, but at the same time they were worlds apart.

My gaze drifted to a little girl playing in the autumn leaves, her father sitting with her scarf in his hand on a bench. He pulled out a silver flask and took a sip and quickly hid it again, his face red and gleaming.

Another scene caught my eye, two young men around Beo’s age sat under a tree. I could see they were homeless, but I could also see that, despite that, nothing could rob the happiness from their eyes. The darker-haired one was slightly taller with his back against the tree. His arms were wrapped around his lover, who was looking up at the black-haired man. They had it—the one thing I could never buy, never force from someone, even though I had tried. They had so little, and yet they had everything because they had each other. Something dripped onto my cheek as I kept looking at them. My throat felt

thick as I swallowed, and I remembered the gypsy's words, "*you had so much, and yet, you still have nothing at all.*"

I didn't know how I was going to do this to Beo, but for him, for us, I had to. One day I hoped he would understand, and this time, when the second tear rolled down my cheek, I didn't fight it, nor the third and the fourth.

I had barely parked in my designated space later that evening when my phone rang.

"GrandMaster Hans?"

"Colt, we need you. It's Finn," he rushed out the words, sounding winded. "The whole club is on lockdown because of him. The boy's hysterical, wanting no one to touch him, and keeps screaming for you. I think he's dropping, Colt."

I panicked, ending the call. Finn had fallen into sub drop, which was never a good thing for a submissive. It mostly happened after an intensely heavy scene, hence the reason I would comfort a sub after I used the Serpent's Tongue. It could also be a mental thing when a sub was released from their service or away from their Dominant for an extended period of time. I knew Finn's was because of Beo and me. It was only logical that he would be screaming for me. We've been at our Dom and sub play for five years now. This was the first time I had rejected him and treated him poorly, and I had done it harshly.

I called Beo while driving to The Bark. Two rings and he answered.

"Master, I'm glad you called. I wanted to apologize for last—"

"Beo, not now. I'm on my way to The Bark. There's an emergency that needs my attention."

He took a couple of seconds to respond. "Is everything okay, Master?"

"It's Finn. He's gone into sub drop and won't let anyone near him. I'll see you when I'm done there, okay?"

"Master, with all due respect Finn's playing you. He's making a very desperate attempt to place a wedge between us and—"

"Beo!" I growled. "Finn and I have history. You are not the only submissive in my life, and right now he needs me."

Realizing what I had said, I opened my mouth to correct it when Beo spoke.

"Yes, Master. I'll get dinner ready for you. Please drive safe." His words were short and clipped before ending the call.

I wanted to call him back, but I also needed to get to The Bark.

I hadn't stopped the car properly at the entrance when Clay came rushing out. "He's in room seven, and he's fucking uncontrollable. If you can't get him to calm down, I'm calling the authorities."

I only nodded and stepped through the lobby. The crowd that had gathered in The Black Room quickly moved and made a path for me to get to the back rooms.

Hurriedly, I made my way to room seven. I could hear Finn crying and thrashing against things.

Once I stepped into the room, hell froze over. The anger pulsing in my veins bolted, a sharp knife pierced my heart. "Finn, baby." I was shocked that the words passed my lips.

Finn turned and stared at me. His eyes were swollen and red from tears. Scratch marks and bloody bruises marred his forearms, and claw marks on his chest.

"Master," he sobbed, fell to his knees and curled into a ball, rocking himself back and forth, muttering incoherently.

Quietly I sat beside him, placed my hand on his back and stroked my fingers down his spine. He shivered at my touch.

"I'm here, boy. What's the matter? Tell Master what you need," I said, keeping my voice strong.

"Hold me, please, Master. I just want to be held," he cried, real, painful longing in his voice. This wasn't an act.

Pulling him to me, I wrapped Finn in my arms and pressed him to my chest, and he began to sob.

We sat like that for close to two hours, till my arms ached. Then he pressed his head into my neck and whispered against my skin, "So good to me. My Master. Thank you, Master."

"Finn, talk to me boy. What's all this about? Master can't help if you don't talk, so out with it, boy." I kept my voice low but firm, not wanting to send him back into hysterics.

"It's him, Master. Beo. I get you love him, but he isn't honest with you. He's sick, Master. He's only using you for a place to stay. He's manipulated

Master Martin for so long. He plays on Doms' emotions to get what he wants. I'm just scared he will hurt you, Master Colt."

"Finn," I raised my voice in warning.

He quivered in my arms. "Please, Master, don't punish me. I just want to be honest. I saw him Monday with Daddy Hades. They were just too intimate. Holding each other, kissing, that's why I came to you Monday night."

*Motherfucker!*

What was said this morning came back to haunt me. If it was limerence as Aria had said, then I might have been blinded by my obsession with Beo, under the illusion that his words were all truth, and not able to see what was in front of me. When I took into account what happened between us Monday night, I had to ask myself: *Was it just an act and all lies? Was Hades just a fucking friend of Beo's, a friend with motherfucking benefits? Was I only a fucking meal ticket for when Hades wasn't around?*

"You're growling, Master. It's hot, but you're hurting me." I realized that I was squeezing tightly on Finn's frame.

"Sorry."

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Draining the last of my drink—I needed one after hearing about Beo and Hades messing around. It was not something I wanted to hear, but coming from Finn, I was going to give my boy the benefit of the doubt. I couldn't trust Finn. He was a very good actor—could sell fucking water to fish. I stood, ready to leave, when Mason came up to me. He was a younger Dom that I had only met once before and ignored after.

"How's it going, Master Colt?" he asked with a smirk on his face.

I was not in the mood for small talk, with my brain going a mile a minute at that moment.

"No complaints here. See you around, Mason," I said over my shoulder and turned around to leave.

"I hear you've hooked up with Beo," Mason continued, not taking the hint. "I would've thought you'd have a tighter leash on him."

"What the fuck you getting at, shitface? What do you mean a tighter leash?" I growled, feeling the veins bulge in my neck.

“Well, let me put it this way. If Beo were mine, I definitely wouldn’t tolerate him giving up his ass to anyone else. Especially not Daddy fucking Hades. Who knows what that man has crawling inside his body?” Mason said arrogantly, leering at me.

I gripped him by his harness, picked the motherfucker up and shoved him against the bar counter.

“What the fuck are you trying to say, motherfucker?” I spat the words out into Mason’s face.

“Take those words any way you want, cunt! Now let go of me, fucker!” Mason hissed back. “You obviously have no idea what your sub is up to when you’re not around.”

“Fuck. You!” I retaliated, releasing his harness and walking off.

Moving as if on autopilot—kamikaze autopilot I might add—I got out of the club as if my life depended on it. Sitting in the car, I slammed my fist against the passenger headrest, sending it flying into the back seat.

“Motherfucking cunt!” I screamed at the top of my voice, swerving the car through the parking lot at my own violent outburst.

It didn’t take me long, speeding back home, and a few minutes later I was pouring myself three fingers of whiskey, downing them in one gulp. Not satisfied, I took the bottle and settled in one of the armchairs to wait for Beo. The motherfucker left a note saying he’d be back, went out to get God knows what.

Yeah, probably getting Hades’ cock happy while I wasn’t around.

Taking another long drag on the bottle, I heard the front door open and close.

My eyes went crazy as he walked in chewing a fucking bagel, but it was the leather jacket he wore that made me flip my shit. I knew that jacket with the studs, the badges and patches on the shoulder, the emblem of the Cerberus on the back and KING patched on the front right breast. That was Hades’ fucking jacket.

“Master?” Beo smiled, bagel crumbs sticking to his lips and chin.

My grip on the bottle tightened. He looked into my eyes, and that smile disappeared.

“Sit the fuck down,” I growled through clenched teeth.

Beo hesitated. I stood, grabbed him by the collar and yanked him onto the couch.

“I said sit, motherfucker!”

“Master?” Beo asked startled.

“All those times I couldn’t reach you. Your fucking phone is off, and you never gave me a direct answer as to where you were and what you were doing, right, Babyboy.” I spat his fucking pet name like a dirty word. “Coming home and pretending to not feel so good so we couldn’t fuck.”

Even though I was speaking softly, my voice was laced with venom, and I was fucking teetering on the edge, trying to hold my temper.

“I wa... wasn’t pretending, Master,” Beo answered.

“I wasn’t asking you anything, boy. I’m merely stating facts here. You see, it’s come to my attention that all those times I couldn’t get hold of you, you have been very generous with what is mine.”

“Colt, what are you talk—”

“Shut the fuck up, or I swear to God I will kill you right here, right now!” Spit hit Beo in the face as my words washed over him.

“Generous with what is mine! MINE!” I continued, fucking pacing back and forth. When the fucker tried to reach for the bottle, I spun around and sent that bottle of whiskey toward the wall. It exploded upon impact against the LED TV.

I grabbed for Beo, pressing him against the back of the couch, my hand firmly around his neck. I bent over him and snarled in his face.

“How many have you spread your ass for? How many have fucked that cunt of yours, bitch? You scream their name as they open you up? As they fuck what’s mine? You let them dump cum in you? How many loads have you taken up there? Answer me!”

“I... I—” Beo choked and struggled to breathe. I could feel his pulse racing against my hand. I loosened my grip and glowered back at him, and for the first time there was fear... and then fire. I let go of his neck taking a step back.

Beo was up on his feet meeting my glare. “What the fuck? Who the hell do you think you are to ask me that? Your own reputation considered, Oh Mighty King of All Glory!” I stared back, pulling my lips tight and clenching my fists before I really did hurt him. Some part of me was putting up one hell of a battle

to prevent that, because some stupid fucked-up part of me wanted him to say they were lies, that it was just made up.

“Yeah, as I thought,” he continued. “You can dish it out but you can’t take it yourself.” He looked down and took a deep breath. “What happened in my past is the past. I didn’t know you then, and sure as hell have nothing to explain to you now.” He wasn’t screaming. Unlike me and my own anger, Beo’s was under control it seemed.

“I’m sorry, Colt, you didn’t deserve that. I—”

“Get out! Get the fuck out of my home, you motherfucking whore!” I growled into his face. Being angry one second then trying to be all sweet and innocent, wasn’t going to work on me any longer. I pulled Beo up off the couch by his collar. He stood trembling, emotion playing in his eyes.

“Did you hear me, cunt fucker?” I ranted, baring my teeth.

Still he didn’t move. He just looked at me.

My fists unclenched. My hands started to rise, ready to claw for him and shove him out.

“I said—”

“I heard you, Master. I didn’t ask for this, Colt. I told you it was a bad idea from the get go. I’ll go pack,” he said and turned, walking out of the living room.

I stood unmoving, hands finally dropping to my sides, the anger still roaring in my blood. Several minutes later, he emerged. I didn’t even look up at him, till the little fuck came to stand right in front of me.

“You have more to say, you little fuck?” I breathed into his face.

“Yes,” he said in small voice and looked me straight in the eye, a tear tracing its way down his cheek.

“You will always be my Master, Colt, no matter what. Please, look after yourself.” He stepped up to me, went up on his toes and placed his hands against my chest. The anger rippled inside me. I was ready to grab his throat and throw him across the fucking room when those lips touched my cheek. “Thank you, Master,” he said, turned and walked out of the door, out of my life, closing it quietly behind him.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Eleven

*“When the heart starts bleeding—death follows.”*

— Beo Moon.

To see the anger and hurt of betrayal in his face. To feel the raw lash of his words. An icy grip clamped and squeezed my heart, closing the door... to my home.

The world was dead to me, sounds a dull buzzing and lights a haze of unfocused blurs. Every breath hurt. Each step further away from him cut deep. I fucking hurt. I wasn't sure where I was heading 'cause it didn't matter.

I loved Colt. Maybe I had for far longer than I even realized. The pain in my chest only coiled tighter accepting that truth.

Somehow Colt had been fed lies about me, and I knew it could only be Finn. I should have been angry at Colt for believing the lies, but I wasn't. I couldn't hold him responsible. He had enough anger in his life, some he had never worked through, and it still haunted him. He didn't need mine.

Sitting across from him Monday night, looking into his eyes, seeing that pain wrench, hearing the desperate cry for love in his voice... it broke me. Word by word, piece by piece, it shattered me. I knew I had to end this between us. I just didn't know how without hurting him. That thought warred inside me Tuesday, like a violent storm, 'cause I was going to tell him. I had made that decision Tuesday night when I lay in his arms listening to his breath play over my ear as he held me close.

I also wanted to give Finn the benefit of the doubt, that maybe he was falling into sub drop. But now that I knew it was just a ploy to get me and Colt away from each other, I used that against the man I love. It motherfucking hurt. Was it really better to have loved than never have loved at all?

Two kinds of heartache, each worse in their own way. Either I told him I was dying, or I broke up with him. What hurt the most was that Colt needed to be loved. He needed that one person that would stand against the tide, turn the other cheek when the blow came, and be there for him when each piece fell, when each wall shattered. The fucked-up thing was it had to be fucking me 'cause any other sane person would have already been running the other direction.

And I was that person. That person was walking out on him. Guilt wrecked me the same way it hurt to say good-bye to him. I felt like a monster, worse than the one eating away at me inside my body.

The air in my lungs hurt. The memory of what I was leaving behind hurt, and now it hurt to live.

I stepped out of the building. A crisp cold air slapped me in the face and burned my eyes, but I was too numb to feel and take in the world around me. Inside I was bleeding out, fearing for the day that Colt would find out about the lies, but by then I'd be long gone. Who, then, will be brave enough to face that storm of pain and guilt and start to heal him?

Maybe it was the raw pain of losing him and allowing him to push me away, or it was the memories of what Dr. Mahajan said discussing my bone marrow biopsy on Monday afternoon. The treatment this time was going to be more intense, more invasive, and without a donor... Yeah, there was no hope in her brown eyes, no resurging smile on her face when she gave me a hug.

"Beo..." the night whispered. A cold chill jolted down my spine, my neck hair standing up as I recognized the voice.

*Mother Mary...*

I had never considered it, not once, not ever, till now. Raw pain ripped in my soul, and for the first time, I wanted it to stop. Stop before it even truly began.

As a downpour started, I stood and gazed at the cars blurring past me on the street.

So simple, so easy. An accident they would call it. Just one instant of pain and it would be over.

I took a breath and took a step.

All I needed was to take another. No medical bills for Doc to pay, no sorrow for them to bear, no reason to put myself through the pain of watching the people I love hurt as I fade away.

Just a lifeless body they had to burn and mourn.

*Midnight Blue, arms held so tight. Never just there, never just right.*

*Midnight Blue, my breath slight. Always numb, always cold.*

*Midnight Blue, sky of night. Death so easy, death so right.*

I wanted to go there. I wanted to be part of that. Because without him, the world hurt too much to live in it any longer.

I closed my eyes, dropped my duffel bag, took a breath of the moist air and lifted my foot. I thought of him... the warmth of being in his arms, a feeling of safety. I smiled. Master might never know, but he had given me my last happiness.

One step and I'd have that again. I'd join Mother Mary and my mother in the cosmos of the Midnight Blue.

Blood rushed through my ears, I heard nothing, saw nothing but a sharp light. Then came the sound of a car horn, the squeal of rubber on wet road, and the scream of a woman.

But it was too late.

"Forgive me, Master," I said.

"You motherfucking lost it?" he yelled at me as he gripped me, yanking me back and pulling me against his chest, the strong grip of his muscular arms holding me delicately.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Wendigo yapped in my ear. He spun me around, gripped me by the front of my shirt and glared down at me.

"Why did you stop me?" I whispered. "It was not your decision to make, Wendigo. It was mine."

He pulled me close to him and snarled into my face. "A brave man dies but once, a coward many times." He pushed me back. "Get your shit. You're coming with me," he barked.

"Why?"

"Because when Hades gave you his fucking jacket you became a member of my fucking brotherhood. Now, you either get your motherfucking shit and park your queer ass on my bike, or I beat you and take you with me bloody and broken." He turned, walking to his motorcycle. "And stop fucking crying!"

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Twelve

*"I will love him till the day I die."* — Martin Alexander.

Dr. Martin Alexander glared at the document before him; his hands shook and the page lines began to blur.

It had been five days since he'd witnessed the most painful image of his entire life. The boy, the man he was in love with, getting fucked in front of him. It ripped at his heart in ways he couldn't describe, but more so the contented happiness on Beo's face as Colt Maxus fucked him. Martin could do nothing to stop it. Who was he to deny the man he loved the last bit of joy in his life?

Even if it was in the arms of a monster.

Beo was dying, from what Martin could gather from the prognosis of the oncology report Dr. Mahajan had given him. Beo's life expectancy was estimated at less than a year without treatment and a bone marrow donor.

Martin needed to see Luther, but that was just the issue. Luther wanted nothing to do with him. He wouldn't even take his phone calls. The man had gone as far as getting a restraining order against Martin.

Unfortunately there was no law Martin could stand on to force Luther to donate bone marrow for Beo, or he would have done anything in his power to make that happen. All Beo did was bring happiness to people's lives, and now he was being taken from this world far too soon. If Beo didn't start treatment soon, he would deteriorate at a rapid pace. They'd been through it before, and Beo came out on top, beating his leukemia, but there was always the possibility that it would return. Martin didn't know if he could see Beo suffer through the treatment again. Why put him through it if it wasn't going to help him, only make him suffer more in the end? On the other hand, a mild dose of chemo and treatment of Beo's symptoms could slow down the cancer and prolong Beo's life for—*fuck it!* He balled his fist. *Why should Beo have to die when there was a chance Luther could save his life?* Slamming his fist against his desk, an angry silent tear rolled down his cheek. Martin let out a heavy, defeated sigh.

Beo wasn't on speaking terms with him. He guessed he could turn to Jane and ask her to convince the boy to come and start his treatment, but Colt Maxus was another matter.

Martin couldn't understand the sudden urge for the man to have Beo. Colt never looked twice at a sub, and when he did it was for the purpose of fucking the sub again. Beo wasn't even Colt's type. The whole thing didn't sit right with Martin. Then again, another man being with Beo never did.

Taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose, he closed his eyes and exhaled. He reached for the cup of coffee and took a swallow—grimacing at the cold brew but forcing it down—and placed his glasses back on his face.

"You're Doc, yeah?" A deep, smoky voice rocked through Martin's mind. He blinked and blinked again at the man standing in his doorway.

"Yes, I'm Doctor Martin Alexander," he said, not mentioning that only Beo called him that.

The handsome man grinned, his midnight black hair hung to his shoulders, wet and dripping down onto his leather jacket. Martin's eyes went wide. "You one of Hades' boys?"

"Ah, so the old medicine man knows who we are?" The man's grin caused a deep line to form on his forehead. "Wendigo," he said and gave a toothy smile this time.

Martin could only stare. He knew about Hades' life beyond The Bark, but never in his forty-five years had he seen a biker that fucking gorgeous. If he weren't so tired or emotionally drained, he was sure his dick would have responded by now.

"Anyways, old man," Wendigo stepped out of the doorway, "got someone here for you."

"Beo!" Martin breathed, his heart pounding as it always did when he saw those brown eyes, that black hair and that smile. But it wasn't the image looking back at him. Red and swollen, the bags under Beo's eyes were the darkest Martin had ever seen them, and his hair looked a mess.

Rushing out of his chair, Martin stumbled only to be caught by strong arms and helped up. "Easy, old fucker. Can't have you go breaking a leg." Wendigo's breath was hot against Martin's ear, but he paid no heed; his focus was only on Beo.

"Let go of me this instant!" Martin snapped.

"Sure, fucker." Martin felt the man's grip loosen, only for Wendigo to grasp him by the shirt and bring their faces close to one another. "Show some respect,

old man.” The man’s breath lapped at Martin’s face. “I looked after your boy these past couple of days. Fuck knows where Hades is, and I couldn’t get that kid to stop fucking crying. So show me some fuckin’ gratitude, you feel?”

Martin’s heart slammed against his chest. Those eyes were dead cold, glaring back at him, no matter how gold and warm they appeared. Slowly he bobbed his head and swallowed. Wendigo didn’t let go yet. First he straightened out Martin’s wrinkles, or tried to, reached for Martin’s glasses and set them straight on his face.

“Good. Now, go get the boy,” Wendigo sneered. Again Martin only nodded and swallowed.

It was just a moment, a slight moment, that Martin wanted to take the biker’s perfect pink lips between his and taste that mouth. He turned and stepped towards Beo.

“Come here, kiddo.” He held out his arms and pulled Beo against his frame, hugging him tight. Unwrapping his arms, he tried to get Beo to look at him, but Beo’s face was firmly pressed against Martin’s neck, his hands clinging to Martin’s shirt, scrunching the material.

“I’m sorry, Doc. I’m so sorry,” Beo said, his voice muffled as his chest vibrated against Martin’s.

“It’s okay, Beo. It’s okay. You’re here now. That’s all that matters. I’ll take care of you, I promise,” Martin murmured, holding Beo tighter.

“You look like you could do with some coffee, Doc,” Wendigo said as he walked past, turned and raised a lazy, questioning eyebrow.

“Yes, thank you. Some hot chocolate for Beo, if you don’t mind. Tell ’em it’s for Doctor Martin. They won’t charge you.”

Wendigo nodded, turned and walked out of the office. Several seconds passed before Martin heard a tired voice poke at him. “Stop staring at his ass, Doc. He ain’t a cock sucker.”

Martin gave a quick grin. Despite everything, Beo still seemed to have a small flame of his fighting spirit left in him.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Thirteen

*"I ain't fucking queer!"* — Wendigo.

Seated in a chair with the doctor's lab coat around him, the kid sipped the hot chocolate, retelling what had transpired between him and Colt.

"Always told Big H that one's a rotten piece of shit. I knows you, Beo. You ain't no fucking whore, and you and H goes back a long road. So he can fuckin' stuff it," Wendigo said. "Should go cut the motherfucker," he added, sneering and looking away.

His fucking eyes landed on the old man seated on the other side of the desk. Wendigo didn't understand what the motherfuck was happening to him, but there was something about the doctor that made him want to shove the man against the wall and drive his tongue down the man's throat—*Wait, what the fuck! Pussy-bitch-motherfucker!*—he mentally cursed.

Placing the Styrofoam cup down, he stood and said, "I'm out of here, motherfuckers!" He heard the kid mutter his name, but Wendigo didn't care. Why'd he think that fucked-up shit? The man was... well, a man. An old, attractive man, but still a man. He didn't fuck queers or men. He fucked bitches with their pussy going all wet and crazy while he teased them with his cock. He didn't do fucking queers!

He stopped as he rounded the corner and, with his hand, supported himself against the wall. He was about to motherfucking paint the walls right there on the fucking hospital floor. He wasn't even bi, not one percent gay, not fucking close. So what the fuck was up with his motherfucking shit? He didn't have a problem with gay men. Who people fucked was their shit, and here he was thinking about shoving his tongue down a man's throat. A fucking man, with a cock, as big and bulked as himself. "The fuck."

He coughed, took a step and got out his phone, about to call his girl Melissa. Yeah, he needed to fuck a bitch and forget this motherfucking shit right now. He was about to dial when that deep voice penetrated his ears.

"Thank you, Wendigo." That voice shot straight to his motherfucking nuts.

He turned, jaws clenched, and hissed, "Whatever, old timer. Was a favor for the big boss. Got it? You don't need to thank me, just..." Wendigo's gaze

swept over the man. Yeah, the motherfucker was big, thick and bulked. Definitely had more muscle meat and size than himself. He swallowed hard.

“Yeah, go take care of that kid.” He nodded repeatedly and froze when the doctor smiled, displaying a healthy set of white teeth. *Yeah fuck, fine!* He wanted to suck on those teeth, Wendigo thought *and you're motherfucking broken, that's what you are*, but his anaconda...

“Aww for fuck sake!” he growled, looked up at the ceiling, feeling his cock hardening. *Think pussy, man. Pussy juice, warm, wet pussy, coming all over your mouth.*

“You alright?” the doctor asked, reaching out and touching him on the forearm.

Wendigo just reacted. He dropped his phone and gripped the man by the throat, shoving him against the wall. “Don’t motherfucking touch me!” he snarled into the doctor’s face. That touch sent a sensation he shouldn’t be feeling straight to his dick.

“Motherfucking queers,” he barked and let go of the doctor. “Always touching me. What the fuck!”

Clearing his throat, those gray-blue eyes gazed at Wendigo. The doctor’s deep voice caused crazy-ass shit to happen to his stomach, and his chest contracted tightly. “Was only trying to say thank you. Beo means a lot to me, and you finding him before he—”

Aww fuck, the man was fucking crying now too! *Why don't we bring piñatas and tequila and have ourselves a fucking pity party?*

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I apologize,” the doctor said, straightening himself.

“You know what? Fuck you,” Wendigo said. Sneering at the doctor, he looked down at his hard dick bulging in his leathers. “And fuck you!” He turned and got the hell out of there.

Muttering to himself as he walked away, his fists still balled at his sides and blood boiling in his veins, he was stopped again.

“Wait, Wendigo, your phone.”

Turning, seeing the man holding it out for him, Wendigo snatched it and yelled, “Fuck!” ‘Cause he had to look into those gray-blue eyes and at those fucking hot lips again, causing his cock to drip.

Shaking his head, he spun and marched to the elevator.

He was so drowning himself in club pussy tonight, and the motherfucking rest of the goddamn weekend!

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Fourteen

*"It started and ended with a hippie kid. Marriage just wedged itself in there like a bullet." — Colt Maxus.*

I understood why I said what I had said, reacted how I did upon hearing one man's opinion of Beo. When it came to my boy, my brain malfunctioned, my heart short-circuited and I didn't work right. Hearing those *words* being said about him was a knife in my heart, and it massacred the image of the Beo I had grown to love.

That first week was unbearably hard with him gone. I'd reach for him in my sleep only to grasp emptiness. Other times I'd wake up in the spare room, not remembering how I got there, curled around his pillow, his scent still lingering in the sheets. When I'd snap awake, the anger would rear its ugly head, and my mind would spin—*how many men had he offered himself up to? Their dirty hands raking over his body. He was fucking mine! They had no right to even desire him.*

The deal with Hades never happened. All I got was a message delivered from one of his club boys, stating that it had gone south. When I asked where Hades was, the guy gave me a cold, stern look and I knew not to question his silence. I assumed something had happened to the bad ass wolf, and I was all too glad, because I wanted to rip him apart myself.

Beo's scent eventually disappeared from the sheets, the anger started to subside, and I began to fucking hurt. One I'd never experienced before. It hurt coming home to an empty house and not feeling his presence there. Not being able to smell him, touch him and taste him. I fucking worried.

I drifted that second week in an empty, cold and dark existence, the signs of depression lurking around the corner. I had to fix things with my boy. I had to win him back somehow, and the first step would be to speak to him. A phone call wasn't enough. I had to see him face to face. I'd get down on my fucking knees for him. And there it was. With that thought, I realized what Beo had come to mean to me. My hands shook, a tightness paralyzed my chest, and the first sob rocked through me as my world tore open.

One boy, with his innocence, his beautiful, unconditional gift of love and submission, brought me to tears and shone a light on my worst fears. Fear I'd

find him happy in the arms of another man. Guilt, if the words Finn and Mason had said to me were lies. I chose not to attempt to reach him or make contact because of my fears. I couldn't trust myself with coming face to face if either predicament held true.

By the third week, things became more bearable, and I was back to my old rude motherfucking self. The fourth week came and the demands of my body took over—I needed to fuck. I needed to dominate. I needed to pick myself up and move the fuck on. Accept that Beo, what we shared, whether it was truth laced with lies or the illusion limerence brought, was gone. And I had to accept and place it behind me. Life went on, and God, I tried. Got a boy to fuck, but when he went down on my dick, the basilisk wasn't having any. I couldn't get that shit up. Beo didn't only break my heart but my motherfucking cock, too! The only times I got hard were when I was alone in bed thinking about Beo, whispering his name into the night, spraying white jizz all over my chest. Beo had become a ghost in my life. One I didn't want to banish.

It was a Friday afternoon, and I sat at The Bark for the first time since our split. I was seated on a couch in The Red Room, barely paying attention to the conversations around me when I heard his name again for the first time. A group of Doms and boy Damon were having a discussion about submissives and somehow Beo became the topic of conversation.

"I feel sorry for that boy, for what he is going through," one of them said.

"Yes, Master Martin isn't taking it any better than any of us," another said.

"Beo never deserved this, Sirs," Damon said. "For as long as I have known Beo, he's been honest and truthful. He might be lacking in protocol and etiquette, but if there was one submissive I'd pass on my Alpha sub title to, it would be him."

"I'm just glad he has the support structure of people caring for him. I'm not sure he would last long without that," a third Dom said.

"Yes, but we want to do something for him, Sirs. That is why I came to speak to you all," Damon said.

I ground my teeth and clenched my jaw. Lifting my whiskey to my lips, I said, "Glad to hear the little whore is handling himself well. I wonder how many of you dropped a load in the cunt's ass," and downed half of my whiskey. I wasn't drunk, only warming up. Hearing others speaking of him and that they knew what was happening in his life while I had no clue, it hurt. The only way I could deal with that hurt was to bite back at the fucking bitch and remind

myself of how he betrayed me. I could feel the whole group turn and look at me, falling silent.

“Got nothing to say?” I challenged and turned to them. My eyes locking with boy Damon’s fiery gaze.

“If there’s one thing I know, Master Colt, it is that Beo was never, and will never be, a whore.” Damon paused, a haunted look to his eyes. “You know, he asks about you?”

My breath hitched, my throat got thick and the fucking knife in my chest slid deeper.

I wanted to ask Damon, what he said, but nah. *I had to be the dick.* “Who the fuck cares what Beo Moon asks or thinks. He is a little manipulative shit, telling Doms they are his everything, only to stab them in the back.”

“I don’t understand. Why would you say that, Master Colt? Aren’t you worried about him? Don’t you care that he’s dying?” he said, coming over and kneeling beside me.

The last sip of whiskey went down the wrong hole as I choked on it.

“What?”

The shock on Damon’s face could have equaled my own. Still, I cleared my throat, shook my head and sneered, “His fuck related HIV finally crept up on him? Serves him right, not being honest with people.”

“HIV? You don’t know anything do you?” Damon’s tone wasn’t challenging mine. On the contrary, his words left a painful frown on his face.

I kept staring at Damon. I could see by the way he bit his lip and the deep frown, his mind was working overtime, and a light switched, flashing behind his eyes as he looked up at me.

“That night! What did Finn say to you, Master Colt?”

“The truth, boy. That Beo had been spreading his fucking hole for Hades behind my back. Mason confirmed it too, boy,” I growled and stood. Anger coursed through my body, but I wasn’t sure at whom to direct it when Damon started to shake his head something fierce.

“No, Master.” He gazed at me, and for the first time since I had known Damon his eyes showed emotion.

“There is no doubt in my heart that the scene you and Beo shared in The White Room was done with nothing other than love. That connection between a

Dominant and his sub is not easily reached. It was as beautiful as it was breathtaking.” Taking a deep breath he continued. “It hurts me to tell you that you have been lied to and manipulated by the wrong people. Beo doesn’t have HIV. He has cancer, Master Colt. I believe he didn’t tell you because he knew that it would hurt you. He begged me to keep an eye on you, because you are the only Dominant he has ever loved.”

I glared at Damon, my eyes burning fire and chaos warring inside me. This couldn’t fucking be happening. Beo lied. Finn—*nah shit, who the fuck you kidding, Maxus? You know what Damon is saying is the truth.*

I was out of The Bark like lightning. Everything blurring around me, my heart pounding heavily in my chest as I drew in lungfuls of air. When I reached my car, I had to lean against it to steady myself as I struggled to get air into my tight chest and prevent me from falling over. My stomach knotted, and the world started to spin.

Realization slammed a carnal force of hell into my gut, cruel and vengeful. My world shattered and my heart crashed. I was motherfucking stupid, selfish and obsessed, wanting only what I wanted, caring only to have *him* when I should have been putting the pieces together. I was a sick, evil, twisted fuck, and *I* should be placed six feet under for my selfishness.

Beo was sick. That was *why* he was singing at *that* charity event, why he looked pale and tired all the time, why he was so motherfucking thin and not eating. I, in my obsessed lust for power and dominance, was too fucking blind to see that the man I loved more than anything in my life, who meant more to me than my next breath of air, was dying right before my eyes. Guilt ate at my soul, teeth and claws fucking ripping my heart to shreds.

Every time I got irritable with him, every time he tried to push me away, was because of this. He didn’t want to hurt me. I, the man who broke hearts, the one who didn’t give a fucking shit what happened, was being cared for by Beo.

*He didn’t want to hurt me.* Over and over I could hear those words in my head. Spinning tighter and tighter to the point I wanted to puke out my intestines.

He cared about a tyrant, a monster like me. Someone who didn’t deserve an iota of his heart, of his passion or love, and I allowed my anger to get in the way, allowed my selfish obsession and hunger for him to cloud my judgment. I was a motherfucking fool to even have listened to Finn in the first place.

Then I remembered the moment I walked into The Bark earlier and saw who the fuck were eating out each other’s mouths... motherfucking Mason and

Finn. Anger coursed through me. I dented my car's roof with the first slam of my fist, smashed the driver's side window with the second. I collapsed to the ground, blood oozing from my right hand as I shook and shivered. Forcing myself into a fetal position, the gravel dug into my leathers and skin as I pulled my knees against my chest and wrapped my arms around myself.

My Beo, my beautiful boy, wanted to protect me because he loved me. He cared enough to look beyond the anger and the black carnage and see something worthy to love.

My hand still shook, bleeding, as I pulled out my phone. I dialed Richard, knowing I couldn't drive in the state I was in... *Fuck!* I couldn't even fucking walk.

I finally managed to bring my trembling hand to my ear only to reach Richard's fucking voice mail.

Damon's voice, a distant sound, reached out for me. "Master Colt," he said softly and touched my shoulder. I didn't care who saw, I reached for the boy, pulled him against my chest, and I fell apart while he wrapped his arms around me and held me tight.

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I paced in front of the hospital. Up and down. Back and forth. My breath coming out a vapor against the cold New York winter air. My heart thrashed in my rib cage, and my right hand pulsed with pain.

Every time I would walk to the entrance I'd find myself turning around, twitching and panicked, not finding the fucking courage to step through the doors.

"Maxus?" His deep voice came from behind me. I spun to face him, gripped him by his coat and snarled into Martin's face.

"Where the fuck is my boy?!?"

His gray-blue eyes went wide as he stared back at me, his gaze shifting from my face to my hand covered in dried blood.

"I'll take you to him, but let me take care of your hand first."

"Fuck that... Beo now!" I growled.

"Colt, you're angry, you're scared and you *are* in shock. I will take you to Beo, but you..." He swallowed. "We need to talk first, please." Closing my eyes and letting out a heated breath, I released Martin's coat and clenched my fists at my sides.

“Make it motherfucking quick before I start ripping this place the fuck apart,” I said through clenched teeth.

Seated in Martin's office, my leg jumped up and down. He had tried to address my cut hand, but I wouldn't have any of it.

“I need to explain Beo's situation to you.”

I glared at him, but it was like water running off a duck's back.

“I've known Beo since—”

“Cut it, fucker,” I interrupted. “Get to the point!” I hissed.

Martin flashed back at me. “Not so simple, Colt. You need to listen.” His tone was serious.

“Beo's mother came to me when she was seven months pregnant with him, but by the time she came to me, her cancer had spread beyond leukemia and she was in danger of dying. I had to perform a C-section to save Beo. She knew she would never make it, but she made me swear I would look after him and I did, I tried. There was always a possibility that Beo might develop the same form of cancer she had, and at the age of seventeen—” Martin let out a deep breath. “You should have seen him. He was ready to fight it. His spirit and his courage, it was something to be admired. So we started him on...” and I started to nod absently at Martin. I hadn't a clue what he was talking about, my anger was starting to rise again at the delay in seeing my boy when his words caught up with me.

“Beo beat his cancer, but he knew there was a risk of it recurring, and this is the hardest part to say...”

“Don't motherfucking tell me, there's nothing you can do for him? I don't care what it takes, or who you need to get from what part of the world. I got the fucking cash. I'd give my last penny for my boy, so don't even say it!”

Martin shook his head. “I would do the same for him, Colt, and I think you realize that I was the one that paid for his treatment the first time around. I've paid for his medical bills, hell, since he was born and placed in a NICU. I'd do it again in a heartbeat, but this time, Colt, money and chemo can't save him. No doctor can save him.”

I couldn't believe it. “You want to motherfucking tell me that after all these centuries the medical world can't fix him? You want to tell me there is no other option in this whole goddamn world to save him?” Yeah my reasoning was

even more ridiculous, but I was high on adrenaline, and this wasn't the shit I wanted to hear.

I stood. "You know what, fuck it. I'll make my own calls on this."

"Be my guest, Colt, but you won't find anything. There's only one man in whose hands Beo's life lies now."

"God?" I wanted to laugh. I wanted to lash out at Martin's ridiculously stupid argument, but I didn't have the will or strength. I wanted to see Beo. I wanted to hold him. I wanted to say I'm sorry. I wanted to make everything right.

"No, but Beo's father can. It's a long shot, but the only one we've got." I spun so quick I think Martin was dazed.

"How much money? What does he want? What's his price?" I didn't care to ask why Beo's father never did it before. I only assumed he didn't want to help because he had some ridiculous price that needed to be met. Hell, if it meant I'd lose everything and Beo lived, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I was angry at myself and the rest of the motherfucking world and its greed for power and money. It always had to come to that, didn't it?

Martin's answer was a slap in my face.

"Luther Jacaruso doesn't need money. He simply doesn't want anything to do with his son. I tried to convince him, Colt. Looked my best friend in the eyes, told him his son was dying, and he sneered at me—'*Let him fucking rot*'."

I couldn't breathe, I couldn't fucking move. The world around me was squeezing down on me. In one breath Martin had told me that I was weak, incapable of helping the man that I loved. That I, one of the most powerful men of the era, couldn't do jack shit to save my boy's life. That the man in whose hands his life now lay didn't give a shit if Beo lived or died. Like fucking hell!

"I'll get him to do it, Martin. I'll find a fucking way. I swear to you. Now, I would like to see Beo, please." My fists shook as I met Martin's eyes.

"Not yet, I need to tell you about his cancer and—"

"I don't care! I want to see my BOY!"

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Following Martin towards the oncology ward, my mind raced through my connections. Who would know of anything that could help dig up dirt on

Luther? Snatching my phone from the inside of my coat, I stopped. Here, again, it was just me, me, me! I took a deep breath, because this time it was about what Beo wanted. This would be his decision. That's when the fear grabbed hold of me. *What if he hates me when he sees me? What if he doesn't want his father to—*

"Colt." We had stopped outside a room, the name plate next to the door read B. Moon.

The world around me slowed. This was real, this was motherfucking real, and if I didn't do something, my Beo was going to die.

"I don't know if I can go in there, Martin." The words had barely left my lips when my chest pulled tight and I clenched my gut, bending over and wheezing to pull in air.

Martin, ever the Doctor, quickly reacted, helping me to sit on a waiting chair next to the door. He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Listen to me, Colt. Listen," he murmured. I heard his voice, but it sounded light years away.

"You're having a panic attack. I need you to breathe for me. Slowly, counting back from ten. I'm gonna count with you."

Images rushed before my eyes. I was a child again, my bedroom wallpaper with black and blue airplanes vivid in my mind. *She* climbed on top of me, pulling the belt around my neck tighter.

*"Seven, six, five..."*

My father's face flashed before me, the stench of alcohol daunting and burning my eyes, hands clawing at my face as he shouted at me.

*"Four, three, two—"*

"I need to see Beo. Please, Martin. Let me hold my boy," I rushed out, winded. I knew what spurred the panic attack. I wasn't in control. When control was wrenched from my life, I felt weak. I felt alone. I felt like little Sammy, scared and helpless being pulled between two monsters; their claws different, but equally frightening.

On shaky legs, I stood and turned to the closed sea-green door. Martin's hand rested on my shoulder again. "Colt, I want to prepare you. Beo has lost a lot of weight." His words forced me to meet his gaze. I stared back at those glossy eyes, feeling the vice grip on my heart clamp tighter. "His antibodies will keep dropping, and soon we will be forced to eliminate physical contact.

For now, whatever time you spend with him..." Martin wasn't staring at me anymore, but past me, into the distance, "...make it count."

Nodding, he pulled something from his pocket and swiped at his cheek.

The click of the door opening was a sharp piercing noise dulled by the tornado of sound from the heavy beat of my heart and my blood rushing in my ears. The room was dark as I followed Martin in.

"He received treatment late this afternoon," Martin said in hushed words. My eyes traveled to the tray of untouched food with the cover still over it, the utensils sealed in an unopened vacuum bag. The bedside lamp cast a low gloom of orange light over the room when Martin switched it on.

My eyes trailed further, jaw trembling on seeing his form covered in white sheets. He was curled up on his side, his face hidden under the blanket. Only black hair poked out at the top. His right arm stretched out to his side, his hand open, sticking out from under the sheets, begging for touch.

"Stay with him for as long as you like. I'll arrange with the nurses to give you access to the room whenever you come to visit." Martin walked towards the door.

I had to know. "You're paying for this?" Martin didn't turn to me. He reached for his glasses and took them off, slowly nodding.

I turned back to Beo, hearing the door close behind Martin. Silently I picked up a chair and placed it down beside his bed and sat.

I stared at his pale hand, the fingers every so often giving a twitch.

Reaching out for him, my hand trembled. I knew he was asleep, but I wanted him to know I was here, that he wasn't alone that—my finger had only brushed his palm when Beo gripped it tightly. I was holding strong, fighting with each second that ticked away against the emotions so close to the surface. Until one word, one single fucking word shattered me. Then I broke down in silence, tears tracking along my cheeks. He'd whispered, "Master," in his sleep.

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It was four in the morning. Beo had been restless all night, tossing and turning, muttering in his sleep about Midnight Blue. I had only slipped out to grab a cup of coffee, something to eat and go to the restroom.

Stepping out of the restroom, I looked up and for a slight moment I took a deep painful breath at seeing a guy walking towards me. His head was bowed,

hands in his pockets, a leather, sleeveless punk jacket snugged tight to a small, yet muscular, frame. His arms were bare except for leather bands with metal studs on each wrist, and I couldn't deny how much that image resembled Beo. Till the kid looked up, and I relaxed.

Running my hand over my face, I started to move. The guy was walking straight towards me, and if I didn't step aside he was going to slam right into me. We brushed shoulders passing each other, and I gave him a sideways glance. My skin tingled with an uneasy sensation, but I kept walking.

"You dropped something, master," he said from behind me.

*Fuck!* I felt for my wallet, check, phone, check, and turned balling my fists.

"What!" I growled.

He casually came closer, the muscles on his arms flexing. He looked up, handsome despite the scar over his mouth and the itchy-looking scruff on his face. I didn't see his eyes because his hands were busy in front of me, playing with a card between his fingers much like a magician would play with a coin. "The Wheel of Fortune is an interesting card, master." I blinked and looked up. The shit was smirking from under thick brows.

Those eyes made my blood turn to ice; one green, one milky white, both smeared with thick eyeliner. My fucking heart thrashed in my chest.

"They say Karma's a whore with one nasty bitch slap when she comes to collect her due, but it can also mean change, hope or failure. That, however, is in your hands to spin, master." He offered me the card between two fingers. I crushed it in a violent grip, as I snatched it from him. He winked. Then the motherfucker grinned, turned and cooed over his shoulder, "You have a good day. May luck be on your side, you're going to need it." Fucker even wiggled his tight ass at me. I looked down at the card, narrowing my eyes as I brought it closer. It was from the same tattered, worn out deck the old bitch in the Vardo had, and his eyes were like hers. I looked up only to find the halfway empty. *Motherfucking gypsies and their bullshit.*

Opening Beo's door, I found him propped up on the bed, knees curled in front of him. The lights were on but turned down low. A loud rumbling came from the air conditioner above him. His head was bowed, and a sour, foul stench drifted in the air.

I opened my mouth to speak, and at the same moment Beo looked up, his gaze daggers against my heart. Widening his eyes, his lips parted. "Col—"

A painful sound came from him as he leaned forward, his shoulders shaking, and he gagged. I didn't know what to do. *I didn't know how to help my boy.* I could more than hear it hurt with each reflex as he spewed into a disposable pulp kidney dish.

My mind told me it was a side effect from the chemo, but it could never have prepared me for seeing it. The veins bulged on his forehead, the ones in his neck looking plain angry. His face was red and tears dripped from his eyes as he gagged for the fourth time then coughed and gagged again only for nothing to come out.

Moving swiftly to his side, I brushed my hand to the nape of his neck, forcing myself not to pull away at the cold feel of his skin.

"What are you—" He gagged again, or tried, but nothing came out, only a stream of saliva dripped from his lips. Winded, he fell back on the bed, taking deep breaths, tears glistening against his cheek. His hands shook while holding the kidney dish. The smell was nauseating and the sight—

*No, none of this, you stupid fucker! You proclaim you're strong, that you're untouchable and you want to throw up from this? It's only going to get worse from here on out, so man up, you pussy.*

Taking the dish from him, I placed it on the tray of the hospital bed and covered it with a paper towel. I took another one and reached for my boy's arm.

With trembling hands, I wiped at his mouth. Beo didn't open his eyes as his breathing slowed down. Disposing of the paper towel in the bin, I took his hands and covered them with mine.

"You shouldn't be here," he said in a hoarse voice.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't yet. My throat felt too thick with tar moving down, and I was too scared of what incoherent sob would come from my mouth. I gave his hand a gentle squeeze and sat on the chair next to his bed. A sigh came from his lips.

Several minutes later I trusted myself to speak, but even then my voice shook when I called to him. "Babyboy?"

He swallowed and pulled his hands from mine, propping himself up on his elbows and lowering his chin against his chest.

"I didn't want you to know. I didn't want to burden you with this, and I'm sorry for not telling you," he said in a dark tone, a heart-wrenching sob following his words.

Cupping his cheek, I pulled his gaze to me. My breath wedged in my throat as his eyes locked into mine. "Don't ever be sorry for that, Beo. I know why you did it. That you wanted to protect me, and, baby, no one has ever done that for me. Thank you." I leaned off the chair moving in to capture his lips, but he turned his head.

"Don't," I growled in a hard command. "I'm going to fucking kiss you, and I don't care if you taste like fucking vomit. I don't care if I have to wipe shit from your ass. I don't care if I have to bathe you myself, and I don't care if I have to spend every fucking minute by your side through this. I want to, and you will fucking let me because you are mine, Beo Moon. You will always be mine. I promised that I would take care of you, and you promised me that you would allow me to."

"Why?" He blinked and swallowed. "Why, after everything? How can you even look at me?"

Those words fucking hurt.

"Because you are my entire world, Beo. I've explained this to you. No one has loved me the way you do. No one has come this close to my heart. No one is brave enough to stand through my shit, accept the bad and the good, want to stay and help me. I know you would. You would do it because you believe that there is some part left inside worth loving. If I could take your place I'd do it in a heartbeat, Babyboy, and... Fuck, Beo! I fucking love you!" I kissed him so hard that I pressed him back against the mattress, my hands on either side of his face. Yeah, he tasted horrible, but I still drove my tongue in his mouth and kissed him with love.

Pulling back, I grinned. "That was horrible, boy, but so worth it." I pressed my forehead to his.

"Colt," he said, a warm tear slipping from his eye. "I'm scared," he whispered, fingers shaking as he clasped my coat and he pulled me to him.

I couldn't keep them back. "I know, baby." I sobbed, tears running down my face and dripping from my chin. I was seeing him at his worst, and I was showing him mine.

"I don't want to lose you, Beo. I don't. I can't. So forgive me if I take things into my own hands, but it's time your fucking daddy gets a wake-up call."

"Don't hurt him, Colt," Beo whispered a plea.

God, he would defend the man even if it meant he would die. It struck me then. Fucking. Love. Beo was love, pure, beautiful, unconditional love. No

matter who you were, what you were or what your shit was, he only had love to give. The most powerful and valuable gift that no one could buy. Beo had motherfucking loads of the shit.

I could walk away, bury this and place Beo in my past. I didn't have to sit here and put myself through this heartache, feeling weak and shit-worried, crying over him. I realized then I'd been running. Running from love and affection. I didn't receive it from my parents or from other people, so I didn't understand what it was, how it worked. In fact I was scared of it. I wasn't taught how to love. My whole life I was weak, hiding behind this rude, barbarous attitude thinking everyone owed me an apology. That my money and power made me powerful. In the eyes of the world, yes, it seemed like I was someone who was powerful.

In the eyes of love, I was weak, and to truly be strong one had to bow, to beg, to be bent and to be brought to the lowest part of your life. It is then that you realize who you are, what you are, and where your courage lies—what your true strengths are. Mine was in the form of this precious boy, lying in this bed, fighting death and holding on to me. I would fight for him no matter what. No matter how hard or how many times it would shatter me, I would fucking fight for him, and if it killed me, I'd claw my way out from death and fight some more.

"Beo, I can't promise you I won't because I don't like it when people fuck with what is mine, and if he can save my boy's life I will do any-fucking-thing I have to."

He sniffed, wrapped his arms around me and held on to me.

I remained there with him on the small hospital bed, my hips painning and my arm numb from the position I was in. When he had fallen asleep, his face looked more rested, different—released, almost peaceful, and I wanted to be so bold as to say a smile was on his lips. I quietly and gently untangled myself and placed a kiss on his forehead.

"I'll be back soon, Babyboy. Master needs to go fix this," I said and went in search of Martin.

I found him dozing off in his chair. "Martin!" I growled and his eyes snapped open as he jumped off the chair. "This what they pay you for, to sleep? You don't have a motherfucking bed to do that shit in?"

He glared at me, and I gave him a small smile.

"I'm going to see Luther, and if I have to, I'm dragging all the guns out on this. I just wanted to thank you for the role you've played in Beo's life. I didn't understand it till now, but you were there for him when no one else was, and... I... Thank you, Martin." Slowly he nodded, his face still stunned, but there was strong emotion in the old man's eyes. I assumed that no one had ever thanked him for that.

Straightening my coat, I held out my hand. He took it and I sneered at him. "I'm going to save our boy. I promise you."

I had just sat down in the back of a cab when my phone went off. Pulling it from my coat, I answered, knowing only one person would be phoning me this early in the morning.

"Richard, I'm not coming into the office. I'll fill you in—"

"Master Colt," James said, his voice sounding broken.

"What happened?" I snapped into the phone. I didn't need this now. These last four weeks Richard had been showing up at work red-eyed and reeking of alcohol. I hoped the bastard didn't drive drunk and have an accident. I couldn't take another heartache, not now.

"I can't, not any more. I love him too much and I can't watch him drink himself to death. I don't know what to do, Master Colt."

I had been so caught up in my own fucking bubble, I hadn't ever taking into consideration that James might be hurting due to Richard's drinking.

"James, where are you?"

He fell silent.

"James!" I deepened my voice.

"I'm at your penthouse waiting in the lobby, Master Colt. They said you hadn't come home yet and you... you're the only other person I know, Master. I have nowhere else to go."

"Okay, listen to me, boy. Stay there. I'll be home shortly."

I ended the call. I was itching to tell the driver to turn the cab around and go to Richard's house, but there were other more important matters to attend to right now.

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## Chapter Fifteen

*"It takes a male to procreate, but it takes a man to be a father."*

— Jeremy.

*"Sometimes it takes a hand around your throat to see the man you're supposed to be!"* — Luther Jacaruso.

Luther Jacaruso sat behind his huge dark-mahogany desk tapping a rapid staccato beat on the armrest of his chair with his left hand. This *tell* wasn't something he allowed himself often, but when it came to thoughts of his son, he uncharacteristically lost the plot.

*Fuck! My son. My son that should never have been. The boy that should never have seen the light of day.*

Luther did not do kids. He didn't like them, couldn't tolerate them and never wanted any of his own. When that bitc—his mother's voice filled his head reminding him never to speak ill of the dead—when that woman had come to him and informed him she was pregnant, he had come dangerously close to doing something he knew he would regret to this day, hit a woman in anger. He had hit plenty of women since then, but it was always consensual and in a scene. Both men and women, he didn't have a preference. His bisexuality was common knowledge.

*Fuck this shit, I have better things to do with my time than dwell on the past and illegitimate bastards walking around carrying my DNA.*

"Jocelyn!" he barked at his PA through his office intercom.

"Yes, Mr. Jacaruso," was the calm response.

"Bring me the Global Steele file and get Jeremy to my office in the next half hour."

"Sure, I'll bring the file shortly. Jeremy normally takes lunch this time of day, but I'll see if I can reach him on his cell."

"Lunch on company time?" He balled his fist and bellowed too no one in particular, "What the fuck do I pay my employees for if I cannot reach them when I need to?"

“Well, an hour lunch is included in his contract with the company. He is within his rights to actually take time off for a meal like most human beings I know,” Jocelyn replied sweetly.

“Don’t be a fucking wiseass with me! Do I need to remind you who pays your fucking mortgage?”

“My husband does, Mr. Jacaruso. Now, would you like a cup of coffee when I bring the Global Steele file?” Jocelyn deadpanned as if Luther had not said anything out of the ordinary.

“God, I should fire your fat ass for insubordination.” He grinned. “Yes, a mug, but no milk. My stomach feels like shit.”

Jocelyn knew out of experience never to take what Luther said to her or how he said it seriously. She had been his secretary when he had formed the company fifteen years ago and had advanced to his personal assistant as the company grew. She’d watched him grow from a cold, detached, thirty-year-old to the even colder forty-five year old he was today. Luther bought and sold companies. He didn’t just sell them... He stripped them, diced them up and sold them piece by piece to other companies. He did this with the precision of a surgeon and left many victims in his wake. The first company he had bought and sold was the one his parents had retired from. Both his parents, more so his father, had worked sixteen-hour days, six days a week in order for the family to barely scrape by. Having five children didn’t help matters. Luther hardly ever saw his old man, and when he did, Pop was always too bone weary to do much of anything with him. He was always in a foul mood, and Luther learned at an early age to steer clear of his father’s wicked temper.

“Your coffee, Mr. Jacaruso. And the file, as requested,” Jocelyn said, placing the mug of strong, bitter brew on Luther’s desk.

Luther grunted his thanks and absentmindedly took a sip of the hot beverage, scanning the file in front of him. Burning his tongue, he slammed the mug down on his desk, spilling the hot liquid over his hands.

“Fuck-fuck-fuck!” He stood, shook his hand and stared at her. “Why the fuck would you make it so hot, for fuck’s sake, woman? Are you just plain fucking stupid today?”

“Enough, Luther!” Jocelyn stated firmly and wiped the spilled coffee with the handy wipes Luther kept in his stationery supplies.

“Sit down and talk,” she requested, making direct eye contact with him.

“There is nothing to talk about, and the only person I wish to talk to right now is Jeremy. Where the fuck is he by the way?”

“He’s on his way, but did say he was about forty minutes out. I’m sure he is going to get caught in traffic. There will be a bit of a wait for him.”

“Goddamnit, can this day get any worse,” Luther sighed, running his hands over his eyes.

“The only person I know who can get you this rattled is your so—” She jumped when the mug of coffee went flying across the office and smashed against the pristine white wall, splashing in a huge brown stain and seeping into the plush carpet.

“Don’t fucking say that name in my presence again. That scrawny bastard is nothing of mine!” Luther yelled.

“He is your son,” Jocelyn raised her voice.

Luther glared, fire surging in his veins. “I don’t have a fucking son!” He slammed his fist on his desk. “He should never have been allowed to take his first fucking breath. If that bitch had only realized that her stupid fucking medication would interfere with her birth control pills, he wouldn’t even exist! Goddamn whore refused to have an abortion too, no matter how I threatened her.”

Jocelyn covered her mouth. “God Luther, I knew you didn’t want kids, but this attitude of yours is cold, downright inhuman, even for you.”

“You, Jocelyn,” nearly spitting her name, “should know me well enough to never look at me through rose-colored glasses. I don’t give a fuck about this boy who calls himself my son. I couldn’t care less whether he lives or dies, and from what I’m hearing, he is close to death’s door anyway.”

“Luther!” Jocelyn exclaimed. “Please don’t tell me the cancer has—”

“What the fuck do you know about his cancer?” Luther sneered at her.

“I get the reports Jeremy sends to you. Even though you never read them, I do.”

“Why the fuck are you reading personal reports addressed to me?” Luther shouted. “That, Jocelyn Stampstede, is cause for an instant fucking dismissal.” Luther’s neck veins were bulging, his face had turned a deep shade of red from trying to control his temper. Jocelyn realized how angry Luther was and knew she needed to explain, and fast.

"I knew you weren't reading the reports, and I wanted to make sure there was nothing in them that would be detrimental to you personally or professionally," she stated.

"That is what Jeremy is there for, for fuck's sake. If he thought there was anything that needed my immediate attention, he would have told me."

"I didn't trust Jeremy to make that distinction. I'm sorry if you feel that I have violated your privacy, Luther. That was never my intention," Jocelyn responded.

"This is what I have tried to avoid all my fucking life." He stood and folded his arms over his chest, looking out of his office window. "The life-robbing burden of children. I watched my father work himself to death to feed five children and take care of a handicapped kid. For what? He had no fucking life! He did it to raise us, but he couldn't stand being anywhere near his children. So what the fuck for then?" Luther swore he would never put himself in that position when his mother died shortly after his old man, leaving Luther to raise brothers and sisters who didn't appreciate a damn thing! Now this.

He turned to Jocelyn. "I don't fucking want to know about this! I do not want to know Beo Moon or anything about him. He needs to curl up and die somewhere quietly, preferably far away from me."

"Oh God, Luther, you can't say things like that," Jocelyn protested. A painful expression came upon her face, but for whom Luther wasn't sure. Maybe it was for both father and son.

"I just did, and I meant every fucking word." Sighing, he undid his tie and discarded the silk snake on his desk. "Look, Jocelyn, I know your warm sensibilities can't comprehend my aversion to children or my need to distance myself from this situation, but this is how it's going to be. I don't have to fucking justify myself to you or anyone. Nor do I need to give an explanation... end of discussion. Now leave and get some real work done for a change. I have a company to investigate before I can make them an offer. I need Jeremy in here. Where the fuck is he?" Luther demanded.

"I'm sure he's on his way." Jocelyn made her way out of his office. "Please don't leave things until it's too late. Regret isn't good company to keep." Raising her hand to silence his response, she continued, "No, Luther, I can't side with you on this one. Not when your son's life hangs in the balance. I know, I know," she responded at his growl, "you don't have a son. But your denial of the truth does not change the facts."

“Females!” Luther roared in his Dom voice, standing with his fists clenched and his chest heaving. His skin felt itchy, and the tightness of his diaphragm became a vise grip. Struggling for control, he clenched his teeth, preventing himself from saying more to the woman who had practically run his life for the past fifteen years.

His glare shifted from Jocelyn to the bulk of Jeremy's huge physique filling the office doorway. Only an inch or two taller than his own six-foot-four, Jeremy outweighed him by a good fifty pounds of pure hard muscle. His bald head shone with sweat, running in rivulets down his scraggy cheeks and past his cherry blond goatee. Jeremy was often annoyed that he looked like Stone Cold Steve Austin, but Luther knew if anyone was stone cold, it would be him, not Jer. He had never seen Jeremy be anything but a gentleman around Jocelyn.

“I got this,” Jeremy said in his deep voice and gestured for Jocelyn to pass him.

“You wanna seat your ass, Luther, and calm the fuck down?” Jeremy advanced casually and took the chair Jocelyn had vacated.

“I'll warn you again about the way you fucking speak to me, you son of a bitch. You're the employee here, remember?” Luther barked, but proceeded to sit as instructed.

“Yeah?” Jer raised a blond eyebrow. “And I'll remind you about cussing at that woman out there. I don't give a shit how you speak to your submissives, but Jocelyn is not one of them. One day she will boot you in the ass. And then what? This place will fucking crumble quicker than the walls of Jericho.”

“Jocelyn is my employee, and I'll speak to her as I fucking please,” Luther gritted out, but Jer was fuckin' spot on. Luther would be lost without Jocelyn.

Giving Luther a raised eyebrow, Jer bared his own teeth. “Then act like her boss and not some punk off the streets without any etiquette.”

Looking up at Jeremy, Luther's chest relaxed enough for him to take deep breaths, and his skin didn't feel tight anymore. Jeremy, an ex-marine, had run Luther's security details and private investigations for the past thirteen years. He was very successful at digging up information on a company Luther was interested in buying. He was also in charge of all security at The Bark, even though Jer wasn't into the lifestyle.

Luther knew Jeremy could have his pick of submissives, and was often informed of who the flavor of the week was by the twinkies who seemed to thrive

on house gossip. The twinks, to their utter disappointment, never seemed to interest Jeremy as he tended to lean more towards men with a hell of a lot more meat on their bones. Luther knew if Jeremy ever showed an interest in the BDSM lifestyle, he would make one helluva Dom because of his patience coupled with his calm persona, even in volatile circumstances. Jeremy took charge of a situation whenever it was needed. This calm exterior belied a deadly strength and sharp military-honed skills to take down any threat if the situation warranted it.

Those traits turned Luther on, even though he didn't want to think of Jeremy in that way. Something pinged in his chest and his breath hitched at the thought of never having Jeremy in that way, but Luther dismissed it as the result of his already overemotional status.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me he was dying?" Luther asked more calmly.

"It wouldn't have made a difference." Jeremy made direct eye contact with Luther. "I knew that tidbit of news would make its way through the club and eventually reach your ears, leading you to actually read one of my reports instead of simply dismissing it and chucking it into a filing cabinet."

This is exactly what had happened, and it pissed him off that Jeremy knew him so well and predicted his behavior.

"Well, that's what I fucking pay you for, keeping me informed of important changes. The fact that he has deteriorated to the stage that his fucking lover now wants an appointment with me makes it important enough for you to at least tell me, motherfucker!" Luther seethed.

Jer leaned over in his chair and said, "If I'd sat you down, told you how bad things had become for your son, you would have dismissed me out of hand. There's no use denying it."

"I have no intention of denying it because this does not change my decision. I want nothing to do with the boy."

"Right," Jeremy stood, "just needed you to confirm that for me. I'll get on it and let Maxus know he's not welcome for an appointment or anything else," Jeremy answered in a clear voice.

"That's it? You're not gonna try to convince me that it's my duty to intervene and help as much as I can?" Luther asked skeptically.

"Now that would be a waste of energy, Luther, and I've already had an annoying day as it is."

“Huh?” Luther was dumbstruck at Jeremy’s easy concurrence.

“You’re an intelligent man, Luther. You have always looked at any given situation from all angles, especially when deciding if you were interested in a company. I presumed, considering the magnitude of this situation, you would have given it as much thought and consideration as you would one of your multimillion dollar investment. If this is your decision, then I will respect that and do what needs to be done.”

“I haven’t thought... I didn’t give it... I...” Luther’s olive-toned cheeks heated up.

“Are you’re saying you haven’t given it much thought or consideration and simply made your decision based on your irrational fear of being a father, or whatever fucked up idea you have going on in that pea brain of yours?” Jeremy asked calmly.

“What the fuck, Jer? Fear? There’s nothing that I fucking fear!” Luther absentmindedly used his pet name for Jeremy.

“You’re sure about that, big man? Let me tell you what I think, so there’s no confusion about where I stand. You...” Jeremy said leaning over Luther’s desk and poking his finger against Luther’s chest, “...are afraid of a scrubby little slip of a boy whom you haven’t even met. He holds so much power over you, and you cannot understand it. Therefore, you don’t tolerate it. Dismissing him like yesterday’s garbage. If this was my son or Jocelyn’s, you would have been at that hospital, already demanding why you were being kept waiting. You fear that this boy will make you feel things that will take over your life and you will lose control. Control to you, big man, is the be-all and end-all of your life. Without it, you feel as if you’re floundering. One day, Luther, I swear to God, you’re going to hand over that control to me and you’ll realize nothing has changed. Except what’s in your head.”

A shudder went through Luther’s body. “What the fuck are you talking about, Jeremy? Are you out of your fucking mind? Me, handing control over to you? What are you getting at?”

“Nothing, it’s a topic for another day. It’s clear you haven’t given this situation much thought. I suggest you actually think about it.” Raising his eyebrows at Luther, Jeremy said firmly, “Fucking think about it. Meet with Colt Maxus. He’s a fellow Dom at your club and you’ve got nothing to lose by agreeing to meet him.”

Luther bit his tongue. Jer knew Colt Maxus as a Dominant, but he wondered if he knew who Colt Maxus was—an envied tyrant in the power-hungry world of business. He had more money than he had life span left to spend it. What he saw in Luther's bastard son was beyond him. He needed to play his cards right. Maxus was an asset to The Bark, and you didn't cross a Titan and get away with it. Luther knew there was more to the man than his gruff personality. Maxus had power elsewhere. He held influence with the kingpins of the "true world order." It was plain and simple—Maxus wasn't a man to be crossed.

"Fine, I'll meet Maxus tonight at eight at the house. Make it happen," Luther rasped.

"Yes, boss," Jeremy said, with a smirk on his face, and left the office.

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That evening, Luther stood in his home office before the huge, tinted bay windows overlooking his property, recalling his earlier negotiations in his attempt to take control of Global Steele. He knew their board of directors would eventually succumb to his low offer as they slowly ran out of options. Nothing was going to spoil his good mood, not even this meeting. But—he took a sip of the rare bourbon—he was fucking nervous. He had already made up his mind about staying as far away from this situation as was humanly possible and meeting with Maxus was just to satisfy the man and get him off his back. To be honest, it was also to get Jeremy to shut up. He was going to listen to what Maxus had to say, as he so often did during negotiations, and firmly, but with respect, deny the request.

He glanced at his watch and took another nip of the liquor. Jeremy said he'd be there for the meeting. He wondered what was keeping him.

Seating himself on the dark-blue leather couch, Luther tried to relax. Restlessly, he stood and wandered over to the window again, looking out at the black night enshrouding the garden. Discreet lights were scattered amongst the foliage. From that high up, he couldn't see much in the dark. Beginning to feel impatient, he turned as a knock sounded on the door. It opened, and Jeremy walked in accompanied by Colt Maxus. Luther recognized the man by his stride, the air of superiority about him. His breath caught in his throat as another man followed behind Maxus.

Martin.

*What the fuck was he doing here? Why had Jeremy not warned him? Why had Jeremy not stopped Martin? Jer fucking knew about the restraining order.*

*Did Jeremy set him up? Was this an ambush to get him to change his mind? What the fuck was happening here?*

“What the fuck, Jeremy?” Luther growled through clenched teeth. He met Martin’s eyes and the two glared in greeting. Jeremy shrugged, flopped down on the couch and picked up a magazine, ignoring Luther.

“Luther.” A voice so deep, so imperious, it shook him to his core. Whether his name was meant to be uttered as a growl or not, the way it was said made him want to drop to his knees and start saying, “Yes, Sir.”

Ripping his gaze from Martin, he turned to the man with the offered hand and Luther had to swallow. He was big, and fuck, he was tall.

“Maxus.” Luther cleared his throat and gave a nod. He wasn’t going to shake that massive grizzly paw. “I’m a busy man, and would like to get this meeting over and done with, so please state your business. What do you want?”

Maxus moved to one of the chairs and indicated to Luther to take the one next to him. “Take a seat, Luther, so we can discuss this properly.”

“Nothing to discuss. You simply need to tell me what you want. I’m hoping it’s different from what Martin wants, otherwise this will simply be a waste of time. My answer hasn’t changed.” Luther moved to stand next to Jer and turned his back to them.

Those grizzly paws spun him around, latched onto his shirt and pulled him close, knocking their heads together.

“Listen to me, fucker, and listen to me good,” Maxus breathed into his face. Letting go, he dropped to his knees. “You want me to beg? I’ll fucking beg. You want me to crawl at your feet and grovel, I’ll fuckin’ do it!” Luther held still, his anger almost forgotten when Maxus fucking bowed before him. Luther’s heart was pounding so fast against his rib cage he thought the organ was going to break bone.

Maxus looked up, his eyes wet, meeting Luther’s gaze. “That boy means everything to me. He is the one person in this entire world who loves me for who I am—who cares enough to look past my faults and accept me. I have never held such a precious gift in my hands. I never knew love till I met your son. I’m begging you, please, for the love of God, please. He doesn’t deserve to die.”

“I don’t get it. Did you think that asking me face-to-face would influence my decision? The answer is still no. A resounding hell no!” Luther roared. Turning his back on the desperate man kneeling before him.

He heard Maxus stand, and then something he never would have thought was offered.

“My company! I’ll give you my empire and every fucking penny I have to save that boy. I’d give my life.”

“Get them out of my office, Jeremy,” he said and walked back to the window.

Maxus’ enterprise was mammoth. It was a deal of lifetime, but this wasn’t about money.

“I promised him I wouldn’t hurt you and I will keep to that, but I would like you to know what an honor it was to be a part of your son’s life, and I pity you for never having that with him.”

“Jer!” Luther growled.

Jeremy’s furious stare bore into Luther’s back, but he turned and escorted Colt and Martin out of the room.

Returning to Luther’s home office a short while later, Jeremy found him sitting on the couch with another drink in his hand. He stood there and simply stared at Luther without saying a word.

“What? Another lecture coming my way? Save it. I’m not in the least bit interested,” Luther said bitterly.

“A lecture? No, no lecture, big guy, just my opinion. You are a coward, Luther Jacaruso. A weak, fearful coward.”

Luther vaulted off the couch and flung his drink across the room. “You motherfucker! Who the fuck are you to call me a coward?” he erupted, advancing on Jeremy. He didn’t get far. Jeremy was much quicker than him, and shoved Luther back onto the couch. Luther clasped Jeremy’s forearm and the two men grappled. Jeremy threw Luther to the floor and sat on his chest, pinning Luther down with a hand wrapped around his throat.

Jeremy snarled, “Stay the fuck down, you prick.” Luther grabbed at Jeremy’s arm trying to dislodge the hand from his throat. Jeremy wouldn’t budge. He gripped Luther’s wrists and held them to the floor above Luther’s head. Coming down close to Luther’s face, Jeremy could smell the whiskey on the man’s breath. He said menacingly, “You’ve got no control now, Luther. How does it feel?”

Feeling a full body shudder travel through him, Luther squeezed his eyes tight. At Luther’s obvious distress, something must have snapped in Jeremy.

Jer's hold slowly lessened on Luther's wrists, his thumbs gently brushing against the Luther's skin.

At Jeremy's mercy, Luther forced his eyes open. The fiery eyes gazing down at him got his blood flowing and he was fucking hard! The pure desire in Jeremy's face caused him to pant like a bitch in heat. Jeremy slowly lowered his mouth towards Luther's.

"What... Jer, what are you doing?" Luther whispered.

Ghosting his lips over Luther's mouth, he felt the growl vibrating from Jer's chest. His heart leaped when a warm, wet tongue licked at his lips.

*Fuck it!* When the next lick came, Luther lifted his head, his blood rushing in his ears and pressed his lips to Jeremy's. The man went rigid atop him, eyes wide, and Luther grinned. His lips still pressed to Jer's, thrusting his tongue into Jer's mouth. Slowly Jeremy relaxed and hesitantly returned the kiss. In small, slow movements of his lips, Jer's tongue brushed against his, building confidence.

With a sexy purr from his lips, Jeremy invaded Luther's mouth, lapping the inside. Luther could feel the man trying to own him in the kiss, and handed over control to the man. Feeling encouraged as Jer responded, Luther opened his mouth wider, letting their tongues duel. If he hadn't made the first move, Luther wasn't sure anything would have happened. God, he wanted this, wanted Jer for so long and now...

Jeremy growled and moved down Luther's jaw, nipping at the stubble, licking his way to Luther's throat. Luther offered his neck, and was rewarded when Jeremy latched onto his Adam's apple and sucked hard. A loud groan slipped from Luther as he bucked, rubbing his hard cock into Jeremy. Still holding Luther's arms above his head, Jeremy spread Luther's legs with his knees and aligned their hard cocks. Rubbing hard into each other, both men let out simultaneous moans as their dicks welcomed the friction.

"Want you," Jeremy hissed against Luther's ear, moving his tongue into the shell and biting his lobe. Luther panted in response, not getting anything out other than low incoherent mumbles.

Jeremy scooped him up from the floor and planted Luther on his knees facing the couch, pushing his torso onto the cushions.

"Stay there," Jeremy ordered when Luther tried to lift up. Luther trembled, closed his eyes and nodded. Jeremy reached over to the drawers of the coffee

table and removed a condom and some sachets of lube, throwing them onto the couch next to Luther's head. He looked over his shoulder at Jer. The two men stared at each other without saying a word. Taking a deep breath, Luther lowered his head to the cushions again. Luther's submission did strange things inside him and so seemingly to Jeremy too. He wanted to be naked and have Jer discover and explore each fold of his skin with his tongue. But ultimately he wanted to submit to Jer; he just wasn't certain his Dom was so willing to go along with it. Giving up control wasn't something Luther did.

"I need you, Jer," Luther said so softly he was afraid Jeremy almost didn't hear him.

"You have me. I'm right here."

Luther's shirt was pushed up almost onto his shoulders, when Jeremy reached around to undo his belt and removed it. Button and zipper followed in quick succession, and Luther's pants was shoved down to mid-high revealing his round, firm, muscular ass covered in black hair. Luther hissed loud into the room, hearing the muscles and bones pop as they protested the sudden jolt arching his back as Jeremy ran his tongue down Luther's crack. Jeremy groped Luther's butt cheeks, spreading them, and lapped at Luther's hole. Groaning into the cushions, Luther tried to spread his legs further but was restricted by his pants still around his thighs.

"More, Jer," he begged.

Not taking his mouth from Luther's hole, Jeremy pushed Luther's pants down until they were under his knees. Standing, Jeremy freed his own cock from its confines and started rubbing his swollen dick along Luther's crack. Tearing open a sachet of lube, Jeremy coated his fingers and circled them around Luther's hole. Slowly he sank in his fingertip and gently wiggled. Luther hissed and tensed from the intrusion.

"Been a while for you?" Jeremy asked and gently pressed his finger deeper.

"Try never, Jer," came Luther's breathless response.

"What?" Jeremy froze.

"I've never bottomed before, Jer," Luther replied.

"Fuck, Luther! You sure about this?"

"Yes! Don't you fucking stop now or you're fucking fired, so help me God, Jeremy!"

Jeremy slowly added a second finger to Luther's channel. Luther tensed again and held his breath.

"Relax and push against my fingers. It'll make it easier. Breathe," Jeremy coaxed.

Slowly the burning sensation morphed into something more bearable, and pleasure exploded all at once. Gasping, Luther bucked against Jeremy's fingers.

"Oh God Jer... harder, faster, something Jer..." Luther panted and begged, trying to fuck himself on Jeremy's fingers.

Jeremy added a third finger, and Luther held still, waiting for the burn to subside, but was soon moaning and bucking against the man's fingers.

"Harder. Harder please," Luther begged frantically.

"Give me a second," Jeremy said, tearing the condom wrapper with his teeth before sheathing his cock. He slowly withdrew his fingers, pulling a whimper from Luther.

Jeremy lined his cockhead with Luther's hole and gently pushed in. Inch by inch he slowly slid in, Luther clench his tight hole around Jer's shaft.

"Just relax, Luther. I'll take it as slowly as you want me to," Jeremy reassured him.

Luther felt Jeremy's balls against him. "Move," he said when Jeremy remained still. *Fuck, I'm a greedy bossy bottom.*

"God, give me a second or I'm going to lose it," Jeremy panted.

Jeremy slowly started to move his cock in small little thrusts.

"God, Jer, fuck me!"

"I don't wanna hurt you. Be patient damnit," Jeremy barked and planted his hand hard on Luther's right ass cheek. The sound snapping as flesh met flesh cracked through them both. A tingle jolted down Luther's spine—*God, this is what it feels like?*—an itch starting in his gut and a smirk on his face. He wanted it again, over and over, till he was begging Jer to stop.

"Fuck patient. I'll fuck myself," Luther growled and slammed himself back onto Jeremy's cock.

"Argh!" both men groaned, Luther fucking himself hard on Jeremy's thick dick, pushing it in deeper.

Jeremy grabbed a fistful of Luther's hair and pressed the man's face down against the cushions, seizing Luther's hip with the other and plowing into Luther's ass, causing Luther's dick to rub against the couch.

"God, I've waited for this too long. I don't think I can hold off any longer," Jeremy thundered. Releasing Luther's hair, he wrapped his arms around that thick, hard hairy stomach and pulled Luther's body up against his. Jeremy panted hard in Luther's ear, snapping his hips faster and faster, feeling the older man's hole clamp around his cock.

A few hard pumps and Jeremy groaned Luther's name and filled the condom. Collapsing on Luther's back, Jeremy got his breathing under control and slowly pulled out. Luther hissed at the sensitivity the action caused. Jeremy turned him around and helped him up onto the couch. Spreading his legs, Jeremy swallowed Luther's cock in one go. Luther groaned and bucked his hips off the couch, pushing himself deeper into Jeremy's mouth and down his throat. Jeremy simply swallowed Luther's cock causing him to scream his name and come hard. Lapping the last of the semen off Luther's softening cock, Jeremy laid his head on Luther's thigh and released a satisfied breath.

"Fuck... fuck," Luther gasped. "That was fuckin' good."

Chuckling, Jeremy asked, "So now I'm a fuck?"

"You know what I mean," Luther responded running his hand over Jeremy's bald head. "We're still half-dressed." Both men laughed, neither of them wanting to move.

"I need to get rid of this condom, but I don't think I have the energy to move."

Finishing what was needed in the en suite attached to Luther's office, they both sat naked, side by side, on the couch in front of the fire. Jeremy's finger running down Luther's hairy thighs, "How you feeling?" he asked.

"Like my ass has been plowed," Luther responded with a grimace.

"Besides your ass, shithead," Jeremy laughed.

"I don't know, Jer. I never thought I'd be able to do that. Give up control enough for someone to fuck me. It was easier with you. I trust you with my life," he said, looking at Jeremy and noting the satisfied look on his face.

"So giving up control wasn't the worst thing that could happen?"

"Giving up control to you wasn't. In other situations, I have my doubts if I could handle too much of that."

“You are not your father. You need to give yourself a chance. You need to give your son a chance. The man I know is not the one who so callously disregarded those two men earlier. Go see him. For heaven’s sake, go meet him. I’d say get to know your son, but you don’t have the luxury of time to do that, Luther. You have control here; his life is in your hands. I really don’t understand what you are afraid of. You need to make that choice now, bottom line. I think it’s a really easy one to make knowing that if it was anyone else we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. The deed would have been done already. He has lived and survived all these years without your help. He’s not going to be a clingy burden now. Besides he has Maxus, and you witnessed the lengths that man is prepared to go to, to help his sub. You saw the love he has for his boy, for your son. It would be good for you to play a small part in his life.”

“I guess you’re right. Let me think about how I’m going to go about doing this.”

Jeremy nodded. “Sure, whatever you need.” He fell silent looking at Luther for a couple of minutes. Luther’s skin began to heat the longer Jer stared at him—*God, what was this, high school?*

Jeremy traced a finger along Luther’s cheek, leaving a heat trail where it touched. “I love you, Luther. Have for a long time,” Jer whispered and placed a thick finger against Luther’s lips. “No, wait, don’t say anything,” he said when Luther wanted to respond. “I wanted you to know how I feel without any pressure. I’m not into the lifestyle that you find so much pleasure in, but I don’t think I’m completely opposed to experimenting with you if it’s what you need.”

Sighing, Luther regarded Jeremy with dark brown eyes. “There’s too much happening right now for me to respond to that, Jer. I don’t want to lose whatever this is between us. I don’t have a clue what this is, but I know I need you with me, beside me, when I take on this thing with my son.”

“That is a given, Boss. I’ll be whatever you need me to be; whenever you need me there.” Jeremy leaned in and kissed Luther gently on the lips.

“What hospital is he in?” Luther asked when Jer released his lips.

Jer raised an eyebrow. “You wanna do this now?”

“I’m feeling... adventurous.”

“God, save us all!” Jer’s laugh sparkled in his eyes.

Arms circled Luther around the waist and Jeremy whispered in his ear, “Got time for another, old man?”

This should have felt awkward considering how long he and Jeremy had worked together, and he was Jeremy's boss, but nothing felt more comfortable and natural than being in his arms, feeling his lips against his skin. *Damn, the man had popped his cherry. God, he sounded like a love-struck teenage girl. Soon he would have to hand in his "stone cold" card.*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Sixteen

*“All that shit in my past, was nothing—a small grain of dust compared to this—to seeing him go through this. To sit there and know I could do nothing to help him. And yeah, it fucking destroyed me.” — Colt Maxus.*

Luther came to the hospital. They did a biopsy of his bone marrow; it was a match.

Beo was skeptical about meeting his father at first, but the two got along surprisingly well. I'd say almost too well, because when father and son sat side by side and looked at you with soul-sucking, deep brown eyes, you knew you were done for.

Two days later, Hades showed up at the hospital. Motherfucker looked like the dead—smelled like it too. He spoke alone with Beo. Gave me a two finger salute, gripped me on my shirt and said, “You better motherfuckin’ take care of my boy or I’ll come back from the dead and gut your ass.” The bastard then pulled me into a hug, and whispered low in my ear, “Take good care of him, motherfucker.” He abruptly turned and left.

Jane came to visit. I met *Baby Magpie*. The kid was on me something fierce, calling me Uncle M. The little madam stole my fucking heart. I was going to spoil that princess rotten.

Martin and Luther were still not speaking to each other, only staring.

James had moved in with me. He mostly kept quiet when he visited Beo, often bringing flowers, but everyone could see the situation with Richard was slowly eating him up inside. Richard said he wanted nothing to do with James, and that the boy was the worst mistake he ever made.

Beo started more treatment, a week’s worth of intense chemo. Luther had to take filgrastim shots to boost his white blood cell count before the procedure. Beo’s vomiting got worse, and his blood cell count kept dropping, but Dr. Mahajan said that was expected.

Martin and Luther had advanced to growling, but still glared at each other in greeting.

My sessions with Aria were going well. We were working through a lot of shit. She said that what happened between Beo and me was a good thing, even if we saw it as bad. She was fully confident that the limerence had been broken, and we were falling in love as a natural couple. I laughed at her and said, “Bitch, that boy owns me.”

She stretched out her hand to mine and replied, “Welcome to the club, motherfucker.”

Things went nuclear at work. Christine was pregnant with Xavier’s baby. James moved back to Portland. Luther and his pea-brained, knucklehead bodyguard that follows him around like a bitch-puppy were caught making out in a hospital closet.

The big day of the transplant of Luther’s bone marrow arrived. It was a four hour procedure. Luther’s *puppy dog* sat with him the whole time. Beo got a new birthday—apparently once you received bone marrow you get a new birthday. “Another celebration date to add to our calendar,” he said.

Beo wasn’t doing so well in the days following the procedure. His count was still too low, and he was still in pain. The medications were making him lethargic, and his hair was falling out at a rapid pace. He also wasn’t allowed a lot of visitors anymore, all of which caused bouts of depression.

Martin and Luther started greeting each other, but still mostly ignored each other.

I made a collar.

GrandMaster Hans, aka Master Yoda (and how did it come to be that I was Darth-fucking-Vader?!) and several of the Doms shaved their heads for charity. Hans shaved his body hair. I shaved my scalp. Beo bawled his eyes out at that. He made us all sign up for the National Marrow Donor Program. My boy was as fierce as any fucking Dom.

Beo introduced me to *True Blood*. I never knew a fairy could ride so much cock. Beo was in love with Eric Northman.

Finn got expelled from The Bark. We never saw or heard from him again.

Richard and I decided to sell the company. I was offered a partnership at The Bark. Martin became heart fucked, and Richard started attending AA meetings.

My boy was doing great, and they finally gave him the okay to go home. He still had to go in for checkups, and there was always the possibility the cancer

could return, but I made a vow that I would spend every second of my life with my boy. Beo was healthy, he was gaining weight. Luther even threw him one hell of a party.

Richard went to go see James.

I still had the tarot card.

I bought a ring.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Chapter Seventeen

*“A story has more than one beginning, more than one final word.”* — Beo Moon.

February had arrived, and The Bark was hosting a party. We were celebrating Colt's birthday and his acceptance in becoming one of the Bark's co-owners.

I would never have dreamed that my story would end this way, or begin. I guess, when you fall in love with a man like Colt, miracles are possible. Still, I had never openly stated to him that I loved him. I could tell he was nervous that night. He was fussing over me incessantly—“Are you warm enough? Do you want to go, because we don't have to, baby? Maybe you should put on another jacket. We really don't have to go, Beo”—I pressed my lips to his to shut him the hell up. The stewing over me was epic, but some days I wanted my Master back!

Stepping through the lobby, I could immediately tell that something was up. The House Lords all stood in a long line in front of The Black Room's bar. All of them in suits or formal cocktail dresses, and there were no other members in sight. Colt had dressed me in a pair of jeans, my sweater, a hoodie and a pair of sneakers. He, however, was wearing a long trench coat that was buttoned up to his neck. Colt had been walking in front, but stopped inside The Black Room and turned around to face me. A finger pressed under my chin bringing my gaze to his. His eyes, hard emeralds, blazed at mine. Yeah, those bright greens were fiery and raked a shudder from me. He spoke in that deep voice that had my cock heavy with blood.

“Was that a shiver from being fucking cold, boy?” he asked, tracing his finger from my chin down along my jaw.

“Sorry, Master,” I whispered. “You do things to me with only your eyes. I can't help it.” I felt my cheeks burning. Colt's lips twitched upwards at my admission.

“Strip for your Master. Now,” he growled.

My heart began to thud, my palms were clammy and my fingers kept twitching. Something was up, something fucking huge... Maybe he was required to do a scene as part of his joining The Bark as an owner. Maybe it

was some form of initiation... which didn't make sense. Colt was a Master. He didn't have to prove he could dominate a sub. His title spoke for itself.

Unzipping the hoodie, I heard him remove his trench coat, but I kept my gaze lowered as a sub's actions reflected on their Dominant. Peeling the garment off my shoulders, Damon stepped up to me, a shy grin on his face, and held out his hands for my hoodie. Folding each piece of clothing, I lay them on Damon's outstretched hands until I stood naked.

My gaze was glued on the floor, hands covering my junk, taking slow breaths to calm my intense heartbeat. My skin pulled tight when Colt's finger traced one of my globes, and whispered darkly in my ear, "I'm sorry for all the secrecy, boy, but you will understand in a few minutes."

When he stepped in front of me, my gaze was filled with his boots. My eyes trailed up, but there were no leather pants tucked into the boots where they ended around his calves. There were bare, beautiful, muscular legs, lightly covered in black hair. I couldn't help it as my gaze swept upward landing on his ass. Colt was fucking naked, except for his boots, leather gloves, daddy hat and chest harness.

Damon came up to my left side and Alex, a female submissive, came up to my right.

She whispered in my ear, "You want to clasp your hands behind your back now, Beo." There was a slight excitement in her voice as I did exactly that. Both of them cradled a bicep on either side.

Damon leaned close, breathing in my ear, "Just relax, Beo, and trust your Master." I swallowed hard at his words. I still had no clue what the fuck was going on.

I heard GrandMaster Hans address Colt. "You ready, boy?"

"I am, GrandMaster Hans," Colt replied.

The House Lords turned and walked in a single file down the stairs towards The Pit. My own steps were shaky as I followed Colt, seeing his ass flex and his butt cheeks dimple as he moved, and I was thankful for the two beside me, holding me steady.

The Pit was a dark and eerily medieval-style dungeon. Large floor pillar candles in red and black stood in the far corners against the walls. They provided the only light in the room, adding to my anticipation. There were more people here, all silent, spread out along each wall. As I entered with

Damon and Alex, they led me to the center of the room, my gaze falling on Colt's frame.

One leg perched on the stage, he was leaning with his right hand on his thigh, the other leg still on the floor. There was a dark scowl on his face. Master's junk hung semi-hard between his legs adorned with a fucking silver cock ring. The basilisk was hungry and spewing. Junior rose to the occasion too, but nothing could have prepared me for what happened next as both Alex and Damon leaned in and placed a kiss on each of my cheeks.

Colt's gaze went violently jealous, as both submissives walked away behind me.

I dared a glance to my right. *Mother of God, why?* My gaze had to land on a group of men dressed in fucking suits. It was fine seeing Doc; it was fine seeing Jer. But fuck me, Dad? Really?

He was wearing a black suit except for the bright red tie, and he looked fucking smashing. In fact, everyone was wearing black with the exception of their ties in different colors, both Jer and Doc's were a silvery-white.

"Boy!" Colt growled and stepped up on the stage, "bring your sweet boy pussy up here to your Master."

I was sure my ass cheeks managed to blush as I made my way over to him. He held out his hand, and I gave him mine. The bastard was still a gentleman, helping me up on the platform. I went to my knees before him—shoulders straight, hands behind my back, and chin to my chest. He didn't touch me as he circled me, but at seeing the basilisk drooling, veiny and hard, I bit my lip. Colt growled clasp my chin, leaning down, he rasped in my ear, "I so want to fuck you right now, Babyboy, but this isn't about me." He released his hold and stepped aside. "Turn and display for the crowd."

Still on my knees, I slowly turned, my heart pounding violently against my rib cage. *This wasn't about him?* I was confused. It was his birthday. He said we were going to The Bark... *So how the hell was this about me?*

"GrandMaster Hans once said to me, I will never own Beo. For a man of my stature and title it was something hard to hear and more difficult to accept. But standing here before my fellow associates, friends, Doms and submissives, it is never the Dom that owns his submissive. It truly is the other way around."

"Those of you who thought they were going to see my dominance on display, I'm sorry to disappoint. But it is only fitting, in my eyes, that the Master of my Heart stake his claim. As I will stake mine."

“Damon,” Colt said calling him over. My eyes caught the reflection of light off a silk pillow when Damon stood before him and held it out. Grasping an object from the pillow, Colt turned to me cupping my cheek with his fingers and pulling my gaze up to his. The object was hidden behind his back.

“Stand for me, Beo, please, Babyboy.”

Taking a deep breath I got to my feet, as gracefully as I could and looked at my Master.

There was a shine in his eyes; emotion flashed behind them when he stepped closer. His words were spoken with difficulty through a thick throat, and his eyes never left mine.

“Will you, Beo Moon, accept my collar, as the Master of my Heart? Accept that I will always watch over you—” he stopped. He bit his lip, took a shaky breath and cleared his throat. “Accept that I will provide for you. I will protect you. I will comfort you, and be there for you always and for as long as you stand by my side.”

That first tear hit hard and it hit home. That first fucking tear, damnit! *Fuck, shit, and balls!*

“That I will do anything in my power to be the Master you need. Will you, Beo Moon, accept my love for you? Will you do me the honor of being my one and only submissive for as long as fate wills it?”

The tears were tracking down my face as I held my breath, bit my lips and grinned. “You had me at, ‘Your voice is really nice,’” I said through blurry vision, remembering the first night we met.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “God, I love you, you little shit. Come the fuck here!”

Cheers and hollers erupted when Colt placed the collar around my neck with shaky hands. Upon hearing the click of the lock snapping in place, he gripped it, pulled on it, and shoved our lips together.

Pulling away, he flashed a smile. “Party ain’t over, Babyboy.” He winked at me, letting go of the lock, and gave a grope to my ass cheek.

He turned to the crowd like he wasn’t aware his fucking basilisk was in full view. I didn’t really mind. My Master had a cock that should be looked at, but it was mine, *all mine*.

“I never said tonight would be without a show, and Colt Maxus doesn’t fail to impress,” he said loudly. “Boys?”

I wasn't sure exactly what was happening. I was still a bit dazed, feeling the snug hug of my Master's collar and its weight on my neck. It was thickly padded on the inside, made of soft leather, and I knew the short blunt studded spikes were made of platinum.

His big hand brushed the nape of my neck, pulling my attention back to him. "Turn around, boy, and go lay down on your back on the bench for me." I turned around and got a slap on my ass when I froze. Where there wasn't before, a spanking bench now sat on the stage. At least I thought it was a spanking bench. It was a wide table covered in padded leather, and... *on my back? How was he going to—*

A second slap came harder and more forceful. I bit my lip, holding back the hiss, 'cause it not only seared into my tender ass, but the noise cracked loudly across the room.

Slowly, aware that my cheeks were blushing, my ears turning red, I made my way over feeling the eyes of both subs and Doms on me, but the only gaze that mattered was my Master's. Hissing when my rear kissed the soft leather, I laid down as I was commanded.

"Arms stretched above your head, boy," he droned above me. Raising my hands and laying them down against the soft leather, I felt Colt grab my right wrist. "Relax, I'm not going to hurt you, Beo." His voice was confident and reassuring as he fastened a restraint around my right wrist.

"Tight enough?" he asked and traced a finger along the sensitive skin on my arm. I slowly bobbed my head as he moved to fasten my left wrist, giving that arm the same sensual attention with his finger. He moved the digit down my body as he walked around the table, trailing it down my arm, over my armpit, circling my nipple, and giving it a quick flick before tracking along my ribs. My breath flared at the sensation and my skin pulled tight as my gut ignited with a hungry fire.

He grasped my cock, giving it a hard pump causing me to push up my hips, as I bit my lip to try to keep silent as I sought more friction. "If I wanted you to be silent, boy, I would have gagged you."

A warm, silky wetness surrounded my cock when he leaned over and gently sucked at my head. I was still biting my lips, moaning softly when he gently nipped my frenulum and it became a growl. Releasing my cock with a pop, he growled back, "Love that sound, boy."

Gripping my base he took me down his throat in one swallow. I pulled on the restraints, trying to keep myself from thrusting into his mouth and moaned loudly into the room.

Releasing me a second time, a cool, wet hand gripped my cock coating it with lube and my mind exploded with his earlier words, “...*the Master of my Heart stake his claim. As I will stake mine.*”

No, he wouldn't... but Colt Maxus was so totally going to.

The table shifted from his weight as he climbed on to it. I held my breath when Master's eyes stared into mine, and my body responded to him. The leather against my back became slippery as I began to sweat. My heart was pounding in my chest, attempting once again to burst forth, but the moment his lips brushed mine... time slowed down. The rest of the world drifted away as his tongue traced the corners of my mouth. My world became only my Master and me. His tongue snaked past my lips and filled my mouth.

He rumbled low in his throat as he slowly lowered himself onto me. My eyes went wide, rolling back in their sockets, feeling my cockhead being clasped by his fucking virgin-tight ring. Master bit my lips as he, in one single movement, impaled himself completely on my cock. The heat of Master wrapped around me, the feel of his heavy frame sitting on my cock, the cling of his ass—God, I coulda popped just from that!

Master began to moving on top of me, slowly raising his hips, hands on either side of my head. His lips, teeth and tongue tasting and devouring every inch of my mouth. Each time he would fill himself balls deep, I'd feel his body shudder and that sound would slip from his lips. Not a whimper, or a growl, or a moan. It was beautifully erotic. “You like this, baby? Your pretty little boy cock up Master's hole?” he said, sliding my cock halfway out of him.

“You're giving me your load, Beo? Gonna shoot your boy juice up Master's ass?”

I growled at Master. Gasping as he ground himself on my dick, lifting his hands behind his head and snapping his hips back and forth.

But fucking himself on my cock wasn't enough. “Fill Master up as you blow your hot load, boy.” He took hold of my nipples, giving each one a roll and a pinch, making fuckin' stars spark before my eyes. I started huffing and puffing trying to hold back.

Pressing his forehead to mine and lifting himself off my dick just past my crown, Master scraped his teeth along my jaw, groaning, "God, you feel good, Babyboy."

He slammed himself down pulling a loud grunt from me. "So hard, so fucking thick." He took my lips again. "Want it so fucking bad, Babyboy," and with that Master started frantically fucking himself on my dick. Sweat clung to his forehead dripping down his temples and tracking its way along his jaw before falling to my chest. His cock slapping my stomach each time he slammed down on me.

"I love you so fucking much, Beo," he said wrapping his hands round my neck, pumping my cock with his ass and gazing into my eyes. My toes curled, "Master..." I rasped into his mouth, my balls drawing tight, "I..." my cock swelled, "love you!" and *Boom!* The stars burst in front of my eyes; my world spiraled into oblivion as I shot my first load in two weeks up Master's ass.

He rode my orgasm, milking my cock and stroking himself. He kissed me again and froze. I knew what was coming. I felt the warm spits erupting over my chest, hitting me on the chin and stringing in yarns over my stomach, I kissed him hard. God, I loved it when he came, panting hard, with me still inside him, my cum leaking out of his ass and dripping down my balls. He said in a hoarse voice, "Say it, boy. Just one more time. Please?"

"I love you, Master," I said, and he thrust his tongue into my mouth with more heat and passion than I had ever felt.

Pulling back from the kiss, aware that people were looking at us, he whispered, "One more question, Babyboy." I opened my eyes as he reached for something on his right, his eyes never leaving mine. Everything beyond Master was nothing more than a blur.

"Marry me, Babyboy."

I couldn't speak, and my eyes welled up. As my arms were still cuffed to the bench, all I could do was nod over and over again as I pressed my head to his neck and sobbed. As I felt the cold metal slipping over my ring finger, Master whispered to me, "Never gonna stop loving you. You're my entire world, Babyboy. Without you," he shuddered, "there's no point in taking another breath."

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Epilogue

Beo was never mine; I am his. He's my precious gift, one I cherish with my heart and soul. Every opportunity I get, I will show him that.

Peeling myself from his embrace, I stare into his soft brown eyes. He smiles at me, grins and licks his lips. My husband, *my boy*. My world. Even if I had to go back, there's nothing I would change about how we fell in love.

I clasp his hand and pull it to my chest, placing it over my heart.

"You know I love you," I say, grinning.

"Yes, Master. You wanna know something?" He turns his head sideways and places his bottom lip between his teeth, ogling me with an amused eyebrow.

"What?" I raise mine.

"I love you too... maybe, a bit too much, old man!"

"Rascal!" I growl and snatch his wrists before he can get away. "None of that! You got your cum, boy. We've got to get ready, or your father will have a bitch-fit if we're late for his dinner party, and you know how possessive that man has gotten over his son."

"You mean sons?"

I growl again, watching him walk his hot little ass to the shower. Now, Beo's all muscle—God, I think his biceps might be bigger than mine one day—definitely of the more ripped and defined, healthy sexy kind. I practically need to walk around with a fucking bat to keep the fuckers away from my boy.

And that dimpled ass... Yeah, someone's so getting fucked in the shower.

For those of you wondering what happened to the others: Richard and James haven't spoken since Richard's trip to Portland. Martin, the stupid bastard, went and fell in love with a straight man—it's complicated. Luther and Jer? Fuck knows how those two make it work, but they're happy. And as for Finn? Last I heard he moved back to his hometown in New Orleans. Aria and I? We still have our weekly sessions, but my anger and issues are far more under control.

And for those of you caring enough to want to know what happened to Hades and that deal we had? I'm still not sure on the details, but the man

vanished. Went nomad, off the fucking radar. The thing is, when those kinds of men go missing, they usually don't want to be found. Whatever happened to cause that is not my story to tell. You will need to take that up with Hades himself. That is, if you can find him.

Now, excuse me, I have a boy to fuck and an ass I wanna fill up with my cream.

See you around, motherfuckers!

**The End**

*Author's Note*

All of us have been touched by cancer: either ourselves, someone we know, or someone we know who knows someone. It's part of our lives whether we accept it or not. It can rip people apart, but it can also bring families together. Cancer affects every person differently, but it also affects those around them differently. If you ever consider doing something nice wear a ribbon and wear it proudly, because you care. The official ribbon color for cancer is lavender. There are the subcategories, but cancer, no matter what form, is devastating.

Walking down the street, going out for a jog, or just running to get milk; you never know if the person you just passed might be suffering from cancer. They might be facing it alone or they might have an army of loved ones behind them, but when they see that ribbon they will know you care. A little light will shine in telling them there is still hope left in this world. There are still people who give a damn about others.

For the purpose of this story I chose Beo's father to be the one to donate bone marrow. Leukemia (AML), however is not easy to fight. The treatment is devastating and the majority of leukemia patients lose their battle. There is a program where you can get tested to see if you are eligible to be a donor. You never know, your bone marrow might just give someone that extra time to make things right and to spend those few extra moments with those they love.

## Author Bio

*Wulf Francu Godgluck*

*They come to me in the night, creeping into my head. Their voices are all different, their stories all dissimilar, but they keep saying the same thing...*

*“Show us, tell us, bring us into your world, and make us known.”*

*Then I sit and they take over. They tell their tales of love, loss and sinister misfortune. Not all of them get a happy ending, but they are pleased when their part is written.*

*I sometimes find myself lost in my own mind; a world very similar to our own yet so different. Things don't go bump in the night—they squeal and crawl under your skin, making you grind your teeth, and making your stomach turn over and putting your nerves on edge. Then there's the drama. Oh, the drama!*

*I write because I must! There is so much inside of me that needs to get out. So many stories to tell, characters that want to be heard, and hearts lost and won. Words and art are my way of bringing my world to others. I enjoy telling tales of the human condition but working in elements of the supernatural. Werewolves, Vampires, Zombies, Witches and the unexplainable all set against the human world or worlds of their own.*

*I was born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa. I grew up in a working class family and enjoy writing, cooking and spending my husband's money! Yeah I'm a cocky little brat too (and proud of it, spankings included)!*

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)