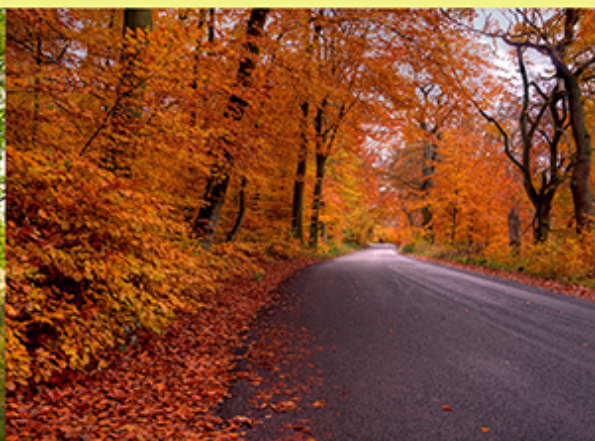
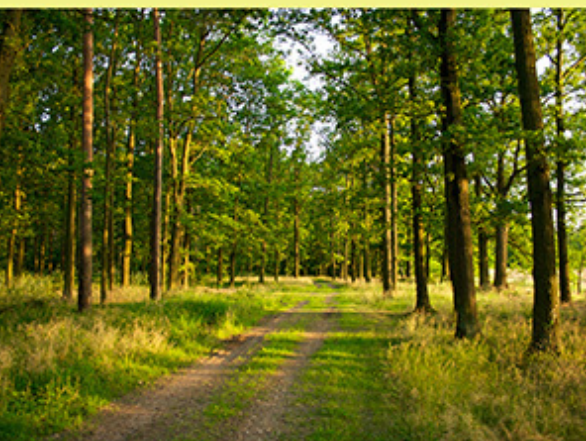


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**REASONABLE  
DOUBTS**

**Jae Moran**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## REASONABLE DOUBTS

**By Jae Moran**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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# REASONABLE DOUBTS

By Jae Moran

## Photo Description

A tall, slender man in a gray business suit walks along a city street holding twin girls by the hand. The girls are about five years old and wearing fluffy, pink tulle skirts with colorfully striped tights and sneakers. The three of them appear to be having an intense conversation.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I never thought I'd find myself in the situation where I'd be part of a loving family, especially not consisting of twin girls! People always considered me the ice-cold lawyer who takes everything way too serious and never cracks a smile at any joke whatsoever.*

*Everything changed the moment I met X. Little by little I started to loosen up with him (in more ways than one), and then we found the girls.*

*Please help me tell the story of how we met and maybe how we went on adapting to each other's differences.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jane A*

P.S. Requirements: I'd like the MC to have any white-collar job and his partner can be anything opposite to that (just not anything flamboyant). Please do not include BDSM, but kink is totally okay.

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** businessmen/lawyers, visual arts, family drama, fetish/toys, men with children

**Word Count:** 48,368

*Acknowledgements*

A huge thank you to the Goodreads MM Romance crew and all of the folks paddling like hell behind the scenes to make DRitC work. You are all amazing.

And as always, this story is for Sunshine Smartypants who is my reason for everything.

# **REASONABLE DOUBTS**

**By Jae Moran**



## Chapter 1

Walking down Boylston Street holding my daughters' hands, I can't help but think about the unbelievable luck that led me to this amazing life. It's not all rainbows and unicorns. My husband, Casey, and I are gay men raising twin five-year-old girls and juggling two busy careers. Nothing about that is easy and sometimes I want to go back to the days when I could sprawl on the couch in my underwear, drink a beer, and watch Anderson Cooper. Other days are like today and I wouldn't trade this life for anything.

Our current challenge is the gap week between the end of the school year and the beginning of summer camp. We're covering with some tricky tag-team parenting. I have the girls on Monday and Tuesday and Casey will have them Thursday and Friday. Wednesday we're both playing hooky and taking the twins to the zoo, and if the weather doesn't cooperate we'll go to the "fish zoo," otherwise known as the aquarium.

Fortunately, my new job allows me to work from home when I need to, but today I have a couple meetings I couldn't reschedule, so Rose and Lily are going to work with me for a few hours. They love taking the train into Boston and sitting in my office coloring while they pretend to be working with me. But the absolute best part of the day is the walk from the subway station to my office building. The conversations that happen in those few minutes are priceless.

Genetically speaking, the girls are Casey's nieces, but with a bit of serendipity and some outright intimidation, we have officially adopted them. They're ours. Forever. As fraternal twins, the girls are a lot alike, though they are also strikingly different in both appearance and personality. Rose is tiny with a riot of curly, strawberry blonde hair and this huge personality crammed into a feisty little body. Lily's bigger and generally gentler, with wavy hair just a shade or two darker than her sister's. She is also the more contemplative of the pair but she's definitely no pushover. For important conversations, Rose is their spokesperson.

As we crossed Copley Square, Rose glanced up at me as we ambled along. "Benny?" The twins are the only people in the world who have ever dared call me anything but Bennett.

"Yes, sweetness?"

“We’re a real family now. You, me, Lily and Uncle Casey. You said that’s what it meant when we saw the judge.” Two weeks ago we all went before the family court to finalize the adoption.

“That’s exactly what it meant.”

“Okay. Does that make you my dad now?”

“Only if you want it to. I can be your Benny forever, if that’s what you want.” I hoped one day they would think of me that way, but I never wanted to push. They’d been through so much change in their lives already.

“Jackson Edelstein has two dads. He calls one Daddy and the other Papa.”

“That’s nice.” It was nice. We chose their school in part because it had a number of LGBT families enrolled. So far, the teachers and staff had done a brilliant job making all the different flavors of family feel welcome.

“Lily and me... Is it okay if we call Uncle Casey ‘Daddy’ and call you ‘Poppy’?”

“Why ‘Poppy’?”

“’Cuz then we’re all flowers... Rose, Lily, and Poppy.”

“I like Poppy. Why does Casey get to be Daddy and not one of the flowers?”

“’Cuz he’s in charge, silly.” A true statement.

It isn’t so much that Casey has any more power; he just has a more down-to-earth way of solving problems than I do, so I tend to defer to him. My solutions almost always involve throwing money at the problem until it goes away. “I’m in charge too.”

Rose stopped walking and turned to me for emphasis. “I know. You’re big and take care of us. But Uncle Casey takes care of everybody.”

“He does. What do you think, Lily?” Lily had been quiet since we got off the subway.

“I love you, Poppy.” The words and shy smile from the little sprite shattered me.

“Love you too, sugar.” What else was there to say? And for the record, the wetness in my eyes was just allergies. Allergies. Yeah, Casey wouldn’t buy that one either.

Pablo Picasso said “Everything you can imagine is real,” and while on some level that’s true, the opposite seems just as true. I am living a life I could never have imagined and sometimes I have a hard time believing it’s real. It’s also hard to believe I almost gave up my chance to have this amazing loving family I never dreamed was possible.

\*\*\*\*

*When Bennett Met Casey...*

Monthly staff meetings were the bane of my working life. They came around the second Monday of every month whether I objected or not. The large boardroom was already overcrowded and overly warm. I found my way to a folding chair against the far wall under the portrait of my great-grandfather, who happened to be one of the founding partners of the law firm where I worked. If anyone bothered to look, the resemblance between Charles Eliot Whitmore and me was rather remarkable. I sipped my caramel latte, which was my monthly reward for sitting patiently through the regurgitation of the status update memos we all received via e-mail, and waited for the meeting to start.

Around me, my colleagues in the civil litigation group ate bagels and chatted amiably. No one asked about my weekend or even talked to me really, which was fine. It had taken me a long time to train them not to make conversation about anything other than work. I don’t talk about my personal life in the office. Ever. It’s not because I’m in the closet or even because I’m gay. My picture appears in the About Town page of the paper with a male date often enough that my sexuality is common knowledge. More than anything, it’s because nobody needs to know that I don’t really have much of a life to speak of, apart from work.

Being the sole heir to a family with a significant fortune and storied history in Boston comes with some extraordinary expectations. The Whitmore legacy stretches back to before the American Revolution and my great-grandfather, Charles, was Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts and later a State Supreme Court judge. My grandfather, Bennett Stevens Whitmore, was a long-standing member of the U.S. House of Representatives who quite literally dropped dead in his office in Washington when I was ten. My father, Douglas, is a world-renowned heart surgeon who has operated on kings and former presidents.

In that kind of high-achieving family, I couldn’t just graduate from high school, I had to graduate at the top of my class from an exclusive prep school. When I wasn’t accepted at Harvard as an undergrad, it was a huge scandal.

How a page from my essay never made it into the envelope with the rest of my application was a mystery—at least to my parents. I had to settle for Dartmouth, which luckily was where I actually wanted to go. I did go to Harvard for law school and made editor of the law review like everyone expected. As it happens, I like being a lawyer; I'm good at it and I enjoy the work. My father had been hassling me about beginning my political career for a while. Being a politician isn't something I ever wanted, yet I didn't see how I could escape it without crushing my parents and probably ruining our relationship.

So there I sat, the youngest partner at Bradlee, Perkins and Whitmore since my grandfather, trying to stay under the radar until I could go back to my office and actually get some work done. The meeting eddied around me but I wasn't paying much attention. I had multiple cases competing for brain space and only so many hours in the day, so I used the time to strategize my week. Eventually, I realized that David Rice, the firm's managing partner, was covering information not lifted directly from the status memos.

"If you've been following the missives from the management committee, you know we are in the process of updating the firm's marketing and recruiting materials including the website. Starting this week, Casey Nolan will be lurking around taking candid and scheduling times to take new portraits of all the partners. The goal is to soften the firm's image, making us seem a little younger and more approachable. Casey, raise your hand so everyone can see who you are."

With all my ruminating, I hadn't noticed the stranger at the back of the room with the artfully messy, auburn hair, full lips and a camera in his hand. The photographer waved before gesturing with his camera. "I'll do my best to make this as painless as possible. The marketing team put together a helpful e-mail with some suggestions to make sure we get the right tone. If you have any questions, I'll be around, so please feel free to flag me down." His broad smile framed by some seriously sexy dimples struck me like an elbow to the ribs. It had been a long time since I was turned on by anyone not starring in high-quality Internet porn.

From that point on, my attention was split between the attractive photographer and the rest of the meeting. It was strange how I noticed little things about him—like the graceful way his hands manipulated the camera or the way the dark purple button-down shirt he was wearing made his eyes shine like pure cobalt. I took a risk sneaking another glance, only to find him looking

right back at me. The photographer gave me a cheeky smile and went back to fiddling with his camera. As soon as the meeting was over I darted out of the conference room and headed back to my office.

I'd no sooner made it back to the refuge of my office, when my cell phone rang. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. My mother. I love my parents but they have a very carefully scripted plan for my life, and I learned a long time ago that there wasn't much use in trying to change it.

"Hi, Mom."

"Good morning, sweetheart. I know you're busy at work, but I wanted to remind you that the Heart Association Ball is a month away. Do you have a date yet? Molly Oatway's stepson Lawrence has just come home after finishing his residency in Chicago and..."

I tried to hold back my annoyance. Cutting her off midsentence probably gave me away more than anything I said. I should be relieved that she finally had stopped trying to set me up with women, but her ceaseless meddling in hopes of finding a suitable match for me was beyond aggravating. "Mom. Please. If I decide to go, I will find my own date."

"Bennett Gregory Whitmore, your father is chair of this event. It's important for you to be there and show your support. We already bought a table and have set aside a pair of tickets for you. Please don't embarrass your father by not attending."

"If I promise to be there, will you let me get my own date?"

"Fine. You know we just want what's best for you. It's time for you to settle down."

She couldn't seem to comprehend that if I got any more settled, I'd start to molder. "Mom, I'm happy being a bachelor and I work too much for a relationship right now."

"You're thirty-one years old, Bennett. It won't be long before you start your political career, and voters like candidates with a stable family life. It's time for you to think about your future." She was like a dog with a bone.

"I don't think a husband, two kids and a cocker spaniel are in my future, but I'll get a date for the ball. Okay?"

"Thank you. Aunt Trish and Uncle Don are coming up from New York this weekend. Will we see you for dinner Sunday?"

“I’ll be there. I haven’t seen them since Christmas. Besides, I can always use a mom-cooked meal. I have to go, but I love you. See you Sunday.”

\*\*\*\*

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing? It’s a good suit.” I dressed that morning thinking this is how a successful attorney was supposed to look. The navy Burberry suit, white shirt and lipstick-red tie were classic. My posture stiffened as I stared blankly at my administrative assistant, Suzanne. She stood beside my desk with her arms crossed over her ample chest. Always fashionable, Suzanne was in her midfifties and a lovely woman, if a bit heavy, with sparkling green eyes boring into me from behind her reading glasses.

“Bennett, listen. The whole point of the new portraits and marketing materials is to make the firm seem less stuffy and pretentious. Let me send an intern to your condo for your gray windowpane suit and a light blue shirt and tie. We have time before the photographer gets here.” Suzanne looked at me plaintively, knowing it was hopeless. She and I came to an unspoken agreement when I became partner. I accommodate her need to do things a certain way—to her the “right” way—and she keeps me from alienating the other partners and staff. A fair trade, usually, but today I was being stubborn. I didn’t want to look like a kid at the grownups’ table in the photos, so I wore my favorite power suit—not that I would admit that to anyone.

“No. Thank you. This is me. The marketing group can’t dictate what I wear for my headshot. David can pound sand if he has a problem with it.” I generated more revenue than some of the partners twice my age. The firm’s managing partner wouldn’t dare scold me for my wardrobe choice.

“It’s your funeral.” Suzanne just shook her head before returning to her desk.

After picking up the next file in the pile on my desk, I leaned back in my chair and started reading. The opposing counsel on my current case was drowning us in paper, which usually meant they were hiding something. With a little luck, I’d find it on the first pass but I’d probably spend most of the weekend rereading the cartons of files until I found what I was looking for. The key to winning the case was there, I could feel it.

Time passed as I worked and eventually I heard some clicking coming from the doorway to my office. Casey Nolan stood there pointing his camera at me as I looked up. He was just as handsome he’d been at the staff meeting the week before. His coral, V-neck sweater and pale blue shirt highlighted his

gorgeous tan and gave him the look of someone who spent a lot of time outdoors, unusual for a guy with freckles. For a moment I imagined the muscles in those broad shoulders paddling a kayak or climbing a sheer rock face. Shirtless. By his reaction, I'm sure he thought I was annoyed by the interruption, but no, I was just perving on the photographer.

"Sorry to disturb you. I saw an opportunity for some nice candid and couldn't resist." The man smiled a little sheepishly as he stepped into my office. "Hi. I'm Casey Nolan." We shook hands before he sat on the leather sofa opposite my desk. "I guess we should talk a little before we get started."

"Sure. How does this work? Usually the photographer sets up in the library and we get shuttled through like middle schoolers on picture day."

"I work a little differently. My job is to bring out more of your personality than the generic portraits the firm has done in the past. It takes a little more time and effort but the results will be worth it. And I'll try and make it at least a little fun for us both." Casey flashed that dazzling smile that stole my breath. I just stared at him without smiling back. My natural awkwardness chose that moment to kick in, and as much as I wanted to respond, I couldn't. My mouth wouldn't move and my brain froze solid. This was why I didn't have a personal life.

Casey shifted on the couch and scratched the back of his head. "Anyway, David said you are one of the two legacy partners at the firm from the original Bradlee, Perkins and Whitmore, so I thought we'd stage a few shots to play that up. I'll put you next to your name on the firm's sign inside the main entry door, and I'd also like to catch a few of you with the portrait in the boardroom. The resemblance is uncanny and I think I can get a great photo that reflects that. Also, you're the youngest partner in almost sixty years and the marketing team wants to use that in their recruiting materials, so I thought we'd lose the jacket and tie, walk up to Post Office Square, and get the rest outside in the park. That should give the graphic designers plenty of variety to work with. Are you comfortable with all that?"

"That sounds fine. We should get started."

"Excellent. Follow me, I've already set up in the boardroom." Another smile, less enthusiastic than before but still arresting and I trailed behind him like a puppy on a string.

We spent a few minutes moving me around and trying out different poses. It was awkward and I knew I looked uptight. Casey was a trooper, keeping up a

steady stream of jokes and attempts at lighthearted banter, but I didn't bite at any of it. I was too busy trying to hide my response to being in close proximity with someone I found incredibly attractive. Maintaining a professional demeanor came at the price of basic civility.

Eventually Casey was frustrated enough to address the problem directly. "Okay. Let's just stop for a minute. Have a seat." I did exactly what he requested, happy to know what was expected of me. Casey handed me a bottle of water as he sat and looked at me with more compassion than I deserved. "This will go much more smoothly and take a lot less of your time, if we can both relax a little. Did I say or do something to make you uncomfortable?"

"No, not at all. You've been great. I'm just not comfortable in front of a camera. Obviously."

Casey leaned back in his chair and studied me for a few seconds. "Okay. Not to play armchair psychologist or anything, but people this nervous are either afraid of the camera seeing the real person behind the mask they show the world or they have serious self-esteem issues with their appearance. Either way, you're an incredibly successful, good-looking guy. My job is to show people the best version of you in these pictures. I can coach you there, if you trust me a little. After that, everything else is cake."

"I'm sorry to waste your time. I'll get it together. It's not you. I'm just a law geek and generally not fit for normal human interaction."

"Come on. Let's just play around and see what happens. Go ahead and sit on the stool and mimic old Charlie's pose."

I couldn't help but chuckle a little. "He died a decade before I was born but if Charles Whitmore was anything like my grandfather, never in his life did anyone call him Charlie."

"So the stuffed-shirt thing is genetic then?" Casey laughed gently and winked, taking the bite out of his teasing.

"I guess it is." I looked away and smiled. I heard the *click* of the camera. Casey fiddled with the equipment, asked me to change poses and questioned me about what my favorite food was and why. Surprisingly, I started talking about my grandmother and me sneaking out of her apartment, which is now mine, to visit Mike's Pastry for the best cannoli in town. It was during those fifteen- or twenty-minute walks that we talked about our lives, away from my parents who mean well but always seemed to get in the way of real



conversation. She was the first person I came out to at eighteen before I left for college, not that I mentioned that part to Casey. As I talked, he asked a few questions and gave me little directions here and there... chin up... more to the left... and there was quite a bit of *click* and *whir* from the camera. I was surprised when Casey said he had enough and we could change locations.

The move to the entryway was a little more difficult because I felt exposed to the people coming in and out of the office, but Casey somehow got me to talk about being a lawyer and what I was working on that day. Again he gave me direction and asked smart, sometimes teasing, questions. All in all it felt a little like a first date. By the time we wrapped up the second location, I realized he knew all kinds of personal things about me but I knew absolutely nothing about him.

Casey repacked his camera bag and condensed the rest of his equipment into a manageable pile. It didn't take long to move it all into my office before we took the elevator down to the lobby. As we walked out the door, Casey looked at me and laughed. "For a few minutes there I thought this was going to be a disaster, but you were an easy fix."

"It didn't feel easy to me, but how so?"

"What was the difference between my setup for the first test shots and the ones after our little come-to-Jesus talk?"

"I don't know... What?" I really didn't know.

He smiled and held up what looked like a car alarm remote. "You needed to see my face. Once I started using a remote trigger, you relaxed and talked to me."

"You have a nice face, and you asked good questions that distracted me." Walking side by side kept Casey from seeing my face flush before I could push it away.

Casey laughed. "Bennett, honey, I asked the same questions before. I just had a camera in my face the first time. It's going to be a little harder in the park because I'm going to try and shoot without the tripod and trigger. It gives me more flexibility while I'm contending with sun and shadows. I'll make sure I pull the camera away from my face as much as I can. Okay?"

"Now that I'm more comfortable with you, it should be fine. I'm not really that needy."

“Don’t worry about it. Photography brings up a cognitive dissonance for a lot of people. It exposes the difference between who they are and who they think they should be. As a portrait photographer, I’m just trying to bring out the beauty of my subject while hopefully showing a little bit of who they are naturally.”

“I realized while we were upstairs, I know next to nothing about you. Did you always want to be a photographer?”

“No. I actually wanted to be a cinematographer. I went to film school at Emerson and moved to New York after graduation for a few years. I even managed to accrue some decent movie and TV credits.”

“Why’d you come back to Boston?”

“My father died and my mother needed me closer to home. My sister wasn’t around to help, so it became my responsibility.”

“How’d you end up a still photographer?”

“I needed to earn a living. After I moved back to Boston, I started producing and directing commercials and other corporate videos freelance. Paul Morasco at Polliwog Media was my biggest client. Every once in a while Polliwog would get a request for a still photographer as part of a project and since Paulie knew I needed the money, he’d throw the work my way. Later, some of those video clients called me directly for other still jobs and it snowballed. Now that I’m getting well known for my portraits and corporate headshot work, I don’t shoot as much video, but I still freelance for Paul when he needs me. Don’t get me wrong; I love what I do. It’s just not what I planned when I graduated college.”

“How’s your mother doing?”

“She’s a lot better now that she sold the house and moved to North Carolina to be closer to her sister. It was hard for her to be here without my dad. Being away from New England winters doesn’t suck for her either.”

“You didn’t go back to New York?”

“I had a life here by the time she decided to move away. Memories are short in New York. I’d have had to start my career all over to get into serious filmmaking again. Somehow it didn’t seem worth giving up the life I had to chase a dream. Did you always want to be a lawyer?”

“No. Once I realized I was never going to be Indiana Jones, I wanted to do be a doctor like my father, but in medical research instead of surgery. Finding

ways to cure people of disease seemed like a cool way to make a living when I was fourteen. But my parents had other plans for my future. It worked out in the end. I like what I do and I seem to be good at it.”

“You don’t get to be the youngest partner in years without being good at what you do. My guess is you’re great at it and are being modest.”

“Not really. My partnership had as much to do with my last name as any skill I have as a lawyer.”

As we approached the park at Post Office Square, Casey led us to a bench on the shady side of the path just past the fountain. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Why wouldn’t I? That’s how the world works. The firm wanted me as a partner to bolster business with some of the old-money clients who have long-standing ties to my family. It didn’t hurt that collectively my family is the largest shareholder in Franklin Street Financial and the partnership wants a bigger share of their business. They’ve gotten frozen out by a couple of the mega-law firms in the last few years. I do good work and book more than my share of revenue, but I have no illusions about why I made partner three years before I should have.”

“That can’t be easy to live with.” Casey rifled around in his camera bag and started setting up his equipment.

“Belonging to my family comes at a price. It’s a burden as much as a blessing.” For a minute I fiddled with my hair and straightened my suit and tie.

“Okay, Bennett. This set is going to be more casual. Lose the jacket and loosen the tie.” With a wave of his hand, Casey hurried me along.

After I slipped out of the jacket and laid it over the back of the bench. I turned to look at Casey for more instruction. His intense expression surprised me. Somehow I kept my feet when he licked his bottom lip and mumbled, “Suspenders. Damn.”

“Braces, actually, but yeah.” A rare smile graced my lips as I stared at Casey.

“This is going to turn into a whole different shoot, if I don’t focus. Go ahead and sit on the bench like you own it and lean your elbows on your knees. Look past me to the fountain. Chin forward. Think about the last time you ate cannoli with your grandmother. Good.” *Click. Move. Click. Click.* “Excellent. Now look at the camera.”

My whole body went stiff and all of my anxiety roared back to life. Casey dropped the camera to his side. “It’s still me, even when you can’t see my face. I promise my camera will not bite you or tell your mother about your belly button fetish.”

I laughed in spite of myself. “How’d you know about my belly button predilection?”

“I have a sense about these things.” Casey chuckled as he lifted the camera back to his face. “You can always use the old speaker’s trick and imagine me naked. It might help make you feel less exposed.”

Those images in my head were not helping me relax. I smiled before I looked away and blushed. *Click. Click. Click.* “I’m trying to imagine the Bambi tattoo on your chest instead.” Smiling again, I tried to relax.

“Close, but no cigar. It’s Flower, the skunk, not Bambi.” Casey grinned as he lowered the camera and had me change poses again.

“Damn. My x-ray vision must be on the fritz along with my gaydar.” More blushing. More smiling. More flirty glances. I was so far outside my comfort zone, I wasn’t sure I could find my way back.

“Your gaydar must really be wrecked for it to take you this long to suss me out.”

“It doesn’t get much use; the dials might be stuck.” The rest of the shoot was mostly painless. Casey fluttered around like a bumblebee taking pictures from every conceivable angle and pose but he finished a lot sooner than I expected. As we strolled back to my office, I had this crazy urge to hold Casey’s hand. I was already so far out on a limb, I might as well see if it would crack. “Hey, Casey. Are you going to be at the firm again this week?”

Casey stopped walking and turned to look me in the eye. “Tomorrow and Monday. Why?”

“Maybe we could grab some lunch... There’s a great deli a few blocks from the office that has the best sandwiches in town.”

“Are you asking me on a date?” With wide eyes, Casey looked at me expectantly.

“Not very effectively, I guess. It doesn’t have to be a date. Sometimes a lunch is just a lunch.”

“Well, Dr. Freud, I’d love to have lunch with you. Tomorrow is packed and I’ll be lucky to snarf down a granola bar and coffee between appointments. But Monday I’m only booked here until about one, and then I’m free the rest of the day.”

“Tell you what... I usually eat at my desk anyway. I can bring you a quick lunch you can eat on the go tomorrow. It’s no trouble for me to bring enough for two, and we can do our official lunch date Monday.” I didn’t know where this need to care for Casey came from, but the idea of him skipping lunch bothered me in a way that was wholly inappropriate. I didn’t feel this way about my own mother, never mind someone I just met.

“That sounds nice. Thank you.” Casey smiled hard and my brain turned to creamed farina. We walked back to my office in a comfortable silence. Once he collected the rest of his equipment from my office we exchanged cell numbers and went back to work. It was a good day.

The next morning I had two e-mails from Casey. One was the official proofs from our shoot the day before that was sent to the marketing people at the firm, and the other was a group of photos that didn’t really fit with the rest of the more corporate headshots. They were more appropriate for a personal portrait session. I opened the one labeled “my favorite”. The picture itself was amazing. I looked good in my shirtsleeves and braces, if I say so myself. No knobby knees, elbows or geekiness in sight. My eyes sparkled with attraction right on the edge of lust and my smile was broad and openhearted. It was taken the nanosecond before I looked away and blushed, just after Casey had suggested I imagine him naked. Although the man in the picture was a stranger, he looked like someone I might want to get to know.

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## Chapter 2

I waited in a cab outside my best friend's condo before he flung the door open and launched himself inside in a burst of boundless energy. Nate Graczyk and I have been friends since we were eighteen-year-old freshmen at Dartmouth. Randomly assigned by the housing office, we just clicked from the moment we met. He was a middle-class kid from Ohio who worked his butt off to earn an academic scholarship to the Ivy League, and I was a trust fund baby with a drawer full of silver spoons who worked my butt off to not disappoint my parents. On many levels we were kindred spirits and on others we were completely different.

Nate was straight, handsome and athletic with a devil-may-care attitude that made women swoon, while I didn't have a single one of those attributes. He never cared that I was gay or a geek or who my family was; I was just the one person who saw past the cocky smirk to the insanely smart, driven guy he was. I can say many things about Nate but he has never once traded on our friendship for access to my family's money or political connections, and that was a rare, honorable thing in my world. Luckily, he was also always willing to be my plus-one at events like the Heart Association Ball. I've been on more "dates" with Nate than anyone else in my life, probably combined.

To Nate, our arrangement was perfect. I got to attend an event with someone who didn't want anything from me and he got to network with Boston's social elite without having to cater to a real date. More to the point, unlike an actual date, I didn't care who he went home with—sometimes it was me, usually it was some woman he picked up for the night. Either way we both got what we needed. My guestroom should probably have been known as the Nathaniel Graczyk Suite. I think he was the only person who'd slept there since I inherited my apartment. Nate was a management consultant who traveled half the time, and while he owned a small studio about five minutes from me, he tended to crash with me quite a bit when he was home.

"Hey, man. It's good to see you. Sorry I was late. My flight from Milwaukee was delayed."

"How is life in Brew City treating you?"

"Okay. Boring. I have two more weeks, and then I'm home for a month. Drake called to talk about that strategy job over at Google again and I'm

seriously considering it this time. My condo should be more than a very expensive storage unit. And I want a cat.”

“I’m surprised you don’t want a little dog, like Otis.” Otis is my mother’s Maltese and probably her witch’s familiar.

“Dogs are too much commitment. You can leave a cat overnight without shit hitting the fan. One of the managers in Milwaukee had the team over for dinner, and she had this Bengal cat that was badass. It’ll be like having a leopard in my living room.”

“Do you have a fever or did you hit your head? You’re talking like you want to settle down or something.”

“Only a very little bit. It would be nice to have someone waiting at home for me. My apartment felt dead when I walked in tonight.”

“You could always sell or rent your place and live with me.” It was something that had been on the table since we were in graduate school. When I inherited my apartment from my grandmother during my first year of law school, Nate and I shared a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Cambridge while I was at Harvard and he was in business school at MIT. He wouldn’t move with me because he couldn’t afford to live in Beacon Hill, and he didn’t want feel like he was taking advantage of our friendship. It was a dumb argument because the apartment came to me free and clear. All it cost to live there were the taxes—which were less than half what we were paying in rent—but for Nate it was the principle of the thing. We didn’t really talk about money; however, I was pretty sure he could afford to buy my apartment a couple times over these days.

“No. It makes more sense for me to own at this point, though I may trade up to someplace bigger if I’m not traveling so much.”

“Well, I, for one, would be pleased to have you around more often.”

“It’s still just talk. What’s going on with you? You’ve been in a strange mood the last few times I called.”

I looked out the window of the cab as we passed the Public Garden. “I met someone.”

“For real? That’s awesome.”

“We’ve only been on a couple lunch dates, but I like him a lot.”

“Who is he? Someone at work?” Nate knew that was that was the only place I could have met anyone.

“Sort of... Casey’s the photographer they brought in to do the new headshots for the website and recruiting package.”

“So, why am I here and not this new guy?”

“I don’t think having to face my parents at a flashy fundraiser would be a good move for our first real date.” No one needed to know that I seized up again at lunch last week and couldn’t manage to get the invitation out of my mouth.

“In other words, you chickened out.” Of course Nate knew I was obfuscating.

“Yes. But my rationalization isn’t totally off the mark.” It wasn’t. We weren’t ready to meet the parents, especially my parents. It’d be like parading a baby gazelle in front of hungry lions. Maybe my parents weren’t quite as bad as lions, but I stood by my analogy.

“Not totally. But he’s going to have to learn to deal with this shit if he wants to be your boyfriend.” I blanched at the word “boyfriend.” I was not ready for that.

“It’s way too soon to think about calling him my boyfriend. Two lunch dates, Nate. Two.”

“But you like him more than you think you should. Tell me about him.”

“Auburn hair, bright blue eyes, a face full of freckles, taller than me, so six feet, maybe six-one, broad shoulders, elegant, expressive hands... But he’s a whole package. Smart, funny and I smile the rest of the day after I see him. Suzanne thinks he’s replaced me with an alien clone.”

“I’m so calling Suzanne on Monday.” He would. Nate and Suzanne liked to think they could manage my life without any input from me. They were mistaken. Mostly.

“Anyway, it’s all still new and different. Casey doesn’t want to scare me off, so we’re taking things slow.”

“We’re here. Time to put on my gay boyfriend persona. It might be the last time I get to use it.”

“We’ll see. I’m not counting chickens just yet.” We climbed out of the cab and made our way to the red carpet entry set up for the ball. Nate walked close with his hand on my lower back and whispered catty things in my ear making me laugh. We posed for pictures at the designated spot. Nate hammed it up a



little more than usual, calling me babe and kissing my cheek. I elbowed him and hissed at him to tone it down. He just laughed at my prudishness, like usual.

As we reached the end of the aisle, I noticed a familiar face. Casey was standing at the end of the carpet wearing a navy tuxedo and holding a video camera. I was so ridiculously happy to see him; I smiled so big I could feel the stretch of the underused muscles in my face. I turned to Nate and whispered, “Casey’s here. He’s the guy shooting video at the end. I’m going to say hello.”

“Why’s he pissed off?”

I whipped my head around to look at Casey again and this time I took in his expression. He was furious and trying to bury it. “I don’t know. Go on in, I’ll catch up in a minute. I need to check on him.”

“You did tell him you were going to be here with me, right? Before he saw my little performance or someone saw a picture of us in the paper or online...”

“Crap.” This wasn’t my finest hour.

“Bennett, you may be the smartest guy I know, but sometimes you are dumber than a box of hair. I’ll be at the bar. Find me once you climb out of the hole you’ve dug for yourself.” Nate smiled encouragingly and headed in the doors.

I slipped behind the rope line to stay out of the range of his camera. “Hey. I didn’t know you’d be here tonight.”

“Obviously. Go inside with your boyfriend. I’m working.”

“It’s not like that. Nate’s my date in name only. He’s straight and my best friend without any sort of benefits, romantic or otherwise. Not now, not ever.”

“Whatever. You looked pretty cozy. Just leave me alone.”

“Casey, please... Talk to me.”

“Not now, Bennett. I’ll find you later. I’ll have a little time during dinner.”

“Okay. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“We’ll see.” Casey turned and went back to work, clearly dismissing me.

I wandered into the ballroom, barely noticing the gorgeous space or the sparkling red and gold decorations supporting the “Hearts of Gold” theme. It didn’t take long for me to find Nate flirting with some curvy woman in a slinky

metallic dress. Once he spotted me, Nate excused himself and waded through the crowd.

“I need a large drink and perhaps a straw.”

“Sorry, buddy. Getting drunk won’t help. It’ll be like Miami Beach all over again.” My first boyfriend broke up with me while we were in Florida for spring break our junior year. I proceeded to get drunk for the first time in my life with Nate and his friends. Poor Nate spent the last two days of our vacation nursing me through a foul hangover and momentarily broken heart. “He didn’t believe you? Want me to talk to him?”

“I don’t know. He’s working and can’t deal with our drama right now. He said he’d find me during dinner. But he’s pretty upset.”

“I can’t blame him. It’ll be okay once you get a chance to explain. I’m sorry I fucked things up for you. I was just playing.”

“Not your fault. I should have talked to him beforehand. It would have saved us all a lot of heartache.”

“Not to pile on, but your mother is looking for you. She didn’t look very happy to see me.” Nate winced a little. My parents have never been fans of our friendship. They hate the fact that they have no leverage over him and can’t use him to control me.

“I’m going to go say hello to my parents. I’ll take my lumps and hopefully avoid an arranged marriage to Molly Oatway’s stepson.”

“Good luck with that.” With a wry smile, Nate rolled his eyes.

“Not in the mood for their crap tonight. I’m here wearing a tux and have a date, such as you are. They don’t have any room to complain.”

“Hey! I’ve been told I’m quite a catch.”

“And I’m supposed to ignore the fact that you don’t want to be caught? Besides, I have all the wrong equipment to do the catching.” As soon as the words ran out of my mouth, I knew I was in trouble.

Nate nearly doubled over laughing. “Dude, even if I swung that way, we both know you’re the only one doing any catching.”

“Yuk it up, boyfriend. I’ll be back.” I crossed the cocktail reception looking for my parents.

I found them chatting with a local political reporter and his wife, who also happened to be old friends of the family. For a moment, I was tempted to turn

on my heel and go back to Nate, but there was no escape from this conversation. “Hey, Mom and Dad.” I shook my father’s hand and kissed my mother’s cheek. “Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, it’s nice to see you.”

“Bennett, it’s good to see you too. I was just telling your father that Margot Wallace is very likely leaving Boston for a leadership position with EMILY’s List in Washington. We’re expecting a special election next spring to fill her seat in the state house.”

“That is news. EMILY’s List is a great organization and they’ll be lucky to have her.” Margot was a force of nature, politically and personally. But that wasn’t what this conversation was about.

My father puffed up a little bit. “Ned O’Keefe and Trevor Carson were tasked by the state party chair with creating a short list of possible candidates, and rumor has it you were one of the people being discussed.”

“Really. I’m honored, but I’m not sure the timing is right. I’m still a relatively new partner at the firm and I’ve only been on the board of my neighborhood association for a year. I doubt my resume will stand up against other potential candidates.” I was being honest, even if I didn’t come out and declare that I’d rather eat rat poison than run for office. My father glared at me so hard, I worried he was going to pop a blood vessel.

Mr. Phillips smiled kindly. “Well, it’s something to consider. I’m sure they’ll be in touch to test your interest. Come on, Karen. We should find our table. Doug, Joanna, we’ll see you in a few weeks. Bennett, enjoy your evening.” The couple walked away toward the dining tables.

“Bennett, what the hell were you thinking? You practically told him you didn’t want to run. This is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for.”

No, it’s the opportunity he’d been waiting for in my grandfather’s stead. “What difference does it make? The state Democrats will try and woo me into running or they won’t. A little reluctance and humility on my part won’t deter them. Anyway, how are you, Dad? The ball is stunningly beautiful so far. I know you’ll raise a ton of money tonight.”

“Thanks for your vote of confidence. I was honored to be asked to chair the event. Keep your mother company while I speak with Dr. Millgate for a moment.” Dr. Millgate was the Chief of Medicine at the hospital where my father works. It wasn’t surprising for him to ditch us for work.

“Sure, Dad.” My father left the ballroom. “How are you, Mom?”

“I’m disappointed, Bennett. You promised to bring a date.”

“I said I would find my own date and I did.”

“Yes, I heard about your little display out front. You know I meant a real date and not Nathaniel Graczyk.” She always says Nate’s name like he’s a communicable disease and not my best friend.

“What display? He kissed my cheek.” Best strategy here was to feign ignorance of her closeted homophobia.

I came out to my parents before I left for college. On the surface, they reacted positively or at least, not negatively. I suspect they thought it was a phase or a rebellion of some kind. My father, the doctor, said, “Thank you for telling us,” and he hasn’t said one word about my sexuality since.

My mother, on the other hand, cried a little and said she was disappointed she wouldn’t have grandchildren one day. I told her grandchildren weren’t out of the question, and she gave me a pointed look, then proceeded to try and set me up with women for the next five years. After a huge fight my first year of law school, she gave up and started finding men for me to date. An improvement to be sure, but it was still aggravating.

“No one wants to see that kind of exhibition, Bennett. It’s distasteful and insolent.” Her sharp scowl was cutting.

“What are you talking about? If it was a Kate instead of a Nate kissing me on the cheek, you wouldn’t have cared. You probably would have thought it a sweet gesture.”

“But he’s not a Kate. The rules are different for you.”

“Why?” I knew I had her trapped in her own hypocrisy. In her world, being gay was fine as long as I didn’t look or act gay, and I didn’t behave in any way that could be perceived as gay by other people. She seemed to forget that I was a really good lawyer and argued for a living.

“This is not the time or place for this discussion.” It wasn’t, but, even so, this was my mother’s favorite tactic when she couldn’t win an argument with facts or logic.

“Fine. I’m going back to my date. I’ll see you at the table.” It was going to be a long dinner.

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### Chapter 3

Near the end of the salad course, Casey sidled up to our table. He was tense, though less hostile than he'd been outside. I smiled and was happy to have it returned this time. If I wasn't already used to the slam of affection and libido I got every time Casey walked into a room, I don't think I would have been fully capable of speech. I briefly introduced him to my parents and their other guests at the table. Nate and I excused ourselves and followed Casey out to the ballroom's foyer, where there were a few people milling around.

Casey looked Nate up and down before speaking. "So you're the infamous Nate."

"I don't know about infamous, but I am rather well known for my exploits." And there was Nate's signature grin. I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Seriously though, I don't want my stupid antics to come between you and Bennett. He's my best friend and I take that seriously; however, Lord Stick-in-the-mud over there sometimes needs a little shove to get him to loosen up and have a good time. My boyfriend shtick makes him laugh and embarrasses him all at the same time, which is generally a double win for me. In any case, I'm no threat. Now, I'm going to go back to the table and eat my dinner. Bennett, I'll cover you for as long as I can but the tiger mama will not be assuaged. I suggest you be back before we get too far into the entrée."

Casey stuck his hand out for Nate to shake. "Thanks, Nate. I apologize for being bitchy earlier. I should have trusted Bennett. I know he's a good man, even with the handicap of being a lawyer."

Nate shook his hand. "Once you get past the shyness and tragically bad taste in beer, he's the best guy I've ever known. He can sometimes be a little lacking in the communication department, but it's never malicious. When he doesn't know what to say, he just doesn't say anything at all. You'll understand after witnessing a few run-ins with his parents. Anyway, I'll stop embarrassing him now. I'm sure we'll talk later." With that, my best friend sauntered back into the ballroom.

"Bad taste in beer?"

I rolled my eyes again. I do that a lot around Nate. "I don't like hoppy beer, especially the craft IPAs he loves. My taste runs darker, mostly porters and stouts. Nate finds this to be a character flaw."

“Yeah, I’m a light beer kinda guy most of the time. I like my calories to come from actual food, not beverages.”

“You like what you like. I won’t hold it against you, unlike Nate.”

“I am sorry about earlier. I saw Nate flirting with you and got pissy. We haven’t made any commitments to one another, so I don’t have any cause to get jealous and growly.”

“No. It was my fault. I should have mentioned the ball to you. I wanted to ask you to be my date, but I wasn’t sure we were ready for all this, plus meeting my parents... Besides, pictures of Nate and me could end up in the paper or online, I should have said something so you didn’t get blindsided. I was stupid and I’m really sorry.”

“I get it. You didn’t want to hurt my feelings by mentioning the ball without inviting me when you were bringing your best friend along. You didn’t know what to say, so you didn’t say anything. Nate is a smart guy.”

“He is. I am so sorry. I like you and I’m trying really hard not to mess this up.” I raised my hand and cupped his jaw, brushing his full bottom lip with my thumb. We stared at each other, absorbing the moment of simple connection before I lowered my hand.

“Just talk to me. Tell me what you’re feeling, and I promise to do the same. Okay?”

“Okay.” My inability to form full sentences needed to stop.

“So, how ’bout I take you out Friday night? I should still be able to get reservations for a thing and a late dinner.” I melted just a little at Casey’s sly smile.

“Do I get to know what the thing is?”

“No. Just wear clothes you’re not afraid of ruining. Sometimes it gets a little messy.”

“Okay, I’m intrigued. Let me know when so I leave work on time. We’re still having lunch Tuesday, right?”

“Absolutely. Tuesday, one o’clock at Saus. The poutine, she calls to me,” Casey giggled. The French fries at that place were beyond stellar and he was working a couple blocks away, so I’d hike the ten minutes from my office. I shook my head and laughed. We laughed so much when we were together. My other relationships never had that easy, friendship-first feeling.

“When do you have to go back to work?”

“About now. I’m only on until ten. I’ll find you when I’m done. ’Kay?”

“Sure. I’ll be out here talking shop, avoiding my parents.”

“You’ll have to tell me why later.”

“I will. Go back to work.” In a spastic fit of bravery, I leaned in and kissed his cheek. Casey blushed and smiled wide enough to show off those puckish dimples. I fled the scene to prevent myself from ruining a perfect moment.

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Dinner went according to plan, more or less. Two of the other couples at my parents’ table were my father’s partners in his surgical practice and their wives. I’ve known them my entire life and they are nice enough for surgeons—a little arrogant and condescending for my taste—but nice enough. It was the fifth couple that held my attention. Meghan Kope was one of my father’s patients and just a doll. Wearing a pink lace maternity dress with her blonde hair piled softly on top of her head, Meghan looked a little like a pretty petit four from a fancy bakery. Her husband, Andrew, was a regular guy in a rented tux who absolutely adored his wife. Meghan and Andrew were both suburban schoolteachers who had never been to a party this grand. It was fun to watch them experience it.

My father had been able to repair Meghan’s congenital heart defect because of research funded by the Heart Association. All of her life Meghan had been told she should never get pregnant because her heart wouldn’t be able to handle the stress, but the corrective surgery my father performed made her pregnancy possible. They were so grateful to my dad and he was so kind and considerate of them, it made my teeth ache. The dichotomy between how warm and sincere he can be with some of his patients and how distant he can be with his own family was sometimes jarring. I learned a long time ago that hoping that things could be different between us would only lead to heartache.

Anyway, after talking with my parents about her pregnancy, Meghan turned to Nate and me as she rubbed the top of her belly. “So have you boys thought about having kids?”

Nate nearly choked on his poached pears as he sat up straight and slid a panicked glance at me. All I could do was chuckle. “Umm... Nate and I aren’t together. He’s my best friend and just a stand-in for the guy who should have been my date. To answer your question, I’ve always wanted kids. But as a gay

man, even in a state with marriage equality, it never seemed practical—especially with the demands of my job. But lately I’ve been having second and third thoughts about living a different sort of life than the one I have now. So, if the right partner comes along, the right situation, I’m more than open to the idea.”

Soon the dancing started and the big band orchestra was amazing. I danced with my mother and Meghan but eventually Nate and I were able to escape to the schmoozing area to network a little and talk business. It wasn’t long before Nate disappeared to dance and flirt with the woman in the slinky dress again.

As I excused myself from a conversation with one of my clients, Casey appeared at my elbow. He reached out and took my hand as he leaned in close. “Dance with me.”

“Okay.” I didn’t think about anything but having the opportunity to embrace Casey in that beautiful room, wearing our tuxes and dancing to the gorgeous music of another era. It was otherworldly. I didn’t think about my parents or the cadre of conservatives and homophobes in the room who were sure to be scandalized. I just followed Casey as he led me to the dance floor. I slipped easily into his arms, reveling in the warmth and safety as they wrapped around me. We danced through a few songs, before the music registered. “The Very Thought of You” was the first song that caught my attention. The singer was doing the Etta James version and knocking it out of the park. Slow, seductive, and painfully sexy, Casey and I moved together gliding around the dance floor, oblivious to the world. I was completely captivated by the sparkling blue eyes and suggestive smile staring back at me. As the song ended, Casey pulled me in with a hand on the back of my neck for a gentle kiss. He whispered, “Let’s get out of here.”

As we walked off the dance floor hand in hand, I said nothing more than “Okay.” Somehow this man obliterated my power of speech and reduced me to one-word sentences.

“Go say your good-byes. I’ll text the valet to bring my car around while I collect my equipment. Meet you in the hallway.” He kissed me quickly before walking away.

I found Nate first and he didn’t even let me get a word out before he told me to go. My parents were back at the table having a suspiciously intense discussion. The only part of the conversation I heard was my mother hissing, “He wasn’t even leading, Douglas.” I knew they weren’t going to handle my



dancing with Casey well, but I hadn't expected that. I hesitated for a second and thought about leaving without saying good-bye. They weren't going to make me feel ashamed about one of the best moments of my life. I hurried along knowing Casey was waiting for me. "Mom, Dad, I'm heading out. Thanks for the invitation and a great evening. Love you both." I kissed my mother's cheek and patted my father's shoulder before they could get a word in edgewise. I bolted for the door, ignoring my mother's order to stay. Knowing she would never make a scene, I swept out of the ballroom without looking back.

Casey was right where he said he'd be with his equipment. Between the two of us, we carried the bags out through the lobby to the valet stand. There wasn't much conversation beyond the practicalities of getting out of the hotel. Once we had the equipment loaded and were settled in Casey's SUV, he turned to me and asked, "Where to? Somewhere for a drink? Your place? Mine? Where?"

"Your place. I want to see where you live. Maybe we could grab some coffee on the way..." Fatigue was going to catch up with me soon. I knew Casey lived in a loft in the Leather District near Chinatown but I wanted to see it for myself.

"Excellent. I have everything to make us cappuccino at my place. I was a barista for a while during college, and I'm a little enamored with my espresso machine."

"Should I be jealous?"

"Only for the fifteen minutes between my getting out of bed and the time my coffee is ready. I'm a zombie until I get my first jolt of caffeine in the morning."

"Good to know. I'll tuck that nugget of information away for tomorrow." *Huh.* For whatever reason, I expected to be around in the morning.

"You should because even if I respond, I won't actually *comprehend* anything said to me until the coffee has a chance to work its magic." Casey seemed to be making the same assumption about where I'd be sleeping that night. I honestly wasn't expecting anything when I suggested we go to his place. I just wasn't ready for our dance to be over.

We parked in the garage across from his building and lugged the equipment over to his loft. His apartment was definitely a live-work space. There was a small bedroom and bathroom off of the entryway but most of the rest was a large open room with a twelve-foot ceiling and exposed ductwork surrounded

by old brick walls. The kitchen was a little dated, but still functional with an enormous island. The spot opposite of the kitchen, originally designed to be the dining area, had a soft sofa, a couple armchairs, a large bookcase full of books and movies, and a good-sized flat-screen television. The rest of the room was clearly Casey's studio. There were light stands and flash umbrellas along with backdrops and a variety of benches, chairs, stools, and tables. Casey carried the large lighting equipment bags over to the cabinets in the studio area. He had me put his camera bag on the desk in the space sectioned off for an office area.

"A friend of mine bought this place at the beginning of the housing boom. Danny got underwater on the mortgage here and didn't want to sell when he moved in with his boyfriend, so he rents it to me for just enough to cover the expenses while he waits for the price to come back up. I couldn't afford to rent, let alone buy, in this neighborhood otherwise. This is such a great studio space with all the natural light, and I love the office. Dan found these old industrial doors at a salvage place and set them up like a cubical; the clerestory windows still let light in, though there aren't any windows on this side of the loft."

"Is it hard living and working in the same space? Don't you ever just want to leave work behind for a night? I already work over sixty hours a week plus weekends. I'd work myself to death if I lived in my office."

"A lot of my jobs are on location which helps, and I tend to travel when I need to get away. But mostly, I have to be disciplined about keeping my work from overrunning the rest of my life. I'm lucky to have friends who don't let me become too much of a workaholic."

"I work a lot of hours which is normal for a partner at a good-sized law firm, but I don't think I'm a workaholic by nature. I just don't have a lot going on in my personal life to compete." My mouth had once again run out into traffic without any input from my brain. That's the only explanation. I don't think it was possible for me to sound any more pathetic.

"What about Nate?"

"Nate's great and he does his best, but he's a management consultant and travels a lot. We talk on the phone and text, only managing to get together once or twice a month. I mean I'm on the board of my neighborhood association and I have my pro bono work for the LGBT youth center. However, that all feels like work—just without wearing a suit."

"Well, that's probably because that's what it is. What do you do for the youth center? I volunteer there sometimes and I know I've never seen you there."

“I’m sort of their de facto general counsel. I don’t do all their legal work but I kind of keep an eye on everything. I only go over there for meetings when things are too complicated for a phone call or e-mail. Hugo and Jeannie are good at what they do and don’t need me very often.”

“You should think about working with the kids. A lot of them have legal issues to deal with on top of everything else.”

“Yeah, no. I tried in the beginning, but it didn’t end well. The kid got a raw deal from soup to nuts, and I did everything I could to help, including calling in favors, but I couldn’t make it all go away. The kid took it hard and I got my watch stolen for my trouble. Even though Hugo got the kid to apologize eventually, my TAG Hauer was long gone. I only cared about the watch because it was a graduation gift from my parents. Anyway, Hugo suggested that working directly with the kids might not be for me.”

“Why on earth were you wearing an expensive watch there in the first place? You were asking for trouble.”

“I’m not an idiot. First, it wasn’t my good watch, and second, I took my law school ring and watch off in the car and stuck them in an inside pocket of my laptop bag. I made one trip to the men’s room and the kid was gone, taking my watch with him. At least, he didn’t run off with my laptop.”

“That sucks. Not the losing the watch so much, but reaching out from behind your armor to help someone and having them violate your trust like that must have hurt.”

“Armor?”

“Bennett, you walk around with more armor than a medieval knight, protecting yourself from everyone around you.”

“Yeah, well... I get tired of people using me. When I was ten, a girl invited me to her birthday party solely because her dad wanted to talk to my father about some investment thing. No one at the party even spoke to me the entire three hours. I had a guy at Dartmouth date me just so he could manipulate me into being a reference for a job at Franklin Street Financial. Once he got an offer, he dropped me without even a thank you. My only long-term relationship ended because he couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t pay for his trip to Grand Cayman without me. So, yeah, people have to prove themselves before I let down my guard. Can you blame me?”

Casey stepped closer until we were almost touching. “Nope. Definitely can’t blame you. You know I’m not using you for anything, right?”

“I am perfectly aware I have nothing you need.” I mumbled and looked away so he didn’t see how insecure I felt.

“Oh, honey. No... You, I definitely need, but your money and family connections aren’t the least bit important to me. The sexy smile that you don’t use enough and that huge battered heart that you don’t let other people see... Those are the things that are important to me.” Casey slipped those muscled arms around my waist and kissed me gently at first but the soft kiss built into something bigger and more overwhelming. After he pulled back, we stood there, foreheads together, smiling for a long while. “Now, have a seat at the island and I’ll make you the best cup of coffee in Boston.”

“Okay.” We each took off our jackets and loosened our ties. I sat on the stool at the end of the counter, while Casey pattered in the kitchen and I just admired him as he worked. Casey stopped to roll up his sleeves, and every moment after, my eyes followed his forearms as he worked. The muscles flexing with every movement mesmerized me. Shifting in my seat, my tuxedo pants were only so accommodating of my appreciation. Before long, a cup of cappuccino decorated with a flourish in the foam appeared in front of me along with a plate of shortbread cookies. “Wow. I get coffee art too. Sweet. It’s almost too pretty to drink.”

“Drink up, honey. I want you awake for a while.”

“Umm... Okay.” There was that word again. I’m a well-respected litigator; I should be more suave. I took a sip of my coffee and it really was wonderful. With another irrepressible smile, I looked over at Casey who was leaning back against the stove with his own beverage in hand. “Coffee’s great. Thank you.”

“The shortbread is amazing. Try dunking it in the coffee. My mother sends Sara and me care packages a few times a year. Mine always has this shortbread she orders from a local bakery for me. She feels guilty about moving away.”

“Sara works for Medicine Without Borders, right? Where is she again?” He was always so interested in me and asking me questions about my life and my family, it didn’t leave much time for me to ask him those things in return. Don’t get me wrong; it was nice that he wanted to get to know me, but I wanted to know more about him as well.

“She’s been in Cambodia for more than two years. I think she has another year on her contract, though she’s been making noise about coming back to the States sooner.”

“Tell me about her. I don’t have any brothers or sisters, so siblings fascinate me.” The few times I’d been to Ohio with Nate, I spent hours watching him

interact with his two brothers. The relationship always seemed complicated on some levels and incredibly simple on others. A push and pull between competition and affection ran as an undercurrent to everything.

“Sara and I both look like my dad, but her hair is lighter and curlier. We’re fifteen months apart; my grandparents called us the Irish twins even though we technically aren’t. Anyway, she’s unbearably kind and gentle, but also fierce when she is fighting for a cause she believes in. As a genuinely devout Catholic, Sara felt a calling to heal the sick while she was still in high school. She even went so far to become a pre-novice with the Sisters of Providence and remained close to the order until she graduated from nursing school. At that point, she desperately wanted to go out and save the world, so she volunteered with Medicine Without Borders and that turned into a career. Her work has led her to a refugee camp in Bangladesh, a maternity hospital in New Guinea and now a tuberculosis clinic in Cambodia. It’s admirable work but it comes at the expense of her family.”

“How so?”

“When my father died so unexpectedly, my mother was understandably devastated. Rather than take the month of compassionate leave she was granted and comfort my mom, Sara blew in for five days before she ran back to Southeast Asia. She should have been there helping me take care of Mom and sorting out all the details of my father’s estate. Instead, I had to do all that alone because my mother was in no condition to help.”

“That sucks, but I’d bet your relationship with your mother is stronger than ever now and Sara missed out on that.”

“I know. It’s just irritating when people, including my mother, go on and on about Saint Sara and her mission to heal the sick.”

“Do you talk at all?”

“Occasionally we e-mail, and I get a phone call at the holidays and my birthday but communication isn’t always reliable in the field. We used to video chat once or twice a month but that faded away a few years ago. We were close until I came out in high school. My parents were completely supportive, and Sara couldn’t reconcile that with their being Catholic. She wanted them to force me into reparative therapy and pastoral counseling. For months she left information about the priesthood and monastic orders on my bed. Eventually, she gave up. She now ignores the fact that I’m gay and that’s fine with me. I don’t expect her to alter her beliefs and not talking about it allows us to stay in contact.”

I sipped my coffee wanting a few more seconds to contemplate what I wanted to say. “Family is always complicated. You always love them, but still want to beat them with a tire iron sometimes. How did this conversation become so serious?” I laughed trying to change the mood.

“You asked about my sainted sister. But I’m done talking.” Casey breezed around the island to stand in front of me. “I believe it’s time to commence the action portion of tonight’s agenda.”

As he stared into my eyes, I twisted my body so he was standing between my legs. I reached out and wrapped my hands around his ass and pulled him close. “Fine with me.” The kiss that followed was epic. Casey unbuttoned my tuxedo shirt and was frustrated to find an undershirt in his way. I couldn’t help but smile at his growl while he unbuckled my cummerbund, removed my shirt, and pulled the undershirt over my head. By the time he finished, all I had relieved him of was his shirt. His hands roamed over my upper body as we went back to kissing. I arched my back and moaned as he thrummed my nipples with his thumbs. Taking the opportunity, Casey kissed my neck from ear to collarbone as I squeezed his ass, pulling him even closer until I could feel his dick rubbing against my stomach.

I began kissing and licking Casey’s chest and eventually nibbled at one of his nipples. Eureka. I found a hot spot. The grunt and writhe that I got in response was intense. After a bit, he stepped back and pulled me up so I was standing. Before long, we were kissing again and rutting against one another more aggressively. I really didn’t want to shoot in my tuxedo pants, so I backed off again. “Case, could we maybe go naked and horizontal somewhere... a bed? The couch? The floor?”

“Too tall for the couch. Bed. This way.” Casey grabbed my arm and dragged me along to the bedroom. The room was small, but still had a twelve-foot ceiling and huge window. The furniture was all vintage Danish teak. Decorated in modern gray, orange, and white linens, the queen-size bed with attached night tables took up practically the entire width of the room. Casey stripped the covers onto the floor with one hand and not-so-gently pushed me onto the bed with the other. Before I even stopped bouncing, he stripped us both of our shoes and tuxedo pants. I smiled as he settled his weight on me straddling my thighs.

God, he was gorgeous. Casey’s freckles faded to creamy tan skin as they reached his chest. I still wanted to play connect the dots across his shoulders with my tongue. His smattering of ginger chest hair was just enough to feel

under my fingers and a contrast to my own smooth chest and abs. I was vain enough to wax my pathetic patch of chest hair and trim the shrubs below. If I worked out every day for the rest of my life I would never have the muscle or definition Casey has. He had that lean swimmer's body rather than a lot of bulk and looked amazing. I hit the gym three or four days a week but my body was more whipcord than athletic.

He snapped the waistband of my underwear and laughed. "Bennett, you are a surprise. Hot pink pouch briefs, really? I took you for a plaid boxers guy after the undershirt and all."

"It's my one gay rebellion. I don't think I own a pair of regular boxers or tighty whities for that matter."

"Just to add some historical accuracy to my fantasy, what underwear were you wearing the day I took your photos?"

"Red microfiber boxer-briefs. Armani, I think. They're my go-to for under good suits."

"Jesus, Bennett... You slay me and make my balls ache."

"What?" I leaned up on my elbows to get a better look at him.

"You have special purpose underwear?" Casey snickered and rubbed my stomach like he was trying to soothe me.

"Not really. The smooth, stretchy microfiber looks better under slim-fit pants and they make me feel more confident. Is that weird? I've never thought about it."

Casey snapped the waistband of my underwear again. "And these?"

"Just everyday underwear. It wasn't like I had a real date or anything."

"So you have date underwear, too?" He couldn't hold in the giggle that swamped him and dragged me down with him.

For a minute, I couldn't speak through the laughter. "I guess. I have a few pairs of jock briefs and low-rise trunks hidden in the back of the drawer. I only wear them when I go out looking for a hookup."

"You do that often?" With a raised eyebrow, Casey looked me in the eye. It was time for the transactional portion of our program.

"No. Two or three times a year, and never without a condom. For the record, I was negative for everything when I was tested in March and I haven't been with anyone since."

“Excellent. I wasn’t judging, just asking. I’m negative, too. I’ve been with two guys since I was last tested and always gloved up. What are you into?”

“I’m not looking for anal tonight, if that’s what you’re asking. I mostly top, even if that’s not really my preference. I’ve never been able to enjoy bottoming with a hookup. Otherwise I’m pretty vanilla—hardly a surprise, right?”

Casey raised an eyebrow. “Except for the sexy submissive streak.” He chuckled and shimmied up to straddle my hips. He grabbed my hands and pinned my wrists over my head as he kissed me and started rubbing his junk against mine. I shuddered and responded with a pathetic whimper. My dick, which had gone half-hard during our conversation, roared back to full strength and beyond. I wasn’t sure I had a submissive streak before Casey, but no one ever made me feel as safe and comfortable as he did.

“Why do I always embarrass myself in front of you?” I looked away and sighed.

He frotted more as he licked his way down to my chest. I arched off the bed when he reached my nipple. “Nothing embarrassing about being who you are. I’m a pushy top, so we should fit together just fine. Relax. This is supposed to be fun.” Casey’s wide smile settled my nerves.

We kissed for a while before our underwear magically disappeared and Casey crept up my body until his knees were against my underarms; still holding my hands to the bed. His dick was a perfect “boyfriend size,” not too big, not too small. It was two toned, and the gorgeous golden color of his skin shifted to a dusky plum about halfway down. The slight upward curve was just enough to give him an aggressively masculine look. My mouth watered at the sight, so close and so far away. As I stared at his penis, the bead of pre-cum growing at his slit dripped and hung there an inch away from his dick. I felt compelled to lift my head and sweep the droplet away with my tongue.

Casey smiled through his groan as he looked down at me. “You ready to suck me?” I couldn’t respond with words so I nodded. He crossed my wrists over my head. “Keep them right there.” Nodding again, I flexed my hips up to shift Casey forward and encourage him to go faster. I needed. “Not so fast, honey. You’re gonna have to work for this a little.”

Argh. Did he not realize what I needed? Apparently not. “Come on, Case. Please... Let me suck you.”

“Not yet. Open your mouth.” *Oh my god.* Casey slid the head of his dick across my lips, smearing them with more pre-cum. For a bright guy with an



expensive education, I didn't recognize the sound that erupted from me at that moment. It was somewhere between a gasp, a growl, a wail, and a whimper. I honestly don't know what it was but it was raw and filled with infinite need. Casey bent down and licked his own pre-cum from my lips. "Stick out your tongue." At this point, I was so out of my head, it never occurred to me to protest or do anything but what I was told. He rocked his hips a few times, rubbing the underside of his dick on my tongue. "So good, honey... Suck my balls." Shifting farther forward, he dropped his sac right onto my mouth. I nuzzled and kissed one then the other before drawing one of his balls into my mouth and I was rewarded with a long strained groan. I switched to the other and received the same response. He rocked back and forth dragging his shaft over my nose as I wiggled my tongue along the underside as it passed over my mouth.

"Ready? Just the head." I nodded weakly and waited. He nudged the crown into my mouth and I sucked gently rubbing my tongue over the entire head. Not being a complete novice, I had a few tricks up my nonexistent sleeve. Without being particularly delicate, I pushed the tip of my tongue as far into his slit as far I could and wriggled it a little deeper. Casey roared and I could feel him fighting the urge to plunge farther into my mouth. I smiled around his shaft and moved my hands from above my head to pull him deeper.

I didn't get far before he pulled out of my mouth, grabbed my wrists and shoved them back over my head. "Leave them be. Now, you don't get to come until I say so. We're doing this my way." I couldn't stop the strangled moan that followed his pointed commands. I wasn't all that close to coming until he told me I couldn't. In fact, I wasn't thinking about my needs at all. My focus was solely on Casey.

He grinned and I knew we were still playing. Kissing me before he straightened up, Casey adjusted his position to make things easier on both of us. "Open," he commanded. For a long, long minute Casey just rested his painfully hard dick on my tongue as he took a few deep breaths. "Okay, now suck." He thrust into my mouth being careful not to go too deep or be too forceful while I did everything in my power to make him come. When he was satisfied I could take more, he moved deeper until the head of his dick bumped the back of my throat every so often. My body shook with need as Casey's orgasm approached. He reached behind to stroke me in time with his movements until all I could do was suck and push my dick up into his hand. He thrust harder and faster into my mouth, his rhythm stuttering. "So, so good. God. Don't stop. Coming..."

And with a few grunts and a long, pained groan, he was shooting into my throat. At the end, he pulled back enough to let me taste the last of his salty, bitter sweetness.

Casey moved his knees between my legs and lay down on top of me pressing my dick against his stomach. I was so hard and so desperate to come, I kept rubbing my dick against his abs. “That was amazing, honey. Thank you.” He kissed me, long and sweet before scooting down to lie between my legs with his head just inches from my dick, which was pointed straight at the ceiling, hard, red, and on edge.

“Please, Casey. I need to come. Dammit.” I don’t swear, normally. I don’t like the coarseness of it. Right then, I was beyond reason and well beyond whatever decorum I usually held myself to.

He smiled wickedly. “Come when you’re ready.” Without any foreplay, Casey took me all the way to the root and sucked hard. He slipped his hands under my ass, fingering my hole and encouraging me into his mouth. A giant reservoir of need exploded inside of me, flooding every muscle, every nerve, with an overwhelming amount of sensation. Nothing on Earth could have stopped me from bucking up into him. Nothing. I couldn’t tell you if he sucked me for seconds or hours before I exploded. Time had no meaning in the blissful place I found in the aftermath of the greatest orgasm in the history of the human race. Hyperbole? Maybe, but it was the best thing I’d ever felt in my entire life. I ran my fingers through Casey’s hair as he licked me clean and kissed random spots on my hips, thighs and groin as we both floated back into reality.

By every conceivable definition, I was spent. I wasn’t surprised when I noticed the alarm clock on the nightstand said it was two in the morning. I patted the empty space beside me so he’d come lie next to me. We made out a little more, before Casey pulled the covers back onto the bed. Naked and warm, he burrowed under the blankets with me and draped his arm over my waist. “Bennett, honey, you’re sleeping over, yeah?”

“If that’s okay with you.” I honestly didn’t think my legs would function enough to dress myself never mind make my way home.

“It is. Whenever you want to stay, you can stay. I’ll never send you home alone after sex, Bennett. That’s not what this is.”

“I know. I was being polite.”

“You okay with what we did? I got a little toppy.”

“It was perfect. In case you didn’t notice, I came like a geyser.”

“You did.” Casey smiled a little smugly. “I just worried I went too far.”

“Don’t worry about it. At all. I don’t think my submissive streak is all that deep, but it obviously does exist. In my work life, I am pretty dominant. I have to be. But here in bed with you, I’m free to just be me. It was a gift. Thank you.”

“Anytime. Everyone needs a relief valve and if I can help you find yours, I’m a happy camper.” He leaned in and kissed the point of my shoulder.

“Even with my ex, I had a hard time giving it up. Will was my boyfriend for two years at the end of law school and we tussled for control a lot and it was fun sometimes, just as often it was awkward.”

“He’s the one who wanted you to pay for his vacation without you?”

“Yes.”

“He’s an asshole and I’m glad you had enough self-preservation not to trust him completely. He could have royally fucked you up. Sorry, I know you don’t like the swearing.”

“I don’t care if you swear. I try not to, but that’s my own overblown sense of propriety. I don’t hold anyone else to the same standard.” I sighed, thinking about Will. “He isn’t a bad guy, really. He thought he deserved a reward for staying my boyfriend when we never saw each other and I was working eighty-hour weeks my first year out of law school. We should have broken up months before it actually happened. It wasn’t entirely his fault.”

“I still think he was an asshole.” Casey glowered and it was surprisingly adorable.

“Maybe, but I haven’t spoken to Will in almost five years now. He was in Nate’s MBA class and according to the last alumni newsletter, Will’s happily married to some guy who owns a vintage clothing store in Providence. Not a threat to you or anyone else for that matter. I never would have taken you for being the jealous type.”

Casey growled and grumbled, “I’m not, really.”

“Okay, tough guy. Whatever you say.” I gave him a long lazy kiss to soothe him a little and a few kisses later we were both sound asleep.

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## Chapter 4

Over the next few months, time seemed to speed up as Casey and I slipped into a full-fledged relationship. On our first real date, he took me to a painting class and we each walked away with a finished painting after three hours. His was actual art, mine, however, looked like it was painted by a third grader. We followed up the class with a late dinner at a tapas place down the street where we drank a little too much Spanish red wine, only to giggle and kiss all the way home on the subway. If our relatively chaste affection offended people, we didn't care. Casey's painting hangs in my office where I can see it every day and remember our first "real" date. For some reason, Casey loves my "primitive interpretation" of the Boston skyline and wouldn't let me toss it in the nearest dumpster. He actually hung it in the hallway at his loft where everyone could see it as they came in the door.

We met for lunch a couple times a week and once I discovered that my office was just a brisk six-minute walk from Casey's loft, a fair number of those lunches were spent at least seminaked and horizontal. I sometimes wonder what Suzanne thought when I'd be out for my entire lunch hour and come back with a salad because I didn't get a chance to eat. Although she never asked, I saw the corner of her mouth turn up like she wanted to smirk but didn't dare.

There were other changes and almost all of them were for the better of me, my clients, and my relationship with Casey. First, I found myself cutting my weekend work hours to emergencies only. I still read and took notes at home, but I didn't spend my Saturday afternoons in the office anymore. I was still making well more than my quota of billable hours and booked more business than half the other partners. No one had any room to complain.

Suzanne and the rest of my coworkers were shocked at the June staff meeting when someone mentioned the craft beer festival and I actually joined the conversation and commented that my boyfriend and I had a great time there Friday night. Casey even found a couple beers he really liked once he saw that the hops-crazy belly-busters weren't all there was. He was never going to be a craft beer guy, but at least I'd expanded his horizons. Casey had already pushed nearly every boundary I had, so I was glad to return the favor even in a very small way.

Within a few weeks of our first date, we were spending Friday to Sunday and sometimes Monday morning together. We migrated between his loft and my condo pretty seamlessly. My place was closer to a subway station than Casey's so sometimes that was the deciding factor. Other times, he would have work that could only be done with his equipment at the loft. Lately, we'd been spending more time at my place for no other reason than it was bigger and I have a king-size bed. However, complaints about my coffeemaker were making me a little cranky. It was a single-cup machine that made a passable cup of joe, nothing fancy. Casey, the coffee snob, missed his espresso maker.

I headed off the complaining by preemptively running to the coffeehouse a few blocks away. It was eight on an already hot and sticky July morning as I walked back to my place carrying a tray with two lattes along with a bag of egg sandwiches and almond croissants. For the moment I was comfortable in track pants and the oversized *Jaws* T-shirt I'd stolen from Casey, but the heat was going to be brutal in a couple hours. Luckily, the air conditioning at my condo tended towards penguin habitat territory rather than anything aimed at human comfort. One of the first home improvement projects Casey and I tackled together was replacing the thermostats at my place with the new touch-screen programmable ones. Ridiculous as it sounds, it was nice to be able to turn the temperature up or down from my phone and I already noticed a difference in my electric bill.

As I rounded the corner onto my street, I heard the loathsome sound of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony from my cell phone. I juggled the food into one hand to answer it.

"Hey, Mom."

"Good morning, sweetheart. I know it's early, but I was hoping you could meet your father and me for brunch around ten at The Langham. We haven't seen you in a while."

Guilt poked at me. I hadn't been talking with my parents as often since Casey and I started dating. Since the fracas surrounding the ball, I avoided my mother when I could. "I'm sorry, Mom. I can't. Casey and I have a rock climbing class this morning." We saw an ad on the subway a few weeks ago and they had a three-hour intro class on Sundays. My boyfriend seemed to have a penchant for wanting to get me outside my comfort zone.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You're going to get heat stroke in this weather."

“It’s at a huge, indoor rock climbing gym with air conditioning and locker rooms. I think we’ll be fine.” It was too early in the day for me to get snippy with my mother.

“Just be careful. This would be a bad time for you to get hurt.”

When was it ever a good time to get hurt? “What’s up, Mom?”

“Your father and I just think it’s time for us to sit down and talk about your future. There are opportunities coming your way that won’t come again, if things aren’t handled properly.”

“What are you talking about?” I rolled my eyes knowing what was coming.

“Ned O’Keefe called your father asking why you’ve been ducking his calls. He and Christianne Hoyt from the Equality Campaign want to talk to you about Margot Wallace’s seat in the state house. They need you to declare your intent to run as soon as possible so they can begin fundraising. Everyone is hoping an early money lead will scare other potential candidates out of the field.”

“I don’t even know if I’m interested in running right now. Two of my cases should be going to trial this spring and it isn’t the best time for me to be distracted. Plus, I have to talk to Casey about his role. Decisions like this don’t just affect me anymore.”

“Bennett, either this man will support your career or he’s not worth your time. It’s not like you’re married or have even been together all that long. We’re your parents and we’ve only met him briefly, how important could his opinion possibly be to your future?”

“At this moment, he’s more important than you.” I blanched and immediately backtracked. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I already know how you and Dad feel about this, but I don’t know Casey’s opinion. And after your reaction to our dancing at the ball, are you really surprised I haven’t brought him around for ‘meet the parents’?”

“Bennett, your public image is important. Putting your sexuality on display in front of people and making them uncomfortable is not the way to advance politically. How is Alexander Bradford going to look you in the eye when you ask him to support your campaign?”

“I don’t know, maybe we should ask his lesbian granddaughter. You, Dad, and the bigots who would never support me anyway are the only ones who were uncomfortable or offended by my dancing with Casey. Two partners from the firm were there and neither of them were scandalized.”

“Kristin Bradford is a lesbian? She went to Chapin with your cousin, Natalie. They’re close.”

“I know. Natalie told me about Kristin when I first came out. Last time I spoke with Nat, she mentioned that Kristin and her partner, Jules, are getting married in September. Her grandfather is walking her down the aisle. I don’t think he’s going to care that I was dancing with my boyfriend at a fundraiser.”

“Fine, but you know what I’m talking about.”

“I do. The difference is I don’t care. People can either accept that I am gay or not. I don’t need or want money or support from people who won’t accept that and frankly, that includes you and Dad.”

“Your father and I have always been supportive of you. You can’t deny that.”

“That’s only true to a point, Mom. You’re fine with me being gay in theory. But anytime you are confronted by what that actually means, you lose your marbles like you did at the ball.”

“That is not true, Bennett, but I’m not arguing with you about this.” I could almost hear her straighten her posture and tug at her clothes as she regrouped. “Well, since you can’t join us for brunch, maybe you and Casey can join us for dinner at the house on Thursday. We’d like to get to know Casey better.”

“I’ll ask him. I’m pretty sure that will be fine. I’m at my front door. I’ll text you once I speak to Casey.” We said our good-byes and I was pretty proud of myself for standing up to her. Sort of. Mostly. Okay, hardly at all, but it was progress. I climbed the stairs to my condo and slipped inside as quietly as I could. I’d left Casey asleep in my bed when I ran out for breakfast, and now I could hear the shower running as I put the food down on the dining table. I sprinted upstairs to let him know I was home. The bathroom door was ajar.

Casey had just turned the water off when I stepped into the doorway. “Hey, Case. Breakfast is downstairs. Did you find my note okay?” I couldn’t see much of his sexy body from where I was standing, so I stepped farther into the room where I could appreciate the strong, defined muscles of his back and the tight curve of his rear end. My body started to tighten and tingle in all the right places.

Casey grabbed a fluffy slate-blue towel from the hook as he stepped out of the glass tub enclosure. “Yes, the giant orange sticky note stuck to the wall over the toilet was effective. Thank you. I may have grumbled about waking up alone before I saw your note.”

“I didn’t want to wake you. Does hunting and gathering lattes and breakfast sandwiches buy me forgiveness?” Standing there leaning on the linen cupboard door, I had no inclination to move as I watched him dry off.

“Bacon, egg and cheese?” His eager face pleased me as did the undercurrent of lust and maybe something more.

“On toasted, multigrain bread.” I knew what he wanted. For breakfast, at least. Most everything else was a bit of a mystery.

“All is forgiven.” He kissed me quickly as he wrapped the towel around his waist.

“Excellent. Go get dressed. I don’t need any more temptation to drag you back to bed for the rest of the day.” It wasn’t like it hadn’t happened before. We nearly missed dinner with Nate the previous weekend because we kept getting distracted

“I’m going. Remember, I have to go home tonight. I’m shooting headshots at that writer’s conference on Monday and Tuesday, and I have to lug half my studio out there. Tabby is coming to help so it won’t be horrible, but sixteen shoots in a day is killer regardless. We can have lunch on Wednesday if that works for you.” Casey wandered around my room collecting clothes for our rock climbing adventure.

“Wednesday’s good. I talked to my mother while I was out. She wants us to come to dinner on Thursday. Are you willing to brave my parents for an evening? My mother is actually a good cook and I promise it will be pretty casual.”

“Sure. Bennett casual or Casey casual?”

“Bennett casual, I’m afraid.” I don’t think my father owned a T-shirt that wasn’t a white undershirt. I’m not sure he had jeans, either.

“I figured. So work clothes for me?” Casey’s work wardrobe hovered around business casual and his casual clothes mostly consisted of jeans and T-shirts.

“I guess. I’m wearing chinos and a polo shirt.”

“The apricot one, please?”

“Okay.”

“The color makes the all amber highlights in those big brown eyes of yours stand out. I always want to photograph you when you wear it, right before I strip you naked.”



“I’ll never understand why you want to see this skinny, knobby body naked, but I’m glad you do.”

“Well, I’ll never get your obsession with my freckles, but I’ve learned to live with it.”

“It’s like you have ten-thousand little signs saying Kiss Me Here all over that spectacular body of yours.” Someday I will stop embarrassing myself in front of this man, just not today. Could I sound any dopier? Even if what I said was true, my brain/mouth filter should keep it from spilling out. I felt the blush climb up my neck to cover my face.

“You are adorable when you just say whatever’s in your head.” His slow smile warmed me from nose to toes.

“Just what every man wants to be... adorable.” I sighed and shook my head.

Casey whacked my arm with the back of his hand. “Hey, I like that you can’t censor yourself around me. I’m the only one who sees this sweet side of you.”

“It probably has something to do with the fact that my blood is constantly rushing out of my head, leaving me weak and addlebrained.” I just stood there and groaned as Casey wiggled his naked butt into his bike shorts.

He shook his head as he pulled on a lime-green Life is Good T-shirt. “You are good for my ego. Come on. Let’s go eat before breakfast gets cold.”

Once we were downstairs and sitting at the dining table with coffee and breakfast, I thought it would be a good time to broach the running for office thing. “So, this week I have been dodging calls from Ned O’Keefe and he went running to my parents to find out why.”

“Who’s Ned O’Keefe?”

“He is the point person for candidate recruitment for the Massachusetts Democratic Party.” I sometimes forget not everyone on the planet is enmeshed in the who’s who of state politics. I grew up saturated in it and know things by osmosis mostly.

Casey looked suspicious. “What does he want with you?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. Rumor has it he wants me to run for Margot Wallace’s state house seat in a special election this spring. She’s stepping down and taking a job in Washington, which hasn’t been announced

yet. Anyway, Ned already has the political director for the Equality Campaign chomping at the bit to start fundraising for me as the only gay candidate expected to run in Massachusetts next year.”

“Is running for office something you want to do?” Casey shifted in his seat, scratching his arm. The topic was clearly making him nervous.

“My whole life has been about preparing me for a career in politics.”

“But, do you want Mrs. Wallace’s seat?”

“No, I don’t want Margot’s seat or any other. It would be different if being a politician meant fighting for things you believe in and finding common ground with your opposition to make things better for the residents of the Commonwealth, but it isn’t. Politics is about controlling other people’s access to money and thereby power. Anyone who says differently is naïve.”

“Did it feel good to get that off your chest?” Casey smiled weakly.

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter. It never has.”

“It should be the only thing that matters.”

“A quote from the Bible has been drilled into me since I was a child. Luke twelve forty-eight. ‘From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.’ It might as well be our family motto. By an accident of birth, I live a life of wealth and privilege and what is required of me is a life of public service. That’s why I was born. My parents suffered through multiple miscarriages but continued trying just to provide an heir to continue my grandfather and my great-grandfather’s legacy.”

“Why didn’t your father have to continue the legacy?” Casey looked genuinely curious.

“He’s the second son. My Uncle Gregory was killed in Vietnam before he had any children and my father was already in medical school by then.”

“What does Nate say about all this?” Casey was still absorbing the new information.

“Not much. He thinks I should have stood up to them a long time ago. I think he’s given up trying.” We stopped having that conversation five or six years before.

“I like him more and more.” Casey laughed lightly. “Do me a favor, Bennett. Close your eyes and picture the life you want to be living, not the one

they expect of you.” Casey sat silently for a minute while I imagined. “I don’t need you to tell me what you saw, but that’s the life you should be striving to build.”

What I saw was a little house in the suburbs with a small yard where I have a little garden. Every night I came home to a family of my own, where I helped make dinner, did laundry, and tucked kids into bed before going to sleep with a man I love more than my own life. That’s all I want, all I’ve ever wanted. But what I want wasn’t really the question of the day.

“My question to you, Casey, is whether the life of a politician’s significant other is something you could handle because the downside isn’t trivial. In addition to dealing with campaign chaos, you will lose some anonymity. Anything in your past would be fair game for the opposition and media. If you were ever on the film crew of a porn shoot, if you ever got caught smoking pot in college, if you ever dated someone with a shady past, if you ever posted a less than politically correct joke on social media, it will all come out whether you want it to or not. On the upside, your business will undoubtedly gain a fair number of customers, and we’ll get invited to all the cool parties in town, including the ones during Pride Week. . . I already get invited to a lot of them—not that I ever go—so that might not be such a bonus. It’s not like I’d be running for Congress or even statewide office, but my entering politics is going to be a big deal, especially as a gay man. I need you to decide if all that is something you can handle.”

He looked a little stricken already. “It sounds like a done deal, no matter what I say. The fucked-up part of this is if running for office was something you really wanted—if it was something that you needed to be happy—I’d find a way to live with it. But it’s not and I don’t know what to do about that. Public service isn’t supposed to be a punishment handed out by God or by grandfathers for being who you are. It should be an honor to serve the people of your community, and if it isn’t, you have no business doing it. The people you’d be representing deserve better. Even though I know you would do everything in your power to be the perfect state representative, the perfect congressman, the perfect president, you would lose a piece of your soul in the process.

“I care about you, Bennett, more than I probably should after three months, and I was committed to seeing where this relationship can lead. Right now, though, I don’t know what to tell you. I won’t watch you be miserable living someone else’s dream out of some perverted sense of family responsibility.”

My heart seized in my chest as I listened to Casey's impassioned speech and stopped completely when he said "was." He was right and I knew it, I just couldn't change anything. "I wish I had an answer, Casey. I just don't. I've been riding this train my whole life and haven't been able to even slow it down."

"Oh, honey. Just get off. All you have to say is 'Thank you for your consideration, but I'm not interested in running for office' and repeat it over and over until they listen."

"But my parents..."

Casey shook his head and made a stop gesture with his hand. "Bennett, listen to me. No amount of sacrifice will make them love you or accept you the way you want. You can't make up for being gay or not being the kid they expected by living the life they've chosen for you. It doesn't work that way. They'll be disappointed and probably confused because you've never told them this isn't what you want, but they do love you and will come around eventually no matter what you decide."

"I... It's... You..." I couldn't get my mouth to form words. Emotions I couldn't identify spun through me. Somehow I never considered how much of the disconnect between my parents and me was my fault. Casey was right. I had obfuscated, avoided, and ignored the conflict between us, and never articulated how much I didn't want the public life they expected of me. "What does this mean for you and me?"

"I don't know. No matter what I do, I'm afraid you will resent me for not being supportive enough and for representing the life you wanted but gave up for this."

"We're talking like it's a sure thing that I'd win."

"Between the money and your family's political influence, there aren't many people who could compete unless you purposely threw the race." I must have made a face because Casey's eyes widened in shock. "You'd spend thousands of dollars of other people's money only to throw the election, so you don't have to have a difficult conversation with your family?"

"No, but it did cross my mind. It worked for my college applications."

"What?" Casey appeared genuinely horrified.

"I didn't want to go to Harvard, or Yale for that matter, so I purposely messed up my essays when I applied. I still ended up wait-listed at both

schools. My parents were livid and argued with the alumni offices for days, but there wasn't much that could be done. I only made the waiting list because of my last name anyway. Dartmouth was where I wanted to go all along and it was probably the best decision I ever made, even if I had to manipulate my way to get there."

"Seriously? What would have happened if you just told them your first choice was Dartmouth?"

"I did. After we toured schools, I said over and over that Dartmouth was my first choice and was summarily told that I would go to the best school I got into, which would be Harvard, then Yale, followed by Cornell or Dartmouth. End of discussion. I couldn't even get them to hear me out."

"Yeah. Don't ever pull that crap on me. I won't play those games." Casey's face brokered no argument.

"It's not pathological. I was a kid with no control over my life, so I did what I had to do to survive. I know you'll listen, at least, even if you don't agree."

"Okay." Casey seemed at a loss to understand my manipulative streak. He didn't know my mother yet. He'd learn. Sometimes you have to use the weapons available to you, not the ones that make you feel better.

This was getting us nowhere. "Casey, just tell me what you want from me."

"I want you to be yourself and do whatever makes you happy. I'm never going to tell you what to do, Bennett, at least not outside the bedroom. I don't give advice if I can help it. However, the one thing I will say is that you have to talk to your parents. I'll sit beside you and hold your hand while you do it, but this is all on you."

"It's not that simple." I know he doesn't understand the pressure that comes with my family's expectations. It's bigger than my parents' control issues. I am the last Whitmore on our branch of the family tree. There's only me, and I do feel a deep sense of responsibility to the family. My family's political legacy will end if I walk away from my duty. All my life I have tried to be the kind of Whitmore everyone expected, even if I haven't always been successful.

"It is, if you let it be. Come on. Let's go take our frustrations out on some fake rock walls."

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So Thursday came slower than usual. On the surface, we had a good time rock climbing on Sunday, yet there had been nothing but radio silence since

then. On Wednesday Casey begged off lunch... via text. After talking and texting multiple times every day for two months I felt like I was missing a limb. I must have picked up my phone a dozen times a day, looking for a voice mail or text from him knowing it wouldn't be there. He was pulling away from me and this suddenly fragile relationship we'd been building. It wasn't a surprise, just soul crushing. By Thursday, Suzanne was so desperate to improve my mood; she bought me my favorite Piña Colada cupcake. It didn't help.

I finally texted him to see if we were still going to dinner.

Me: *We still on for dinner with my parents?*

Him: *I guess*

Me: *You don't have to*

Him: *I know*

Me: *Miss you*

Him: *What time?*

We confirmed details after that, but the exchange left me more depressed than before. I was pretty sure he was going to break up with me that night. I came to the conclusion that hope was evil. She urged you to climb the tree of life and then pushed you so far out on a limb that, when it inevitably broke, you were surprised at the pain when you hit the ground.

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As terrified as I was to see Casey again, I missed him terribly. Things had been so great between us before I went and cocked it all up with my family's collectively overinflated ego. I put my cooler bag down and waited for him, less than patiently, in the lobby of my building. It was too blasted hot to wait outside. It was ridiculous to be taking a taxi when my parents' townhouse was a ten-minute walk away, but did I mention the heat? We could have taken my BMW but that was more hassle than the cost of the cab. I was cranky and it probably didn't help that I hadn't slept much in the last couple days.

Irrational as it was, I grinned when he stepped out of his friend Paul's car looking like a model in a very gay Ralph Lauren ad. Casey move around the car, swinging his hips with every step. My breath caught in my throat as I remembered how lucky I was to hold on to this beautiful man for even a little while. The lavender seersucker short sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up, madras belt, pale beige chinos and well-loved but still serviceable boat shoes

made him look cool and put together. His gorgeous auburn hair shined golden in the last of the afternoon sun, a little floppy from the humidity, and I could tell it was annoying him. He spoke to Paul for a few seconds before he even looked at me. When he finally turned and saw me, Casey didn't give me a kiss in greeting or even a welcoming smile. I hit a few branches on my way down this time when hope shoved me out of the tree again. After that, I couldn't look him in the eye, so I just stared at the flight of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

"Hey, Case. You ready to go or do you want to run upstairs for a few minutes?" There wasn't anything I could do or say to fix this, so I just pulled up all the armor that Casey once mentioned and shoved it into place, something I hadn't done with him since the day we met.

"I'm good. How's work?"

"It was okay. Suzanne's been on my case all week and Gerry interfered in the settlement negotiation for Dunbar which screwed everything up for a while, but I think I squared the client with what was happening." Gerry was my least favorite partner at the firm. He had a tendency to treat me like a junior associate and get in the middle of things he shouldn't. I'd spoken to our managing partner about him more than once and I was about to do it again. Work was going to be tense for a few more days. God, my kingdom for a three-hour nap. "You?"

"Paul and I filmed a tire commercial at Fenway today. It was fun. I got to meet Dustin Pedroia. He's a trip even if he took a thousand takes to get his lines right and we may still have to do it in voice-over to get the spot to work."

"Still, a sunny July day on the field at Fenway can't possibly suck."

"True. Even if it was an off day, being on the field, looking at the most perfect green in all the world was amazing. I got some decent photos during my break. A few of them might even be worth selling." Still no smile and still no kiss. I don't even know why he bothered to show up. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Casey, if you're going to break up with me, just do it and go. You don't need to suffer through dinner with my parents. I know you promised to hold my hand while I talked to them but I'm letting you off the hook. I can't stand waiting for the penny to drop."

He tilted his head, stunned at my sharp dismissal. "You're not even going to talk to me about this?"

“Why? All signs point to good-bye.” They did and it hurt. I wasn’t feeling charitable.

“Bennett, look at me.” I pointed a cold and distant expression in his general direction, still not seeing him. “No. Bennett. Look at me. You need to see my face.”

Seeing his face was the one thing in the world that made me feel whole and the only thing I didn’t want to do. His eyes looked soft and a little sad. They also seemed a bit bruised as if he was as tired as I was. “What?” I steeled myself, locking my knees so I wouldn’t crumple to the ground.

“I’m not breaking up with you, not yet anyway. I thought a lot over the last couple days, and I can’t support you running for office. I can’t. I love you and the passionate, goofy, slightly geeky man you are when you’re with me will be slowly destroyed, one tiny piece at a time, if you run.” My heart pounded like a buffalo stampede. *Casey loves me. Oh. My. God. Casey loves me.* “We need to talk about what that means for us.”

“You didn’t call or text, you canceled lunch... I thought I’d lost my chance.” I was still just standing there in the heat, melting, dumbfounded.

“I don’t know what will happen, but I think the Magic 8 Ball will be clearer after tonight. And for what it’s worth, you didn’t contact me either. I’m sorry I had to cancel lunch. I was stuck in Cambridge trying to corral a client and her three dogs into a portrait worth taking. I wasn’t dodging you. You’d know that if you’d asked.”

“Oh.” I blinked slowly, trying to assimilate the new information. Casey loves me.

“That’s all you have to say to me?” Annoyed, he stepped back a little. I realized then that I hadn’t said it back. I couldn’t say what was in my heart on a city sidewalk with a cabbie waiting.

“No, but the cab is here. We need to go if we’re going, but it’s not too late to beg off dinner if you want.” Both of us needed to calm down before we talked or faced my family.

“We should go. Your parents aren’t going to get less demanding and you need to talk to them.”

“Okay, then. Get in the cab.” I grabbed the cooler bag and walked around to the passenger side and climbed in.



“What’s in the bag?” He peered over like it was some kind of contraband.

“I brought beer from my fridge, specifically the saison you liked at the beer festival. Plus, Suzanne gave me an idea today. In an effort to cheer me up, she brought me my favorite cupcake after lunch. I suspect she was worried I might maim the next intern to cross my path. Anyway, my mother has a double-secret guilty pleasure that happens to have a cupcake on the label. It’s a moscato wine that you can buy at the drugstore. It is surprisingly tasty if you can get past the six-dollars-on-sale price tag. I bought three bottles. That should butter her up.”

“You think it will work?” His expression was dubious.

“It might. She’s actually a pretty fun drunk. Remind me to tell you about our trip to Greece when I was thirteen. For now, all I’ll say is that it involves a bottle of grappa, the handsome son of a super-rich shipping magnate, and a swimming pool. In any case, the wine will make her smile and my father frown. He hates the stuff, but he will be mollified by having beer in the house. Mom put beer on the not-approved for his diet list, and after some compromise he’s now allowed to drink beer outside the townhouse. She won’t buy it for him at home.”

“He knows he can buy it himself, right? You don’t need a special license or anything.”

Laughing calmed my nerves a little. “I don’t know why, but it works for them.” My parents loved each other and took care of one another in their own way. After thirty-six years of marriage, they had found a way to make it work. God bless their controlling little hearts.

We pulled up in front of my parents’ townhouse. They inherited the house from my grandfather and his grandfather before him. The Beacon Hill walking tours call it the Whitmore Mansion and it’s been in my family for nearly two centuries. If you go all the way up to the fifth floor which back in the day were servant quarters, there’s even a Juliet balcony with a spectacular view of the Public Garden. I sometimes wonder what people think about the house when they visit for the first time, because, as grand as the townhouse appears, it isn’t really anything special to me beyond the fact that it’s home.

Casey stood on the sidewalk staring at the front door and radiating anxiety like he was about to have a meltdown. I tried to soothe him. “Don’t be nervous. Nothing that happens in there tonight has anything to do with you and me. Whatever issues we have right now, they don’t matter until we have a chance to

talk. I promise you my parents are decent people, just misguided and used to getting their own way.” I leaned over and kissed the side of his head, finding comfort in the herbal scent of his shampoo.

“Okay.” He released an uneasy breath with at least a small amount of his anxiety

I hip-checked him and smiled. “You sound like me.”

“I do, don’t I? Let’s do this. I’m not usually so insecure and I don’t like it.”

“I’ll protect you. Just remember it’s dinner, not the beaches of Normandy.” Part of me was praying that my parents stuck to their cool, WASPy manners

“Let’s just do this.” Casey looked at me and we walked through the front door.

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## Chapter 5

Rather charming was the best descriptor I had for my parents during the early part of our evening. They managed to interrogate Casey without it seeming like a McCarthy hearing, and they told stupid childhood stories about me which were somewhat embarrassing but not fatally so. My mother was tickled by her moscato, claiming it would be wonderful with dessert. After a quick tour of the townhouse, which took a while with five floors and nearly six thousand square feet to cover, we settled outside in the enclosed courtyard under the patio umbrella at the glass-and-iron table set for four.

My mother wanted to know more about Casey's work and he showed her some of his photographs on her tablet. One of the photos she recognized from Blythe and Company, a fine art gallery owned by my mother's best friend, Blythe Hartman. In the category of "It's a small world," Casey had done headshots and other photography for Blythe's website, and she had hung a few of his photographs in the gallery since. They talked for a while about Blythe and the gallery. I wasn't listening to their conversation all that closely while my father talked to me about his work, and, to be honest, I wasn't actually listening to him either.

Mostly I was just sitting out in the courtyard enjoying my beer and trying not to melt while my father fiddled with his ridiculous spaceship of a gas grill. It had light-up knobs and a swing arm LED lamp so he could see what he was doing. I fully admit that he was good at the grill but this was ludicrous. "So, Dad... What's with the new grill?"

"I had a hard time grilling fish on the old one. It had too many hot and cold spots plus it was hard to clean."

"Really? Wasn't it you who told me that it's a shoddy workman who blames his tools?" Dad had to know I was making fun of him.

"Fine. I saw it at the store and liked it. The old one was ugly and the technology has changed a lot in the years since we got it."

My mother laughed as she stepped out the kitchen's French doors with a large platter in her hands. "It was love at first sight. I was afraid he was going to sleep out here so it didn't get lonely the first night."

"Really?" I laughed. "Sounds like Casey and his espresso machine."

“Hey! Just because we appreciate the beauty and craftsmanship in well-made equipment, it doesn’t mean we are in love with them.” Casey stood and moved towards the grill in solidarity with my dad. My mother and I just rolled our eyes. In this regard at least, we were very much alike. Tools like coffeemakers, grills and computers for that matter, just needed to function properly. They didn’t need to be particularly attractive or on the cutting edge, as long as they did their jobs. It was something our technophiles would never understand.

Dad must have asked Casey about his espresso machine because I could hear him talking about an onboard coffee grinder and water temperature, then something about how to choose a good machine. Most of it went over my head. Mom sat beside me under the umbrella watching Casey and my father talk over at the grill. “Casey seems like a good man. I can see why you like him, though I always pictured you with someone more like Will.”

“He’s amazing and I more than like him. But I’m not telling you how much more, before I tell him.” Will was pretty and has the right resume but he was shallower than a kiddie pool. We were never easy together. Casey was a regular middle-class guy; he was smart and down-to-earth in a way I would never be. When we were together, it was seamless.

“I’m happy for you. Have you talked to him about what being a part of the Whitmore family means?”

“We’re not the mafia.”

“No, but you forget that I was an outsider to this family once upon a time. I remember how daunting it all was. Your grandfather’s first congressional campaign happened shortly after your father and I married. I was just beginning my career, while your father was in medical school. We lived here with your grandparents until Doug graduated. I was never happier than the day we moved out to the old house in Brookline. I loved your grandparents, but the lack of privacy was uncomfortable at best.” Mom had always been so enmeshed in the Whitmore legacy that I often forgot she wasn’t born to it. Joanna Collier Whitmore came from a well-respected family that owned a small group of historic hotels on Cape Ann. The Colliers, though quite successful and relatively wealthy, had nothing in comparison to the Whitmore fortune. Those early years must have felt like she had been transported to some alternate universe.

“All I’m saying is that for someone not used to having people care what they do or who they associate with, it can be overwhelming.”

“We’ve discussed it, but until theory and reality collide, I’m not sure he can truly understand.”

Casey crossed the courtyard to sit beside me at the table. “Joanna, Doug wants you to know that he’s put the corn on the grill. He said you’d know what that means.”

“Yes. It means I need to get the rest of dinner on the table.”

“Would you like some help?” Casey genuinely wanted to help. He wasn’t so good at sitting around.

“Not now. I’ll call you when I need more stuff carried out. Relax and finish your drink. Dinner will be ready in fifteen.” With that, she turned and headed into the kitchen.

I was curious about what he was thinking. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good. They’re not like I expected. I was surprised your mom knows Blythe.”

“Told you. She and Blythe are a lot like me and Nate. You would normally have met Blythe and George at the ball, but their youngest was finally graduating from Penn that weekend. Just so you know, the door won’t be closed behind us before Mom’s on the phone to Blythe asking about you.”

“Blythe likes me. She even tried to fix me up with her daughter-in-law’s brother, I think.”

“She tries to set every gay man she meets up with Michael, but it never would have worked. I went on one date with him years ago and he nearly bored me to death. He’s an aging party twink trying desperately to hold on to his youth. He is cute though, sort of a high-maintenance surfer dude. Last I heard, he bought a house on Humarock Beach in Scituate and was hosting house parties every weekend. I’m sure I could scare up an invitation if you’re interested.” I gave him a half-wicked, half-innocent smile.

“No, thanks. I outgrew those parties before I graduated college,” Casey laughed.

“Good. ’Cause I never even grew into those parties.”

“I can’t imagine you in that sort of setting.”

“I’d go if you asked me to, just to defend my territory. You’re mine and I want everyone to know it.” I kissed him quickly.

“Put it back in the box, He-man.” We both laughed because the idea really was preposterous.

Dinner was excellent as usual: watermelon and heirloom tomato salad, grilled butterflied chicken, corn on the cob, and spinach orzo. I don’t like getting my hands dirty and I particularly hate eating with my fingers. Mom went all out to get on my good side and put the sterling corn spikes on the table so our fingers didn’t get messy. Plus, we still had grilled peaches with ginger ice cream to look forward to. Little did I know how quickly this positive tide would turn.

As my dad took another sip of his beer after the table was cleared, his posture must have shifted because I suddenly realized he was gearing up for a discussion. Growing up, discussions were usually lectures from my father about how I had disappointed him and how I was going to fix it. Information flowed in only one direction. No one wanted to hear my “excuses” even if there were honest explanations for my behavior. I learned early to keep my mouth shut and wait it out. “Bennett, we need to talk about how you’re going to handle Ned O’Keefe.”

I glanced at Casey before I turned to my father. “No, we really don’t. I’m almost thirty-two years old. I can decide for myself how I want to handle someone like Ned O’Keefe.”

“If that were true, he wouldn’t be calling me asking why you were ducking him.”

“I haven’t ducked him at all. I texted him after I got his messages and sent him an e-mail telling him that I needed more time before we talked about Margot Wallace’s seat. I’ll call him once I’ve decided what I want to do.”

“He’s going to move you to the bottom of his list of potential candidates if you don’t respond eagerly and soon.”

“So what? Did you ever consider that maybe I’m not interested in running?” I tried not to shout but I wasn’t wholly successful.

“No. This has always been your goal. We’ve been building a resume so you could do this since high school. It’s time.”

“No, Dad, it’s your goal, it’s Mom’s goal, and it was Grandad’s goal, but it has never been mine.” Sitting there mentally banging my head into a brick wall, I glanced at Casey. He gave me an almost imperceptible nod and an equally subtle smile.

“What are you talking about, Bennett? Politics was your dream. I remember you telling your grandfather all the wonderful things you would do when you became President. I think you were about eight.” My mother was genuinely perplexed and it saddened me.

“I did. I remember because it was the day he told me I needed to get better at sports because a sissy who couldn’t catch a ball would never be elected President. At the time I wasn’t sure what a sissy was, but I understood Grandad would be disappointed to have one for a grandson. As a child who already knew he was different from the other boys, it was pretty devastating to think that might be what was wrong with me. I thought if I talked to him about being President, he wouldn’t think I was a sissy anymore.”

“You knew you were gay at eight years old?” My mother blinked slowly, disbelieving, completely unaware her latent homophobia had once again taken center stage. In her mind, being gay was the same as being weak and effeminate.

“No, I just knew I was different. I didn’t like sports or video games and I really didn’t like being dirty. None of those things have anything to do with being gay.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. You’re having lunch with Ned, Christianne, and a few other party people at The Palm tomorrow at one. This has always been our plan and it’s a great opportunity. Your mother is already planning a fundraising dinner for next month.”

At this point, I started to lose my grip. “Do you even hear yourself? ‘*We’ve* been building a resume. It’s always been *our* plan.’ This is my life, not yours. You don’t get to make decisions for me. I’m not a child.” I felt all the repressed anger and resentment welling up in me. Some of the emotion must have bled through into my face. Casey reached over and gently squeezed my hand, grounding me a little.

“Well, you’re certainly acting like one. It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s done. You can do whatever you like once you have fulfilled your responsibilities to this family. Your life has been full of privileges that others only dream of and you have the opportunity to make this world a better place for not just your generation, but the next and the one after that. Think of the difference you could make on equality, health care, education... ‘From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required...’”

I turned to Casey. “You see. He uses the Gospel of Luke as a club to keep me in line.” He squeezed my hand again and remained quiet as I gave my attention back to my father. “Why do you get to decide the price for my wealth and privilege? I do more than my share of pro bono work for the gay youth shelter and child advocacy groups. Every year I donate tens of thousands of dollars to the causes I support. Why isn’t that enough? Why do I have to sacrifice my career on the altar of public service?”

“Being a member of this family comes with responsibilities to the larger community, Bennett. You always wanted to follow in your grandfather’s footsteps.”

“No, I didn’t. I never wanted to disappoint you and was ready to follow the path you laid out for me because I didn’t feel like I had a choice. Last week Casey said something that has been bouncing around in my head like a super ball. Public service isn’t supposed to be a punishment handed out for being who you are. But that’s how I’ve always thought about it. It was a way to redeem myself for being gay, for being introverted and crap at sports and all the other things that have disappointed you. Public service should be a calling, not an obligation. We deserve politicians who enter politics to serve their constituents, nothing less. They sure as hell shouldn’t be there in a losing effort to earn their parents’ respect.” And that’s when I realized what I’d said and panicked trying to figure out how I could take it all back. Not because it wasn’t true, but because this wasn’t how my family worked. We didn’t do emotional outbursts.

“Where is this coming from, Bennett? I don’t understand. Casey, did you put him up to this?” My mother was looking for someone to blame for my rebellion. She wasn’t going to find it in Casey.

“No. I just listened. I don’t have an agenda here beyond Bennett’s happiness.” Casey sat tall in his chair looking squarely at my mother without being confrontational. God, he was gorgeous.

“This is all me. Casey’s done nothing but be supportive. I never said I didn’t want to go into politics, or play baseball, or go to Harvard, or work at Bradlee, Perkins and Whitmore—or any of a thousand other things you decided were best for me, and that’s my fault. You always take my silence as assent to whatever you think I should be doing. And here we are. But this is all ancient history. I’m not going to lunch with anyone but Casey tomorrow and I’ll call Ned when I’ve made a decision.”

“Bennett, this isn’t negotiable. It wasn’t easy to get Ned to agree to this meeting, and I’m not wasting my political capital on your temper tantrum. It’s



time for you to step up and be the man your mother and I raised you to be.” My father was getting agitated.

“You still aren’t listening, Dad. I said no and I meant it. I need more time to decide. I can’t agree to run for office just because you want me to.”

“You have obligations, Bennett. That’s how life works.”

“I have a lot of obligations, Dad, but running for office because your brother died without fulfilling your father’s dream isn’t one of them. I’m sorry you lost your brother. I’m sorry you feel guilty for never being able to live up to Uncle Greg’s shadow in your father’s eyes, but none of that is my burden to carry.” I shouldn’t have said that either and I knew it. While it was true, my family didn’t deal with brutal honesty very well.

“That’s not true.” Looking a little sick, Dad polished off his beer.

“I remember, Dad. I remember Grandad going on and on about how special Uncle Greg was. It was like you were always competing with a ghost and losing.”

“My relationship with your grandfather is irrelevant... The state house is the perfect venue for your first campaign. It’s local to the neighborhood where you grew up and still live. If you somehow get beat, it won’t be a black mark against you statewide. You get to dangle your feet in the water and get noticed for bigger and better opportunities when they come along. This is the right office at the right time. You’d be a fool to turn down backing by the state party at this point in your career.”

“Maybe. But I’d have to take a leave of absence from the firm, leaving my clients in the lurch. I’d also be committing to staying in Beacon Hill for however long I held the seat. Casey has a career that needs to be considered as well. It’s not a simple as you make it sound. I just need a little more time to consider all the angles.”

“You don’t have time, Bennett. In fact, the time to decide is already behind you. You will go to this lunch tomorrow and graciously accept their support.”

“If you want a Whitmore in Margot’s seat so badly, why don’t you run? You’d make just as attractive a candidate as I do. Probably more so. You’d have to give up your medical practice, a small price to pay for continuing your father’s legacy. The teaching gig would have to go too, I suppose. That would be a shame, but Mom will be there by your side helping you every step of the way. She’d have to give up her work with the reproductive health clinic

because you wouldn't want abortion to become an issue in the campaign. I feel for you but sacrifices must be made."

"Stop it. You're being ridiculous."

"It's only ridiculous because I'm talking about blowing up your entire life. You don't care so much when it's mine."

"You don't have a life, Bennett. You have your work and a relationship that will be over as soon as one of you moves on to the next shiny thing."

"Being gay doesn't make me promiscuous or unable to have a long-term relationship." I reached over and took Casey's hand. "I don't know if Casey and I will last or not. It's still too new for guarantees but for you to dismiss what we have as inconsequential is frankly insulting—especially with Casey sitting right here."

"Bennett, sweetheart, we're just confused. I didn't want to say anything, but up until Casey walked into your life you were on board with the plans we've made. Now you're questioning everything and we're concerned that this relationship isn't healthy for you."

Casey stiffened and pulled his hand away from mine. "First, I'm sitting right here. Second, all I've done is show Bennett that his happiness matters, that he matters more than his last name. Your passive aggression isn't going to change that. Bennett, honey, I think I've overstayed my welcome so I'm going go before I say something I shouldn't. I'll walk back to your place and see you later. I don't want to make this any harder than it has to be. Okay?" Casey stood, kissed me and walked toward the French doors.

"Wait just a few more minutes and I'll go with you. Please..." This conversation wasn't going anywhere. Everyone needed to go to their neutral corners for a while and regroup.

"Whatever you need." He waited by the door, watching.

"Mom, I know you are confused. This isn't about Casey. I am sorry for disappointing you, but I'm not letting you manipulate me anymore. I honestly don't care whether you approve of my relationship with Casey or not. He's not to blame and I won't let you make him the scapegoat in all this. You want to blame someone, blame me." I stood and stared at the hazy, twilight sky.

"Bennett, sit down. This discussion isn't over." My father was completely taken aback by my mutiny. This discussion was over before it started. My whole life I wanted someone to see me, to love me for who I am and I found

that in Casey. I could see our life together play out in my mind like an old-school sixteen-millimeter home movie, and I wanted it, more than I had ever wanted anything else in my life. My parents were looking at me like I had lost my mind and Casey just smiled patiently with a hint of those dimples that made me weak.

“No. I don’t think I will. I’m going home. All I wanted was another day or two to think before making a life-changing decision. Instead I got an avalanche of pressure to obey your royal decree that I begin my political career. So, if you’re going to force me to make a decision, I’m not running for Margot’s seat. Not now and probably not in the future, though I’m old enough to never say never. And I’m definitely not going to lunch tomorrow. In fact, I’m calling in sick and taking Casey to Newport for a long weekend.”

With a beet-red face, my father sputtered and my mother actually managed to look a little weepy, which I knew was a ruse to play on my guilt. As I moved towards Casey and looked into those beautiful, zaffer-blue eyes, I knew I had done the right thing even if the guilt lingered, bitter in my throat. “I love you.” I couldn’t hold those sweet words back another second.

“I love you too.” Casey and I stared at one another for another beat before he pulled me into a gentle kiss.

I should have known my mother wouldn’t give up that easily. “Bennett, we’re talking about your future, and I don’t appreciate your tone or your insinuation that we don’t have your best interest at heart.”

“For what it’s worth, I understand you want what’s best for me. I do. We just have very different ideas about what that is. I don’t want a public life. I don’t want people constantly trying to use me for their own financial or political gain. I don’t want to become my grandfather.”

From behind me, Casey touched my shoulder. I turned to see his face. “Tell them what you do want,” he said softly.

“I want a family. I want to buy a sailboat and have time to use it. I want to go to work every day knowing I was, in a small way, making the world a better place. I want the freedom to just be myself for a change. Those are all the things I want, but right now I just want to go home.”

Of course my father just sat there letting my mother speak for both of them. “We can’t allow you to destroy a future you’ve worked so hard for, Bennett. If you leave now, you will lose any meaningful support from your father and me.”

“Really? So if I don’t acquiesce to your demands, you’re drumming me out of the family? Fine. It’s about the only thing you could do to hurt me. I love you both and you will always be my family, but your days of controlling me are over. Come on, Case. Let’s go home.”

“Wait. What are you going to do about Ned O’Keefe?” My father was grasping now. He seemed to know he’d lost.

“Hold on.” I fished my cell out of my pocket and dialed Ned. We exchanged pleasantries for a few seconds before he asked why I was calling. “Ned, I’m afraid my father has spoken out of turn. Thank you for your consideration, but I’m not interested in running for office at this time. I’m going to have to cancel lunch for tomorrow.” Ned thanked me for getting back to him and said he would keep me in mind for the future. Then we ended the call on a friendly note. “Anything else? No? Excellent. I’ll talk to you both next week, once we all cool off.”

With that Casey and I walked out into the muggy night air and raced back to my place, holding hands and not caring who saw us.

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Once we made it back to my apartment we sprinted up the stairs and into the bathroom. We flew through sharing a quick shower to rinse off the heat of the day. We kissed and touched like our lives depended on it, but it didn’t go any further, not then. The need to talk was temporarily sublimated by our desire to reconnect and find a little reassurance in just being together. Out of the shower, we dried off and Casey pulled me close, rubbing his bits and pieces against my hip. “I want you on the bed, hands clutching the headboard, legs spread wide and waiting for me. Go. Now.”

If a guy could scurry and keep his man card, that’s what I would have done. I settled for a dash instead. Casey rumbled around the guest room for a minute before he came into the master bedroom. I was wantonly spread-eagle on the bed with my knees bent, and my dick as hard as it could be. He had something in his hand; I couldn’t see what. He climbed on the bed and stretched out on top of me. We kissed slow and easy, closing the distance between us with every caress. I fidgeted under him trying to find more friction only to be thwarted—repeatedly. With a deep, evil chuckle, Casey moved to kneel between my widespread legs. He licked and kissed the inside of my thighs and knees before moving up my body, sprinkling kisses across my belly and chest, then taking time to worry my nipples with his tongue as he moved around. After another

mind-bending kiss, he slid back between my legs, only to nibble and suck on my hip bones. Not once was there a purposeful touch to my dick. I lifted my hips to encourage more attention to my aching penis, and Casey snickered again, shoving a pillow under my raised bottom. “Case, come on, love, I need you.”

“When I’m ready, honey, not before. I was saving this for a special occasion but I thought we could use a little play to lighten the mood. Lie back and relax. This is going to be fun.”

I laughed. “I think you and I have different definitions of fun.”

“No. You’re just impatient. Worry more about the journey than the destination.”

“It’s not *your* destination turning blue, Yoda.” We laughed some more. I’ve never laughed so much during sex as I did with Casey.

He began stroking the wrinkled muscle surrounding my hole. I heard the *shnick* of the lube bottle and felt a slick finger just barely circling, glazing the skin. Casey slid the finger inside me, as he took me into his mouth, tonguing the head of my penis. I writhed and curled my toes, holding firmly to the headboard like a lifeline. “Oh, God. More. Please, more.” Then there were two fingers filling my channel as he started bobbing his head, continuing to blow me.

Once he came off my dick with a pop and removed his fingers, I heard him get more lube and fiddle with something. Soon I felt Casey spread my thighs even farther apart, and I looked at his gorgeous face as he concentrated on pleasing me. His own largely ignored member was fully engorged and dusky red. I could just make out the glisten of pre-cum beading on the head of his hard dick. I desperately wanted more contact with his cut muscles and smooth skin.

In Casey’s hand was a relatively slim, denim-blue silicone butt plug with a sizable loop at the end. With a broad smile, he twirled that loop on his finger like a gunslinger, before buttering the toy with slick. It wasn’t long before I felt the cool blunt tip of the soft plug at my hole. Slipping it in place without much effort, Casey pushed the blue toy in and out of me a few times before moving to lie beside me. He sought another long, drugging kiss before he resumed manipulating the toy so it stimulated my prostate with every move. My own dick was wet and leaking from the unbelievably sensuous contact with my little gland.

Casey left the plug in place and knee-walked up my body, only to squat over my face dragging his balls over my chin and lips. I sucked one and then the other into my mouth, humming happily as I went to work stimulating all the nerves in his sac and taint. The more I squirmed, the more zings of pleasure shot around my body like bolts of electricity. The plug naturally sat right where it needed to be to drive me out of my mind with need. He spun around to face away from me before he presented that pretty pink hole of his to me. I swear Casey enjoyed a good rimming more than a blow job. The position always seemed a bit indecent to me, but I was learning to embrace the kinkier side of my sexuality.

“Come on, honey, work your tongue inside of me. Need you. Oh, fuck, yes. More, honey. Deeper. Fuck, that’s good.” I always knew how much I was pleasing him by how much he swore during sex. It wasn’t often that he lost so much of his control that he cursed like that in front of me. He lowered his body into more of a sixty-nine position and began nibbling at the head of my dick while he resumed playing with the plug.

“Love, please... I don’t think you want me to come yet. Please, please...” I licked from the backside of his balls to the top of his crack and everywhere in-between. His favorite was for me to push my face as deep as I could so that he could feel the rough of my five-o’clock shadow against his butt cheeks. My entire body shook as he sucked me just a little more, holding me at the knife-edge of exploding.

Casey climbed back between my legs before sucking up a lurid hickey on my collarbone. He removed the plug and dropped it on the nightstand. A condom and more lube were in place almost instantly. He pushed my knees up nearly to my shoulders and held them wide. I felt exposed and a little vulnerable in that position. Casey groaned at the sight of me spread and open for him. I returned the sound with a whimper of my own as I realized how empty I felt in that moment. Seconds later, the business end of Casey’s dick gently slipped into my stretched and relaxed hole. That feeling when a warm, thick penis first penetrates is purely carnal. The flash of burn tightly coupled with enormous pleasure, where for a just moment you can’t distinguish one from the other. Once the heat fully gave way to the pleasure, Casey began to move, pulling his entire dick out before filling me again. Every molecule of my body lit up like a sparkler as he slid over my prostate a dozen more times in a row. I was so close to coming, I babbled nonsense as all sense of decorum fled. Casey’s thrusts seemed to be exponentially faster than before. His sweat dripped down his face and neck as he lunged for the finish line. “Baby, jerk

yourself quick, I'm not going to last much longer. Unggh. Fuck, yes." I took myself in hand, none too gently and started pulling. I felt the goose bumps begin to race across my shoulders and spread across my cheeks as I went over the edge, pulling Casey with me. He froze as his orgasm flooded his body.

We panted and stared at each other as we found our way back into our own bodies. The scent of sex and my own cum filled my nose as Casey gently pulled out of me and removed the condom. I zoned out for a few seconds as I tried to reboot my higher brain functions. In that time Casey must have gone to get a wet washcloth from the bathroom because the next thing I knew he was wiping me off.

He spent a few minutes kneading my shoulders and hands after I let go of the headboard. Over the months we'd been having sex, submitting to Casey had become the most natural thing in the world to me. It didn't happen all the time—not even most of the time—yet he always seemed to know when I needed to let go. Once he was settled back in the bed under the sheet and cotton blanket, Casey pulled me close enough that I was half lying on top of him. I snuggled into his shoulder with one thigh over his and a hand gently smoothing across his chest. If someone pressed me to describe heaven, this moment would do nicely.

I felt the vibration in his chest against my cheek as he spoke. "Are you ready to talk?"

"No." I wanted to bask in the warm safety of his arms for a while. He stroked my spine with the palm of his hand, soothing me.

"Really?"

"No." I knew we both needed to say what we had to say, I just wanted more good before the scary.

"You were so awesome tonight. It took a lot of guts to stand up to them that way."

"Not really. Letting them have their way was easy when disappointing them was the worst thing that could happen. Tonight I had something I wasn't willing to lose even in the face of their disappointment. Every second you drifted away from me this week felt like I swallowed broken glass. Even Suzanne was walking on eggshells around me this week. She insisted the first-years were forming a lynch mob in the break room and I better shape up or she was going to let them get me." I laughed in spite of myself.

“Oh, honey. I was just trying to clear my own head, and we both needed to decide what to do without a bunch of emotion clogging up the works. I love you. I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel on us but I had to know where to draw the line. You understand?”

“I do. I just... I...” My emotions blended into this unidentifiable soup and I didn’t know what to say. Casey shifted onto his side so we could see each other. His fingers, smooth and warm, polished my cheek.

“Bennett, just look at my face and take a breath.” From the very beginning, he found the key to calming me down.

I sank into the amazing blue of his eyes and found my bearings. “I love you. I was so lost without you. I didn’t sleep. I didn’t eat. I couldn’t fathom how I was going to go back to the cold, lonely life I lived before. The depression and darkness compounded every day we were apart.”

“You know a lot of this could have been avoided if you just talked to me, right?”

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“So you said nothing. I really thought we were beyond that. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know. I’m sorry too. I should have realized that the distance between us would freak you out.”

“I’m so screwed up. I knew you were disappointed in me on Sunday, and then there was all this echoing silence as I slowly came unglued.”

“Just talk to me. Tell me when you need to see my freckly face and I’ll do everything in my power to make it happen. I know this isn’t easy for you. Relationships aren’t easy for anyone. But I’m not a mind reader, Bennett, especially when we’re apart—and we’re apart a lot. You have to meet me halfway. Tell me when you need to see my face to know that we’re okay.”

“I’m sorry I work so many hours. I’ve been trying to make more time for us.”

“I know. I don’t resent your work, honey, any more than you resent mine. Of course I want more time with you—I love you. As long as we both keep our priorities straight, we’ll make this work.” I believed him and my doubts floated away like a lost balloon. We would both have to continue making adjustments,



and I had to get better at talking about my feelings but we could do this. I could have everything I told my parents I wanted.

“We never got our peaches and ice cream.”

“I picked up a pint of cherry fro-yo at the farmers’ market. Will that do?” I nodded. Casey sat up and patted my ass as he got out of bed. He was back in a matter of minutes with two bowls. We sat naked and cross-legged on the bed, eating dessert as we talked about our trip to Newport. I had to see a man about a sailboat.

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## Chapter 6

Even my hair was tired; it kept falling into my eyes as I walked into my building. Two fourteen-hour days in a row dealing with an emergency for one of my bigger and more persnickety clients and six hours of a monotonous deposition by the key witness on another case had left me beyond exhausted. It was already well after eight at night when I shuffled up the stairs to my place. I couldn't help but smile when I heard Casey inside talking on the phone as I stuck my key in the front door. Coming home to him would never get old.

I hadn't seen him in a few days because of the routine chaos at work, and I'd been craving him. The end of Casey's lease could not come soon enough. We talked about finding a larger place that would meet both our needs when the time came, though nothing had been decided. Despite the good memories of my grandmother that made my apartment home, it was time to move on. I hoped one of my cousins or even my father's cousins would consider buying the place to keep it in the family, but it was going to be sold regardless.

Once I stepped through the door I realized Casey was talking to his mom. They had a close relationship and I was a little jealous. It had been almost seven months since I decided not to run for office, and while my parents and I were still searching for a new normal, we were talking. I had taken a hard line on them trying to control me and we still clashed sometimes. Casey and I took my parents out for a nice dinner to celebrate my mother's birthday recently, and it was the first time things didn't feel awkward. I think we all had a nice time, including Casey, who really did seem to like my dad. It was progress and that's all I hoped for these days.

"Mom, I gotta go. Bennett's home." I kissed him quietly as he listened to his mother on the other end of the phone. "Tell Sara I'll make arrangements to come down next weekend after I talk to Bennett... Okay, I'll tell him. Work has been crazy lately and I'm not sure what his schedule looks like... Okay, I'll let you know. Love you. Tell those babies that their Uncle Casey is coming with a truckload of presents... I know. I want to spoil them. I've missed out on so much already... Okay... Talk to you soon." I pulled off my tie as I flopped onto one of the barstools in the kitchen while Casey finished his phone call.

"Hey, love, I'm home." I grinned at him as I picked at the bowl of spinach salad on the counter. It was a testament to how distracted he was that I didn't get a rap on the knuckles with the salad tongs. "I'm happy to see you, and the kitchen smells amazing—what are you doing here?"

“I bought groceries and made you some real food. It’s just Moroccan chicken, rice, and salad. The whole thing took twenty minutes. No biggie. I didn’t want you microwaving another frozen dinner. I know that’s all you’ve been eating this week.”

“Not true. I brought home a pizza yesterday.” Casey growled at me as I just grinned at him. “How’s your mom?”

“She’s a little stunned actually. My sister showed up in North Carolina today with twin three-year-old girls in tow. Apparently, my sainted sister got pregnant on vacation in Australia and was so embarrassed she couldn’t figure out how to tell us. When Sara was about six months pregnant, she moved to California in search of the twins’ father and couldn’t find him. He must have lied to her about something because even though she knew his name, the city he lived in, and his occupation, a private investigator wasn’t able to find him either. Anyway, Sara the Martyr went through her pregnancy alone and has been raising the twins by herself outside of San Francisco all this time.”

“Holy crap! She is a piece of work. On the upside, you have nieces! Tell me more.”

“Lily and Rose turn four in May. Mom sent me pictures.” He flipped through his phone for a few seconds before sliding it across the counter. The girls were adorable, not surprising as they both looked like Casey. “They’re not identical. Rose is the one with curly hair.”

“They’re cute. When are you going to meet them?”

“As I was saying to my mom, I want to go down next weekend. I’d go tomorrow if I could, but I’m shooting that music video on Sunday and booked most of next week. Would you like to go with me? I want you to meet my family.”

“I’d love to go. I may have to sneak in some work, but I’ll make sure everyone knows I’m only available for emergencies. After the deposition today, I’m hoping for a settlement offer on the McClellan Construction case this week so that should be one more thing off my plate. Yeah, I can do that. Do you want to fly down Friday and come back Monday? I haven’t taken a vacation day in months, so I could probably even take a few more if you want more time.”

“No. Friday and Monday are more than I hoped for, honestly. I’ll book us a hotel. Mom’s townhouse will be full with Sara and the twins staying there anyway. And, it will give us a little breathing room. I know too much togetherness makes you cranky.” Casey kissed me to soften the tease.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. You should spend as much time with your family as you can. I know how much you miss them.”

“I just want to play everything by ear. Things could get testy between Sara and me. She has a lot to answer for. For all I know, it could be me who needs some quiet time away from the family drama.”

“Did Sara say why she turned up now?”

“All she said to me was some bullshit about feeling guilty for depriving my mother of her grandchildren. She was pretty evasive, honestly, but she’s moving back east. Some nonprofit is flying her up to DC and back on Tuesday for a job interview. She’s leaving the twins with my mother for the day. I don’t have a good feeling about any of this. I’m going to spend every minute between now and when I see Sara waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Sara’s going to do whatever she wants. All you can do is wait for things to play out. She could surprise you.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I told you Mom isn’t in the best of health, and she really doesn’t need Sara’s drama. I doubt Mom has said anything to my sister about her medical issues. Between the diabetes, high blood pressure and coronary artery disease, she’s had two angioplasties in the last few years for blockages. Even though Mom does a good job managing her health and the doctors are happy right now, I worry about the stress.”

I walked around the table, hugged him tight and kissed him on the side of his head. “It’ll be okay, love. Your mom is a tough lady and she knows what she has to do to stay healthy. Look on the bright side... you have nieces to spoil. That can’t be a bad thing.”

“Sunday afternoon, we’re going to the mall. Those two girls are going to know their uncles love them already.” Casey pecked me on the lips as he stepped back and started plating dinner. I couldn’t help but admire his elegant efficiency as he moved around my kitchen.

“Uncles?”

“Well, yeah. I love you. You love me. We haven’t talked much about forever, but I assumed that’s where we’re headed. In my world, that makes you an uncle too.” Casey gave me the earnest look that made me melt.

“An uncle...” A smile stretched across my face that I didn’t think would be going away anytime soon. “I never thought... I didn’t...” A tiny bit of wetness

crept into my eyes as I absorbed that information. Every day the miracle that was Casey Nolan brought more love and joy into my life that I ever thought possible.

Casey reached out and took my hand. “Oh, honey. You’ll be the good uncle who teaches them about the world and takes them to museums and the ballet. I’ll be the goofy one who plays make-believe and talks to them about clothes and boys. We complement each other perfectly. It’s gonna be awesome.”

“Can we eat on the couch?” I needed to be close to him.

“Absolutely. There’s *Shark Tank* on the DVR or I think we still have a whole season of *Louie* to catch up on before the new one starts.” I promise you it wasn’t me who set my DVR up to record the shows we watch. He handed me my plate with silverware, a napkin, and a spill-proof bottle of water before shooing me into the living room. Somehow these cool reusable bottles of filtered water appear three at a time in my fridge so I don’t buy bottled water. There isn’t any part of my life he hasn’t made better.

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My first-year associate mentee, Dani, and I sat at the small conference table in my office going over the work I was giving her for the rest of the week. First-years were always keen for any “real lawyer work” they could get and Dani was no different. She’d been at the firm for five months now and was finally getting to the stage where she was useful rather than just learning her way as an associate.

“That should keep you busy for a few days. The research on the Atlantic Biosystems case alone should take an entire day, so go get to work. I would like a rough draft of the other motions as soon as you have them done. I’m leaving town Friday and I want to get these filed before then. Okay?”

“Sure thing, boss. I have a few things for Lydia on my desk, but I shouldn’t have any trouble getting the motions to you tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” I piled up the folders on the table and handed them to her. She grabbed them with the rest of her stuff and headed back to her cubicle.

I was surprised to hear her greet Casey in the outer office near Suzanne’s cube. We had lunch a few hours ago and I wasn’t expecting him. I scooted out of my office to find out what was up. As I came around the corner, I could see that Casey was upset and I hoped it wasn’t aimed at me. Suzanne told him that I wasn’t busy—as if I was ever *not* busy—when what she meant was I wasn’t in a meeting or on a call.

Casey saw me walking towards him and I didn't get my usual grin. Something was very wrong. "Hey, love. Want to come to my office where there's some privacy?" He just nodded and followed me back. As soon as we got into my office, he threw his messenger bag on the floor and dropped onto the sofa leaning his elbows on his knees. "You're scaring me. What's up?"

Exhaling a long slow breath, Casey ran his fingers through his messy hair. "I was on the Red Line on my way home from my meeting when my mother called. It looks like Sara ran off to Africa and abandoned the twins. I was so angry I couldn't think, so instead of calling or going home, I just came here on autopilot."

"Wait. What? Start from the beginning."

"This morning Sara was supposed to fly to DC for that job interview I told you about. She was scheduled to be back in North Carolina about seven o'clock tonight. A little over an hour ago, my mother went to find the itinerary Sara promised to leave on the dresser in the guest room. Mom wanted to check if any of Sara's flights home were delayed. What she found was a large manila envelope. Inside was a notarized letter giving custody of the twins to my mother, plus birth certificates, passports, medical records, bank statements, preschool records, everything. The fucking note to my mother basically said that while she loved her daughters, her life was miserable and having children was never her calling. She apparently left to be part of a lay mission to Africa with no information about where she was going, when she'd be back, or even which organization she was working with. But she did say she would be in touch eventually."

"That's cold. What's your mom going to do?"

"I don't know. Mom isn't prepared to be the guardian of two active preschoolers. Between her health and her financial situation, it's going to be a huge hardship for her." Casey shook with a righteous fury. "Sara's never getting custody of those girls back. She just walked away from her kids, Bennett. She tossed them away like they were disposable."

"We'll figure it out. But first, let me make a call." I picked up my phone and searched my contacts for someone who went to law school in North Carolina, preferably Duke. John LaMarche, a partner at another firm I worked with quite a bit, fit the bill. I called his cell phone and asked for a referral for a family law attorney near Casey's mother. He said he'd make some calls and get back to me. I pushed my desk phone towards Casey and asked him to dial his mother on speakerphone.

“Hi, Mom. I’m on speaker in Bennett’s office. Say hello, Bennett.”

“Hello, Bennett,” Casey’s mom giggled.

The tenor of her laugh was so similar to Casey’s it made me smile. “Hi, Mrs. Nolan. I’m sorry to hear about your troubles today.”

“Bennett, sweetheart, call me Sandy and please don’t ma’am me either.”

I chuckled. My shiny apple didn’t fall far from the tree. “Okay, Sandy. I can do that.”

“What can I do for you boys? My hands are a little full at the moment. We made a big batch of salt-dough clay.”

“Are you having fun, Nana?” Casey grinned after calling his mother by the endearment.

“We are. Busy hands keep busy bodies out of trouble. Lily and Rose are making dinosaurs.”

“Sandy, I know it was presumptuous of me, but I called a friend who went to Duke Law. He’s going to get me a name of an attorney near you who can help sort everything out.”

“What needs to be sorted out?” Sandy still trusted her daughter.

“Well, we don’t know if the paperwork Sara left will be adequate to enroll them in school, get them medical care, or even maintain their health insurance. You also need to figure out if she left you permanent custody of the children or temporary guardianship. That will become important if you decide you don’t want Sara to be able to get the girls back without going to court, if ever. Nonparental custody gets complicated in a hurry, and we haven’t even discussed the issue of the twins’ father.”

Casey looked at me a little askance. “So soon? I thought we’d have some time for Sara to change her mind about leaving before we had to do anything irrevocable.”

“You have time, but knowledge is power.”

“You’re the lawyer, Bennett. Casey wouldn’t be with you if he didn’t trust you. I think we need to see the lawyer, Casey, if only so I know what my options are. I’ll find the money somewhere.”

I looked at Casey and shook my head, hoping he understood that I didn’t expect them to pay for a lawyer I essentially forced on them. He nodded back

before responding to his mother. “Mom, don’t worry about the cost. We’ll work it out. You don’t have to carry this burden alone.”

“Alright, boys. We’ll discuss this more later. I promised the girls a trip to the playground before dinner. I’ll see you both in a few days and I’m sure we’ll talk before then. Bennett, thank you for your help. We need it.”

“You’re Casey’s family. I couldn’t not help.”

“Someday, I hope you’ll think of us as your family too.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.” Stunned, I sat quietly while Casey and Sandy finished the call. This was real. Casey and I were a unit, maybe even a family. Crazy ideas started racing on the hamster wheel in my head. Once he hung up, I just stared at him for a minute. Neither of us knew quite what to say. I’m fairly sure we were both on the edge of thinking the same thing.

Finally, Casey broke the stalemate. “I’m going to get out of your hair and head to the gym. I need to not think for a while and calm down. I’ll be home in time for dinner. Alright?”

“We’ll figure this out. You mom isn’t going to go through this alone.” If I had to turn over every rock in Africa to find his sister, just so he could smack her around a little, I would.

“I know. I just need to go kick the shit out of a heavy bag and not talk to anyone for a while.” Casey’s fitness regime alternated between weight training and kickboxing classes in some complicated arrangement I didn’t understand.

“Okay. I should be home by seven thirty. Don’t worry about food, I’ll have something delivered. Thai, maybe?” I didn’t want him to feel like he had to feed me when he was this upset.

“Fine with me. See you tonight. Thanks for dropping everything to help. I don’t know what I would have done...”

“You’d have been fine. I don’t know Sara, so it’s easier for me to be practical. Go sweat. I’ll see you at home.” I came around my desk and kissed him. “Love you.”

“I love you too” And with that he trudged off to the gym.

I must have sat at my desk mulling for ten minutes before I decided I needed a reality check. I plucked my cell off my desk and dialed the one person who would tell me if I was losing my mind.



“Hey, Nate. How’s life in Google Town?”

“Good. Yesterday, I played ping-pong with a colleague to determine whose timeline for a new project would get used. I didn’t win, and my embarrassment was broadcast all over the building. However, my boss did comment that my game was improving.”

“I can’t even imagine. One of the new associates wore a plaid shirt with his suit and it was gossip fodder for days.”

“Are you still going to see Casey’s family this weekend? Jordan offered me tickets to the Celtics game on Friday.”

“Yeah, we’re still going, but things just got more complicated. Casey’s sister has run off to heal the sick in Africa, abandoning the twins with his mother. We now have to sort out custody and financial arrangements for the girls. His mom isn’t in the best of health and money is tight, so it’s going to be tough on everyone.”

“Wow. That’s a shitty thing to do to those girls.” Nate and I both came from parents who were happily married our whole lives and sometimes we forgot to be grateful for that.

“Everything is a little murky, but I think there might be a simple answer that is just too scary for anyone to say out loud yet.”

“And what, pray tell, is that?” Nate stifled a laugh and I knew he was going to make me say it.

“What if Casey and I became the twins’ guardians and brought them here? I don’t think Casey could do it by himself. His work schedule is too erratic. But if I could beat my schedule down to something closer to fifty hours a week, it could work. Maybe.”

“Are you guys ready to be full-time parents? You’ve been together for what, nine months?”

“It’s been a little over ten months actually, and we are not in the least bit ready, but is anyone ever ready to have kids?”

“No, I guess not. I just never thought you could move so fast.”

“Me neither, but Casey and I are the real deal. We’re different, yet we fit together somehow. Sort of like me and you, except there’s incredible sex and clean laundry.”

“I have clean laundry.”

“Yes, because your cleaning lady drops it all off at the cleaners for you. I lived with you for five years, Nate. You don’t do laundry until your choice is do laundry or go naked.”

“Well, at least I have a workaround for my laundry phobia now,” Nate laughed.

“Am I crazy to think we could do this?” In my head at least, it was a little insane to think that two gay men who had no experience with kids at all could provide adequate care for not one but two four-year-olds.

“If you were anyone else, I probably would think you were crazy, but not you guys. Casey is as easygoing as you are anal which works. Your relationship has been solid from the beginning and you have more than enough money to buy help if you need it. So, no, not so crazy.”

“You willing to be Uncle Nate for a sixth and seventh time?” If this happened, we were going to need all the help we could get and Nate would always be my first line of defense... after Casey. This was a weird adjustment for us. Casey has been great about encouraging me to spend time with Nate, especially since he wasn’t travelling much anymore. The three of us had even spent quite a bit of time together including a couple afternoons of condo-hunting.

Nate barked his laugh. “I was born ready to be an uncle. I don’t have as close a relationship as I’d like with most of my niblings. They’re in Ohio and I only see them a few days a year. My nephew, Aiden, e-mails and texts sometimes. He’s twelve now and smarter than I was at eighteen. I also think he might be gay because he asks about you a lot. They mostly see me as a gift vending machine, but I don’t think that Casey would let me get away with that.”

“I don’t know. We spent a very small fortune at the mall this weekend buying clothes, books and toys for the twins. He may be okay with you being the single most indulgent uncle in history. And, give Aiden my info if you think it would help.” I hadn’t seen Nate’s family in four years, but I remember Aiden—mostly because he had *the look*—even at eight years old. Although the kid may or may not be gay, that look in his eyes told me he was desperately trying not to be different somehow.

“I already did. Anyway. If Casey’s mom’s health is that fragile and money is an issue, I can’t see a better answer than you guys taking the girls. The

question becomes will Mrs. Nolan let you move them to Boston, and I can't even hazard a guess about that."

"Me neither. I'll talk to Casey tonight and see what he says about my idea. My guess is he's going to come to the same conclusion as me while he's kicking the crap out of an effigy of his sister."

That night, when I finally got home, it was once again later than I'd hoped. Casey was sitting at the dining room table working away at his laptop. We were both pushing to get stuff done before leaving town. It's one of the things I worried about when I considered us taking on the guardianship of Rose and Lily. We both work a lot. I don't mean overtime here or there. Sixteen-hour days aren't the norm for either of us but they aren't exactly rare, and twelve-hour days are pretty routine. We both needed to make some big changes to our work lives to make this happen. I would have to reduce my caseload full stop, and Casey would have to hire an assistant who could handle some of the really routine corporate headshot work. Then he could focus more on portraits and filmmaking which were a lot more lucrative and creatively satisfying.

"Sorry I'm late. Suzanne and I were able to push through the bookkeeping and administrative stuff on my to-do list and it made sense to just get it all done at once."

"It's alright, I got your text." I kissed him as I walked by the table.

"Did you eat?"

"I had a snack when I got home after the gym and waited for you."

"Good. I ordered before I left the office. It should be here soon. And before you ask... yes, I got two orders of Thai shumai." I grinned, proud of myself for remembering this time.

"You do love me. I may share my shumai with you this time."

"You always share your shumai with me."

"I do. The giving and receiving of shumai is a universal symbol of true love, you know." Casey giggled. I think he was a little punchy after the day he had.

"I didn't know. I'll have to remember that the next time I'm trying to woo my true love." I grinned slash leered at him as I waggled my eyebrows, just so I'd hear that laugh again.

"You better not be wooing anyone but me." He faked a scowl as he closed his laptop and slid into my arms.

“Not in this lifetime or any other,” I whispered before he could kiss me.

“Better.” Casey stayed in my embrace for another minute absorbing some extra comfort.

“Let’s get comfortable while we wait... And by comfortable, I don’t mean naked.” After an indignant huff, Casey walked me to the living room at the back of my apartment. We climbed onto the oversize sofa with Casey’s back towards the arm and his legs across mine. This had become our “we need to have a talk” position.

Even though I was pretty sure we were already on the same page, I needed to let Casey lead this discussion. They were his nieces, not mine. “How are you feeling?”

Casey took my hand and played with my fingers. “Better. I talked to Mom for a long time while Lily and Rose were watching some princess movie. I think we worked some things out, but I really need your input because it’s a huge deal and it will affect you.”

“You want to take guardianship of the twins.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. What do you think?”

“I think it’s the only move that makes any sense. It would be really hard for you to do on your own, but there are two of us here to share the load. My place will work in the short term and you can use the loft just as workspace. We have enough money to smooth out the rough spots, which it sounds like your mother doesn’t. Nate even thinks it’s the best option for everyone.”

“You want me and the twins, whom we haven’t even met yet, to move in with you permanently?”

“I’ve wanted you here for a while, and I get that you’d be a package deal. We’d make a good family for those girls.”

“We need to talk about the money thing. I don’t expect you to support me or my nieces. Sara supposedly left a little over ten grand for the girls, which will keep them in preschool for a while, and I can support them on my own even if it will be a little tight.”

“Case, I have a good job with significant income, and I own my apartment outright. I bet your rent on the loft is twice what I pay for this place. On top of that I have a sizable trust fund that I’ve never really touched. If I can use any of that to make our lives easier, I want to do it. I understand paying your own way, but if you expect us to be a family, you have to let me help. We can set up a

household account where we can share our income and expenses equally if it makes you feel better. You know me, Casey. Considering my upbringing and my work, I live well but I don't live a particularly lavish lifestyle. I save way more than I spend in a year, especially since I became a partner. If my money can put the girls in the nursery school around the corner rather than adding half an hour or more to our commute in the morning, why not do that? I promise you Ivy League tuition for both girls would fall into the realm of background noise in terms of my net worth."

"I just don't want you to resent me or the twins for bringing all this chaos and expense into your orderly little world. You would really be okay with me moving a pair of loud, messy, unpredictable preschoolers into your home?"

"Our home. They are your family and they need you. I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"It may be temporary. Sara could change her mind and want them back. Plus, lay missions only last a few years."

"If Sara hasn't come back for her kids in a month or two, she should have to go before a judge and prove that she's the right person to have custody of them. The damage she's already done to those girls is inexcusable."

"You're right. I just want to do what's best for Lily and Rose. They are innocent babies who don't deserve to have their world upended because my sister is a selfish bitch."

"We'll protect them, Case. I can promise you that much at least."

"We're going to be parental figures. Doesn't that scare you?"

"Are you kidding? It's terrifying and a little exciting too. Worst case, it will be a brief trial run for when we have our own kids someday."

"Our *own* kids?" Casey's shy smile was sweet.

"Yeah." Cozy warmth spread over me as I returned his smile.

"That sounds nice."

"It really does."

"You're sure about this? It's a huge commitment and hard to undo once they get here."

"I am one hundred percent sure. Okay, maybe eighty-nine percent sure, but that's still pretty sure. We have a mountain of stuff to get done in the next two days."

“Let’s try and keep the have-to-dos to a minimum and stick to the basics. The only big thing is temporary childcare until we can get them enrolled somewhere. Everything else can wait. Right?”

“It feels like there should be more than that. My firm offers backup childcare as one of our benefits; I can ask human resources tomorrow. If not, I’m sure there’s a nanny service that can help us, which might be a better option anyway.”

“We have the other basics covered. Shelter, check. The girls can share the bed in the guest room for now. Food, the grocery store is two-tenths of a mile from here so I’m calling it a check, Clothing, I’m sure they have clothes with them, but we should double check on coats. March in Boston is different than March in San Francisco. Am I missing anything?”

“I have no idea.”

“Me neither. But we’ll figure it out.”

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## Chapter 7

Okay, so maybe there were things we should have thought about at first, like car seats and plane tickets. By the time we were in our seats for the first leg of our trip, we were both compulsively chewing on antacids to settle our bellies. We weren't second-guessing our decision to bring the twins back with us. However, neither of us had ever had two little beings completely dependent on us for their survival before, and the learning curve felt dizzyingly steep. In need of a little reassurance, I held Casey's hand as the plane took off and couldn't look away when he gifted me with a dimpled smile in return.

The journey to North Carolina was wholly uneventful. Thank God. After checking into the hotel and catching about twelve winks of sleep, we headed off to Sandy's place. The older single-story townhouse turned out to be everything you'd imagine of a retirement condo. It even had a large deck overlooking a man-made pond with a huge fountain. Staring at the front door and trying to find the mettle to get out of the car, we could feel the sea change rising around us, pushing us into the next phase of adulthood. Casey was the one who took my hand this time. "Come on, honey. Mom's waiting on us for lunch. I promise you she isn't remotely scary."

"I know, but what if they don't like me? I don't even know how to talk to little kids."

"Just be you, and as it turns out, little kids are just people. Talk to them like you talk to everyone else and you'll be fine. Look." Casey gestured towards the front door.

Standing in the doorway was a woman I didn't expect. Well, I didn't know what to expect but what I found in Sandy Nolan wasn't in the ballpark. She was a short, slightly overweight brunette with a funky shag haircut and frameless glasses. Her clothes were just as much of a surprise; a bright multicolored geometric tunic, black skinny jeans and ankle boots. She was as fashionable as any of the women I saw on the street in New York, not the suburban mom she was supposed to be. Peeking out from behind Sandy's legs was Rose, three feet of curly-headed pixie. Lily, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

Sandy hopped down the steps and swept Casey into a tight hug. "So good to have you home, baby." Her attention then turned to me as she stood on the walk with her arm linked with Casey's. She looked me over, assessing me for

something. At first I couldn't see any of Casey in Sandy. However, close up it was obvious that what they shared were those dazzling indigo-blue eyes. I wasn't sure what she saw, but she finally smiled and I relaxed a little. "You must be Bennett. Welcome. I know we've spoken on the phone but it's nice to meet you in person."

"Me too. Casey's told me so many wonderful things about you." Despite my lame response, Sandy took my elbow with her unencumbered hand and walked both of us to the front steps. "Let me introduce you boys to your nieces."

I glanced at Casey and saw him draw a deep breath as he nodded to me over his mother's head. We could do this. Really. Rose was still standing alone in the doorway, just watching us approach. "Rose, honey, this is your Uncle Casey and Uncle Bennett."

With her hands on her hips, Rose stepped forward looking at Casey puzzled about something. "You're not little. Mommy said you were littler than her."

Casey laughed and opened his arms to his niece. There was a pause while we all waited to see what she'd do. It didn't take long for Rose to launch herself off the top step into Casey's arms giggling. "Well, I am her little brother and she's my big sister. That just means I'm younger than your mom."

"Oh. Lily was first. Does that mean she's my big sister?" Rose just melted into Casey's shoulder. I could empathize with the urge. It happened to me almost every day.

"Well, you're twins, so nobody is the big sister. You're just sisters."

"Oh. Good. I don't want her to be any more big than me."

"Then it's a good thing she's not. Rose, can you say hi to Bennett? He's nervous about meeting you." Casey smiled at Rose and at me.

"Hi, Benny. Are you my uncle, too?" I knew in that instant "Benny" was going to stick. Surprisingly, I was okay with that. I'd never had a nickname before.

"Only if you want me to be." Although I didn't want to push, I hoped she'd come to think of me as family someday.

"I think you're just my Benny." Her instant ownership of me was endearing.

"Okay, sweetness. You can call me whatever you want."

"Even if I called you Hopper?" Rose giggled wildly.



Sandy laughed. “We watched *A Bug’s Life* last night. Hopper is the villain.”

“I don’t really want to be the bad guy. I’d rather just be your Benny, if that’s okay.”

“Okay.” Rose smiled at me. “Come see. Lily has books.”

“Lily likes books?”

“Yes! Books are her favorite thing.”

“Okay.” Casey set Rose on her feet and we all followed her inside. Rose took off running, hollering for her sister. Lily was sitting on a wingback chair in the living room with a stack of four or five books. Rose led me over to the other wingback chair before she sat on the floor in front of Lily. Sandy and Casey walked into the kitchen where they continued talking quietly.

Rose bounced as she sat in front of her sister. “Lily, this is Benny. He’s an uncle like Uncle Casey, but he’s just our Benny.”

Lily turned towards me worried. “Benny, will you read for us?”

“Sure. Pass me a book.” The next thing I knew I had a lap full of four-year-olds and a beat-up copy of *The Paper Bag Princess*. I spent about ten minutes reading to the girls about a princess who outsmarts the dragon and rescues the kidnapped prince. It was refreshing to see the princess saving the prince for once. When I looked up, Sandy was smiling as big, bright, and open as her son, while Casey was on his knees halfway across the room with his good camera. Yes, I can now tell the difference between his cameras. I smiled back as the two girls talked about the book. We hadn’t even noticed Casey clicking away.

“Lily, that’s your Uncle Casey with the camera. I think he could use a laugh. You should tickle him until he cries uncle.” The twins jumped off my lap and lunged at Casey. He held his camera in the air for his mother to grab as he fell back onto the carpet. The twins were already sitting on his stomach and chest trying to tickle him. They were all giggling and squirming. Sandy sat on the floor nearby snapping a few pictures with Casey’s camera. I was glad someone thought to get some photos of Casey meeting his nieces. He’s always behind the camera and precious few photos of him exist. “You look like you know your way around Casey’s camera. He gets snippy when I touch his equipment unbidden.”

“Who do you think taught him how to use a thirty-five millimeter camera? I finally gave him my old Nikon when he was about twelve. Before I had kids, I

was a newspaper reporter and my photography skills centered on documenting events. Casey was born with an amazing artist's eye that lets him capture emotion."

I glanced over at Casey, who still had the girls sitting on him, talking about pizza of all things. "That's how he captured me. Well, actually, all he had to do was smile and I was lost. But when he came to take my portrait, he made me feel like he really saw me. The photos are extraordinary and that had nothing to do with the subject, I promise you."

Sandy took her turn looking over at Casey tickling both of the girls. "Kevin Christopher, stop torturing my grandbabies. It's time to order lunch. The menu is on the coffee table. Us girls are going to share a cheese pizza and salad; you boys order what you want."

It didn't take us long to place the order. Sandy grabbed her purse and walked toward the door. "I'm going to go pick up the food. You boys can manage to get the girls cleaned up and the table set, okay? Rose, Lily, listen to your uncles. I'll be back soon."

"Sure, Mom. You should know that Bennett already paid for the food over the phone. And no, I didn't try and stop him."

"You boys don't have to take care of me." Sandy frowned a little.

I looked her straight in the eye. "Yes, we do. That's what family does." The warm maternal smile was worth every penny of the fifty bucks I spent on lunch. Sandy walked out the door to the garage and closed it behind her.

"Okay, Bennett. This is a test and we don't have much time. The girls need their hands and faces washed and hair brushed. Lily, who do you want to help you, me or Benny?"

"You can help me, Uncle Casey. Benny can help Rose."

"Rose, you're with me." I held out my hand to the little pixie. "Take me to your hairbrush." She took my hand and led me to the guest room where she grabbed a hair pick and a headband off the dresser and climbed on the bed.

"No hairbrushes, except at bath time. It hurts. Here." She handed me the pick and headband.

"Anything else I need to know?" I was back to being scared stiff. If I messed this up and hurt her, there would be repercussions.

“No, just go gentle.” She smiled and waited for me to do my part, not knowing how much danger she was facing. With a little trepidation and an embarrassing pep talk to myself, I combed Rose’s strawberry blonde curls with the pick. It wasn’t so bad. I quickly learned to brace her scalp when I ran into a little snarl and we were done in just a few seconds. The cute headband with a big turquoise bow that matched her outfit was in place just as quickly.

“Alright, sweetness. Let’s go see how Lily and Uncle Casey are doing.” We wandered down to the bathroom where Lily sat on the counter getting her hair brushed. I helped Rose wash her face and hands at the sink before I lifted her up to sit next to her sister.

Casey smiled at me as happy as I’d ever seen him. “Cross-check,” he ordered and we switched places, making sure the other sister was clean and ready for lunch. The girls giggled as we checked to be sure their hands, elbows, cheeks, and ears were officially clean. We took the opportunity to wash our hands and splash water on our own faces. Once we were all cleaned up, we marched out to conquer setting the table, which basically consisted of Casey handing the rest of us stuff for the table. We spent a few minutes explaining to the girls where everything goes in a place setting. They had a few “why” questions I wasn’t even sure had answers, but I did some quick research on my phone to find out.

When Sandy walked in the door with the pizza and salads, she gave me that maternal smile again as I explained to Lily why table knives have rounded ends. In case you’re wondering, it’s because some Catholic cardinal in seventeenth-century France didn’t like people picking their teeth at the table. A few decades later Louis the Fourteenth again banned pointed knives at the table to keep people from stabbing each other at court.

Casey smirked at my explanation. “Thank you for visiting Bennett’s house of useless knowledge. Be sure to pick up your souvenir cutlery at the gift shop before you leave.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Hey! If they ask me questions, I’m going to give them factual answers. It’s not like I knew it off the top of my head, I had to Google it like everyone else.” Casey just laughed again and ruffled my hair.

Lunch was easy and pretty quick. We cut the pizza into smaller pieces and enforced the mandatory salad consumption rules without incident. The twins didn’t seem to have any trouble accepting us as authority figures. That would change, we knew. For now, though, they seemed pretty easygoing—which may be a genetic thing in the Nolan family.

After lunch, all five of us piled into our rental and headed to our meeting with the lawyer in Greenville. I had the privilege of squeezing between the two car seats in the back for the hour drive. It wasn't too bad, but Casey owed me a massage when it was all over. The girls taught me to play I Spy, and we were entertained for the whole journey.

Keziah Battle was a legend in North Carolina child advocacy circles, and John LaMarche was certain that she was the right lawyer for us. Her office was friendly and welcoming. There were even toys in the waiting area for the girls to play with. At five foot ten and solid, with box braids cut into a really cool bob, Keziah looked like an Amazon. That was in no way disparaging her. Between her bearing and her intellect, she would be intimidating in a courtroom. But once I saw her interact with the twins, I knew she was actually a real softie. Her assistant took Lily and Rose to a playroom down the hall while we had our meeting. They didn't need to hear any of this.

The hour-long conversation was enlightening. Keziah recommended that Casey file for a temporary custody order which would remain in effect for ninety days. During that time we had to meet with an attorney specializing in LGBT family law, hire an investigator to find Sara, and pass an inspection by an adoption agency to prove we had a fit home. Only then would we be ready to apply for full legal and physical guardianship of the girls in Massachusetts. With the temporary order in place, Sara would have to go to court to regain custody of the twins. It would also open up a clear path for us to adopt the twins if Sara didn't turn up in six months or so. By the end of the day, the petition was filed and we had a court date first thing Monday morning. It meant delaying our trip home a day to work it all out.

That night Casey, Sandy, and I sat on the guest bed and talked to the girls about coming to live with us in Boston. There are a lot of unkind things I could say about Sara but she had prepared her daughters for what was happening.

Rose was pensive. "Mommy said we would live with Nana while she was helping sick people in Aprica."

"Africa, ladybug. Nana, Bennett, and I talked for a long time and we've decided that it would be better if you came to live with us. You'll still see Nana a lot. She's going to come up to visit, and we'll come back here too—but you'll live with us. We already found a great school near Bennett's house and I know you'll make lots of friends. I promise you this is a good thing."

"How will Mommy find us if we move far away from Nana?" Lily's small voice sounded so worried. It was more than a little heartbreaking.

“Well, Nana will tell her. We just don’t know when that will be.” Casey had to be realistic in setting the girls’ expectations when we didn’t know how long they would be living with us.

“Where will we sleep?” Lily was ever the practical one. We were prepared for this one. For the transition, we hired a temporary nanny through an expensive and well-respected agency. Bridget was a former preschool teacher whose husband had retired, and she only took short childcare assignments so they could travel. She’s the one who suggested we take pictures of every room in my condo along with the front of the building and the street. We added a few of the neighborhood including the local playground and, if all worked out, their soon-to-be school.

“We’ll all be living at Bennett’s house. Would you like to see some pictures?” The girls both nodded and we all crowded around Casey’s tablet to watch the slideshow. “And that’s going to be your room. You’ll have to share the big bed until we can paint and get new furniture, okay?”

Sandy laughed. “Sara said that no matter how they go to bed, more often than not they will be in the same bed come morning. I don’t think sharing a queen-size bed will be a hardship.”

We talked a little more about the practicalities of living with us, and somehow they just rolled with the punches. I expected questions when Casey showed them pictures of our room, but no, they just accepted that we shared a room too. They had a lot more questions about Nate, who was sitting on the sofa waving at the camera in the photo of the living room.

Rose in particular was concerned that Sandy would be lonely if they left but Casey’s mom dealt with the issue perfectly. “Rose, honey, Aunt Michelle and Uncle Steve live nearby and your cousins, Joey and Ashley, aren’t far either. Plus I have a lot of really good friends, like Terry and Maria whom you met the other day. I may live by myself, baby, but I’m not lonely.” That seemed to satisfy the girls that their grandmother wouldn’t suffer without them. It was all really sweet.

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Sunday morning, Casey and I took a little time for ourselves while Sandy took the girls to Mass. We slept in, ordered room service for breakfast, and walked around downtown for a while. It felt a little weird. Casey had a habit of touching me whenever he asked me a question, sometimes resting a hand on my shoulder or my arm, at home it was more likely to be my thigh. Anyway, I found it sweet and endearing. As we looked in the window of an antique store, I

could see him struggling to not reach for me. He shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his hoodie; we both knew we had to be careful as rural North Carolina wasn't known for being particularly gay-friendly. The last thing we wanted was to have our day spoiled by a bunch of bigots.

We turned up at Sandy's with lunch and set about inventorying the stuff Sara left for the girls. They each apparently showed up with a large suitcase and a backpack. Then six more boxes had shown up since Sara disappeared, making it clear that she didn't plan on returning any time soon. By the time we reorganized and repacked everything, we had a list of five or six things the girls needed right away, including some warmer clothing, specifically coats. Even after just a few days, I could see the twins were wearing Sandy out so Casey and I sent her off for a nap and maybe a movie on the sofa while we took the double trouble to the mall.

Casey warned me that Lily and Rose would be on their best behavior until they knew us better and we used that to our advantage at the mall. They stayed close, happily holding hands with us as we walked around. I thought they might be worried that we would disappear on them too but for now it worked. Finding adorable fleece pea coats in turquoise and purple was a stroke of luck. The sea of pink princess crap that filled the little girls' section of the department store disgusted me. Why did people want to limit girls' beliefs about what they can be? Rose and Lily should grow up believing they can become anything they want, not limited by how they look or what fits with the phony commercialized image of a princess. If Lily wanted to become a firefighter or an electrical engineer, she shouldn't have to fight the cultural misogyny telling her those things aren't girly enough. For what it's worth, the same should hold true for boys who want to be interior designers or nurses.

And then walking by a big jewelry store... ka-boom! Our first major crisis. I was walking with Rose listening to her give a lecture on the history and cultural relevance of *My Little Pony*. I promise you it wasn't as interesting as it sounds. I just kept nodding and making periodic encouraging noises while I prayed for deliverance.

Suddenly, Rose stopped in the middle of the walkway and turned to face me. "Benny, I need to go potty." Uh-oh. I looked at Casey and he looked just as panicked as I felt.

We managed to get to the nearest public bathrooms. My intent was to shoo the two girls into the ladies' room together on their own until I saw there was a bit of a line. Rose didn't look like she could wait. Plan B. We should have had

the conversation before the need arose, but it was something else we had never considered. “So, we’re taking them to the men’s room?”

“Well, I’m not going into the ladies’ room. It’ll be fine. We’ve seen fathers in the restroom with their kids before.”

“Benny, I gotta go.” Rose had progressed to squirming.

I picked her up and strode as confidently as I could into the men’s room. “Little girls coming through.” We bolt for a stall and I hear Casey right behind me with Lily. He rushed into the stall next door to Rose and me.

“Uncle Casey, I don’t have to go.” Lily was a little indignant.

“Just try for me, bunny. We’re already here.” Casey’s patience was inexhaustible. The next thing I heard was the unmistakable sound of tinkle hitting the water.

Rose was still talking about Rainbow Dash when she finally did her business. As she washed and dried her hands she was still talking about My Little Pony. I swear it was like being waterboarded by a four-year-old. Casey and Lily were waiting outside the restroom by then.

A younger guy stepped over to wash his hands as we were finishing up. He seemed a bit nerdy, like I have room to speak there, with thick black framed glasses and a round face. “You’re into Rainbow Dash. That’s cool. Applejack is my girl.” Rose eyed him hard. I didn’t think college guys were the target audience for the ponies either. “Really. I mean it.” He pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed her a tattoo of a blond pony on his bicep. It was incorporated into a half sleeve that looked pretty cool surprisingly.

“It’s pretty. Benny, can I get one with Rainbow Dash?” The kid and I both laughed.

I picked Rose up again and carried her out of the men’s room. “Sorry, sweetness. No permanent tattoos until you are a grown-up. Not my rule, it’s the law. Maybe we can find a washable one for you.”

As the kid walked away he smiled over his shoulder. “Try the party supply store on the other side of the mall. They usually have a decent MLP section. So long, Sugarcube.”

Rose blushed and waved. Casey just watched the kid walk away. “Who was that?”

“Some college kid with a My Little Pony tattoo.”

“In the men’s room at the mall? We live in a strange world.” Casey shook his head and the four of us walked across the mall to the party place and indeed found enough My Little Pony stuff to choke a horse... or a pony at least.

On the way back to Sandy’s, we stopped for ice cream. Half of the picnic tables scattered around the lawn were occupied by families. Early March was still winter in Boston and sitting outside was a rare pleasure that time of year. Soaking up the sunny, low-seventies weather, we all had kiddie cones and talked about flying home on Tuesday morning. The girls seemed relieved that the trip home was only half as long as the one from San Francisco.

Something must have given away the fact that Casey and I were gay. We had enough self-preservation not to hold hands or do anything obvious, so some natural part of our relationship must have slipped through without our noticing.

After we finished our ice cream, I cleaned up our trash and Casey washed sticky hands and faces with wet wipes. A big man in a cheap suit started railing at the travesty of faggots being allowed to raise children. Casey and I looked at each other in silent agreement to ignore the idiot and proceed directly to the exit. The more we ignored the man and his two friends, the louder and more belligerent they became. While I tossed the garbage in the can, Casey picked up Rose and held Lily’s hand as he turned toward the parking area. At that point the men started to approach Casey and the girls.

I knew in that moment I needed to protect my family, and Casey couldn’t be involved in a fight or even a disturbance involving the police less than twenty-four hours before the temporary custody hearing. The twins were scared by the loud bullies and began to cry. I darted between Casey and the men, and over my shoulder I told Casey to go inside, I’d follow in a minute. I didn’t look to see if he went as I stood my ground to prevent the assholes from getting any closer to my family. Cheap Suit spouted off about how we were probably “diddling those little girls” along with a bunch of other homophobic and religious stupidity that I didn’t listen to as I blocked their path.

I wanted to throw a punch for the first time in my life but I didn’t. It wouldn’t have made a difference. “We were just eating ice cream, not bothering anyone, yet somehow you thought our being gay made it okay to scare two little girls and make them cry? Really? I suggest you go back to your table and calm down. I’m sure someone out here has already called the police and unless you want that kind of trouble, you’ll back off and let us leave in peace.”

I heard police sirens as one of the other patrons spoke up. “My wife called the cops and I’d guess those sirens are on their way here.” The men kept



mumbling their rants as they got into a couple pickups and drove away. I went to find Casey and the girls. Inside the restaurant, both Lily and Rose were sitting on the counter laughing with the store manager and another employee, while Casey scowled at me. Someone had given the girls baseball hats with the company logo on them, like the staff at the drive-up window wore. The manager apologized for the jerks on behalf of his hometown and was quite gracious. We thanked them for their kindness but didn't stick around for the police to show up.

Once we were back in the car, the glower I got from Casey succinctly told me I was still in trouble. But we had another crisis to deal with first. We didn't make it to the highway before Rose needed answers. "Uncle Casey, why was that man so mad?"

This was where my darkest doubts about becoming the twins' guardian lived. I didn't want them to know about the ugliness in the world yet. They were babies and didn't need to know that loving someone could be dangerous. I knew our little makeshift family would be exposed to this senseless hostility again. Not every day and less often than ever before, but it would happen and there was nothing I could do to prevent that.

Casey inhaled deeply before he responded. "You know most of the time boys fall in love with girls, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, sometimes a boy loves another boy or a girl loves another girl."

"Like you and Benny." I was surprised she put that together at four years old. Although we hadn't hidden our relationship, we hadn't explained it either. One of the things we talked about on the plane ride down to North Carolina was waiting for the girls to ask before bringing it up.

"Exactly. Some people don't like it when boys love each other and it makes them angry."

"He was scary. I don't like yelling."

"I know, ladybug. Uncle Bennett and I will always protect you from scary people as best we can."

"Okay." That was enough explanation for Rose.

Lily still hadn't said a word. I turned to get a better look at her. "How about you, Lily? You okay?"

“I’m good, Benny. Uncle Casey got us safe and Mr. Dennis gave us hats.” The girls went back to jabbering about something, ignoring us completely.

Whispering, I said to Casey, “I stick my head in the lion’s mouth and she’s going to remember the hats from the restaurant manager. Typical.”

“It was stupid and you don’t deserve any credit for that.”

“I had to make sure you and the girls were okay. It was instinct, not some big plan. ”

“We will be talking about this again. That was as dumb as it was brave. You could have been hurt.”

“But I wasn’t. In any case, better me than you or the girls.”

“I don’t agree. Do you even know how to defend yourself?”

“I admit I’m basically useless in a fight. However, most of the time bullies back down if you stand up to them. We were in a public place with lots of people around. I wasn’t in much real danger. Relax.”

“No. You are taking some self-defense classes when we get home. If you are going to be this idiotic, you should at least know how to defend yourself.”

“Fine. If that will make you feel better. You realize I am all brain, no brawn, right?”

“I’m aware. I also know you are fitter than you look. You need knowledge more than muscles for self-defense anyway.” I would do whatever I needed to for him to feel better about our safety. That was one worry I could dispel without a lot of sacrifice on my part.

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The hearing on Monday was surprisingly easy. Keziah had prepared Sandy and Casey perfectly and once the judge read the paperwork from Sara and heard testimony from Sandy and Casey, he issued the order without any fuss. I sat in the back of the courtroom and watched the proceedings from there. We decided that it was better to not cloud the custody issues with the fact that Casey was gay and in a relationship. I hated it. I hated that I couldn’t sit with them and support Casey throughout the hearing, but I wasn’t going to do anything that could hurt our chances of getting the temporary order written.

Monday night, the twins slept in the hotel room adjoining ours. The flight home was early and we had to be at the airport by four thirty in the morning.

We ended up shipping most of the girls' belongings to Boston so we could minimize how much we were taking on the plane and between the car seats, clothes, toys and books we were still going to be perilously close to paying extra baggage fees.

In the end, it all worked out. We made it home in one piece and got the girls settled and enrolled in the preschool around the corner soon after. Uncle Nate quickly became their favorite person in the universe. He never made them clean up their toys or eat their vegetables, so it was hardly a surprise that Casey and I came in a distant second.

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One Sunday morning a few weeks after we brought Lily and Rose home with us, Casey and I were making more-or-less healthy breakfast burritos, and the girls were sitting on the barstools observing. Casey manned the stove hovering over the turkey sausage and eggs with his back to us while I set up the assembly station with a few different veggies. The girls were whispering; we'd gotten used to the fact that this was a precursor to Rose asking a question for them both.

"Benny?"

"Yes, sweetness."

"How far is our birthday?" They hadn't mentioned their birthday before now. Casey and I talked about a trip to the Children's Museum but that was about it.

"Not too far. A few more weeks." Both girls looked a little puzzled. "About as long as you've lived with us."

Rose looked over at Lily and they did that mind reading twin thing which had kind of freaked me out at first. I mean you hear about it but to see it in action was a little unsettling. "Are we having a birthday party?" They'd attended a party for one of the other girls in their class just a week after they started at their new school.

"I don't know. Lily, do you want to have a party?" Everything we'd read about twins said we should try and draw out the quieter one with direct questions.

"Yes. With sparkly cupcakes and fondue." We'd taken a shopping trip to the suburbs and had dinner at a fondue restaurant out there. Lily, in particular, thought it was the coolest thing ever. Her words, not mine.

Rose piped in with her demands. “A dress-up party with a fashion show. Uncle Casey can take pictures.” Fondue and princess dresses. There’s a recipe for disaster if I ever heard one.

I just stood there thinking for a second when I felt Casey beside me with a hand on my back. “A dress-up party sounds like a lot of fun but Uncle Casey and I need to talk about it before we say yes. Okay?”

The chorus of “Pleeeezze!” was ear piercing. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Give us a minute. Go wash your hands and make sure there are extra napkins on the table. Breakfast is almost ready and it’s a little messy.” I watched the two girls scamper off to the downstairs bathroom before turning to Casey.

He smiled and squeezed my waist. “You’re getting good at this.”

“What?”

“You didn’t panic, you managed their expectations, and you opted to consult me before making a decision. Excellent kid wrangling.”

“I don’t know about excellent. I just treat them like demanding clients when I don’t know what to do and it seems to work out okay.”

“You still slay me, every single day.” Casey laughed and pulled me into a kiss with both hands.

From the kitchen door, we heard Lily yell to her sister. “Not yet, Rose. They’re kissing again.” Lily ran back to the dining area.

“So, we’re having a birthday party.”

“It seems so. A dress-up party with a fashion show. I have no idea how to make that happen but I’m sure my mother knows a party planner who can pull it off for us.”

“No. I’ve worked enough fashion shows that I think we can pull this off on our own. The loft has plenty of open space and it’s easy enough to set up a faux catwalk using paper runners on the floor. The other girls’ parents can hang out and be the audience. We’re going to need some help with the dress-up part but reinforcements are at hand.”

“Who?” I didn’t think I knew anyone knowledgeable about preschool fashion shows.

“Ivan and Chris.” Ivan Bettancourt was one of Casey’s closest friends and I liked him from the moment I met him. He was a kitchen and bathroom designer

by day and the hugely popular drag queen Vera Vermillion by night. Chris Roseman, aka Rosie Bottom, was also a drag queen and more a friend of Ivan's than Casey's. He was an adjunct professor of music at the local community college and I'd met him a few times. Another good guy, if a little quiet when not in character. The pair of them could easily put on a show not so appropriate for the pre-K crowd.

"You want to bring in a pair of drag queens to entertain at a four-year-old's birthday party?" I was a little skeptical.

"Not in drag, you dork. They are nice guys with fashion, makeup and hair skills we will never, ever, have. Hopefully, we can use them as stylists. Plus, they also have sources for boas, costume jewelry, and props."

"Sold. Let's go feed our miniature divas and tell them they're getting their party." I grabbed two of the plates and headed to the dining room.

Casey followed, chuckling under his breath. "You're invited to a preschool drag party... How dumb do you think I am, Bennett?" We both laughed until we were at the table with the girls. All through breakfast the twins giggled and chattered about their birthday party and all the people they wanted there. With a little cajoling, we were able to convince them that they needed to invite all the girls in their class which mercifully totaled eight kids including Lily and Rose. We could handle eight. Any more might have made me lose my already tenuous grip on this uncle-ing thing. I wasn't quite ready to claim to be parenting.

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## Chapter 8

The next three weeks were busier than usual, even by our crazy standards. On the day of Rose and Lily's birthday party, we had bags and boxes of party supplies and decorations along with piles of dresses and jewelry for eight little girls. Ivan had been a huge help with the planning and he was providing the makeup, nail polish, and hair supplies. We had assurances that the makeup on the girls would be minimal, just mascara and lip gloss.

Casey left early on the morning of the party to meet Ivan and set up at the loft, abandoning me to entertain a pair of overexcited newly-turned four-year-olds. There was only so much I could do to keep them distracted. We went to the playground and made thank you cards for Ivan and Chris before I gave up and drove the girls over. It was still more than an hour before the party was scheduled to start. I had brought a *Sagwa* DVD and could put them on the love seat in Casey's office to watch quietly for a half hour if they became a problem.

The transformation of the loft was pretty astounding. We had borrowed folding chairs and a couple round banquet tables from my office for the weekend. There was black-and-white damask accented with hot pink and purple everywhere. The main part of the studio had a runway set up with a black paper runner leading away from a white backdrop and colorful side panels proclaiming "Happy Birthday Rose" on one and "Happy Birthday Lily" on the other. Casey had hung stage lights from the ceiling and he'd even set up a photo booth with modeling lights and a small backdrop for more photos. My poor boyfriend was going to be photographing his fingers to the bone.

I found Casey at the top of a ladder still in his tank top and cargo shorts. He should have been changed into his party clothes already, but he was a little busy. "This is amazing. It looks like a real fashion show." The decorating rivaled some of the over-the-top parties we found online which was impressive enough. I knew Casey was proud of the fact that we actually hadn't spent a fortune creating the magic. Don't get me wrong, money was spent—just a lot less than I expected.

"I am a professional, Bennett. If nothing else, I can create a set for a photo shoot. Ivan has been a godsend. He went to pick up the food and should be back soon." Casey came down off the ladder where he'd been hanging big poofy tissue paper pom-poms that matched the rest of the decorations. Although I had heard the plans about thirty times, I still couldn't have imagined it until I was

standing in the middle of it. I don't have the interior design gene. He kissed the stuffing out of me before greeting the girls and going on to his next project.

Tabitha, Casey's newly hired assistant, set up a photo printing station just outside the office, which was understandably off-limits during the party. She was being paid to keep Casey from getting overly frazzled, helping to print photos and get them into frames as party favors to accompany a few other lovely parting gifts we had put together. A few minutes later Ivan and Chris walked into the loft carrying platters of food. Both men looked the part of fashion stylists in their black T-shirts and jeans, and I have to admit they were sweet, fluttering around our girls like they were A-list celebrities. Apparently, it takes a village to raise a birthday party.

The guests by and large arrived on time with a parent in tow, and the party really started when Nate arrived. As usual, he blew through the door with his bad-boy grin and a pile of presents. I looked him over as he dropped the gifts with the others and noticed he was dressed like he just walked off a runway in Milan. Sunglasses flipped up on his head, super-slim black dress pants, a deep V-neck tee, and the softest suede jacket ever made in a gray-green color that did amazing things for his hazel eyes.

As soon as the twins saw him walk into the loft, they mobbed Nate and tried to climb him like a monkeys after a banana. I couldn't hear what was being said, but Nate pulled two eyeglass cases out of his pocket. It didn't take long to see the two girls in identical Wayfarer sunglasses which just happened to match Nate's. The three of them were practicing their modeling poses. Once Uncle Nate was introduced to the flock of little girls, Lily and Rose temporarily released him to visit with the grown-ups.

The twins chattered and squealed with their friends at the dozen or so costumes and dresses they got to choose from. We had bought them all online and hadn't spent more than fifteen bucks on any of them. They ran from full-on sparkly princess dresses to more casual stuff including a very mod Pucci-esque outfit with bell bottoms. There were also hats, gloves, umbrellas, and other sundry items courtesy of Ivan. The wardrobe room, formerly known as the bedroom, was absolute terrifying chaos. Thank God for the moms and dads who tagged along with their daughters. They policed the few arguments and fits of tears so I didn't have to do any of it. Everyone was getting at least one wardrobe change which helped keep the peace. Mostly. Four-year-olds are prolific drama factories.

The food was a bit of a negotiation. We decided on assorted finger sandwiches and healthy snacks from a local deli along with the requested

sparkly cupcakes. There was no way cheese sauce could co-exist with the mountain of tulle and satin. In exchange we promised the twins a fondue party for dinner with Nate, Ivan, Chris—and hopefully, my parents.

My parents hadn't actually met the twins yet. In the beginning, they seemed to believe this arrangement was temporary, as if we were just babysitting for a couple weeks. However, we never looked at it that way. We chose to act as if the twins were going to be with us forever. It seemed the best way to give them a sense of security and family. No one had heard from Sara in the almost two months since she disappeared, and the investigator looking for her hadn't had any luck either. Last week I mentioned to my mother that we finally had a court date for a permanent guardianship hearing, and that's when she began getting more interested in the girls.

“Permanent? These children will be yours?”

“Yes, Mom. Assuming Sara doesn't show up at the hearing, Rose and Lily should be ours until a judge tells us otherwise.”

“They will be your girls, not just Casey's?”

“Yes, Mom. Casey and I are both listed on the petition for guardianship.”

“Can your father and I meet them?” It was weird to hear the uncomfortable combination of hopeful and nervous in her voice.

“I've invited you to meet them half a dozen times, you always say no.”

“I... I didn't know they would be my grandchildren, Bennett.” Yeah, mostly because she only heard what she wanted to hear, same as always.

“Well, technically you'd be more like their great-aunt, I think, but they are probably as close to grandchildren as you're going to get. Just remember Sara still has her parental rights. There's no guarantee they'll be with us forever.” If you don't think that thought keeps me up at night, you aren't very bright. Casey, Lily, and Rose are my family. Mine. And I'll fight dirty to keep it that way. “Anyway, the girls' birthday party is next weekend. Why don't you and Dad come to the after-party at the apartment around five? We're having fondue and it will be really casual.”

“Would you mind if we came to both? I'd like to see you navigating a room full of little girls.” I could hear my mother's amusement at the idea of me in a room full of shrieking children.

“Not really my natural habitat, is it?” I smiled.



“No, not really.” My mother’s laugh was warm and reminded me of the fun we had when I was younger—before the weight of expectations came between us. She had always been demanding, but she also played games and read books to me every night. One of my favorite memories was from a vacation we took to my grandparents’ cottage in Maine when I was about eight. Every night my mom read a chapter or two of *The Hobbit* to my father and me on the screen porch with the sound of the ocean in the background. It was magical. I wanted Rose and Lily to have those kinds of memories with my mother. Time would tell.

“If you want to come to the kids’ party, you are more than welcome. You know that you and Dad can visit whenever you want. Just call to make sure we’ll be home. Things are pretty hectic as we’re both trying to find a functional balance with work.”

“I remember those days. You were three months old when I first went back to work, and I didn’t last a year before I decided to stay home full-time. Juggling everything was just too difficult, and back in those days your father had just finished his residency and wasn’t around to help very much. Don’t misunderstand me. He would have liked to be with us more; it just wasn’t possible.”

“I know, Mom. I’ve never doubted you both loved me.”

“Good. I’d like to get the girls a present. Tell me what kinds of things they like.” So I did. I told her that Rose was obsessed with owls and My Little Pony at the moment, and Lily was into robots and Hello Kitty. We were also trying desperately to stay away from everything pink and princess. Mom and I actually had a nice conversation about the girls and I was happy to have my parents come to whatever party they wanted.

When my parents arrived at the loft, they were obviously a little uncomfortable. I caught up with them for a couple minutes while Casey shepherded the girls over to meet them.

“Mom, Dad, this is Lily and Rose. Girls, this is my mom and dad.” I wasn’t sure how they wanted to be addressed so I left it to them. I knew from experience that Rose was going to call them whatever she wanted anyway.

I was surprised when my father crouched down to greet the girls. “Hello, girls. It’s very nice to meet you. My name is Doug.”

Rose looked at Lily, then at me, then back to my father. “Like Nana and Uncle Casey?”

“Exactly like that, sweetness.” The twins’ ability to make connections like the one between Sandy and my father, at just four years old, impressed me.

“Okay. Grampa Doug, do you like my dress?” Rose rocked her little body making the skirt on the silver-and-white princess dress swing back and forth like a bell. My father looked at my mother and me before he answered. I could tell he was surprised and maybe a little emotional when he replied, “It’s beautiful. I especially like your shoes.” Rose still had her hot pink All-Stars on her feet. “Joanna, what do you think?”

“I think they look lovely. Rose, your tiara is gorgeous, and Lily, the flowers on your skirt are stunning.” The three-dimensional silk ribbon flowers that made up the entire skirt on Lily’s lavender dress were amazing.

“Lily’s tiara keeps falling off. Gramma Jo, can you help us?” Rose had already claimed my parents as her grandparents and moved on.

My mother reached out and took the girls hands. “We need a couple bobby pins. It should be easy to fix. Let’s go ask the man doing your friend’s hair if he has any.” As they walked away, Lily started telling my mother about Ivan. I couldn’t stop the laugh when I thought about my mother coming face-to-face with a drag queen.

My father stood and moved beside me. “What’s so funny?”

“Mom is talking with one of the more famous drag queens in Boston.”

He couldn’t hold back the laugh either. “She’d probably choke on her pearls if she knew.”

“Dad! That’s not nice.” I didn’t see this side of him very often.

“But true.” My dad was still laughing. “Lily and Rose are really going to become my grandchildren?”

“I hope so but I can’t make any promises. As much as I want them to be mine, they’re not. Until we finalize an adoption, Sara could still come back and take them away. The private investigator is following a few breadcrumbs that may fix that, but it’s too soon to know. In any case, I’ll feel better after the guardianship hearing. At the end of the day, the twins need all the family they can get, so... Yes, they really are your grandchildren.”

“Benny! Grampa! Look. Gramma Jo fixed it.” Lily came running to me nearly breathless with her birthday tiara firmly affixed to her head finally. “Did you know Gramma Jo has a crown like Miss America?”

I scooped her up and held her on my hip. “I did. She won the Miss Cape Ann pageant first, and then she came in second for Miss Massachusetts.” My mother had a box of pageant memorabilia in the back of her closet. I liked to look at the pretty crowns in their velvet boxes when I was little, and I was always sad that I wasn’t allowed to even try them on. “Maybe one day she’ll show them to you with her sashes.”

By then it was time for Ivan and Chris to show the girls how to walk the runway. It was adorable. Some of the girls were bold as brass and could already strut their stuff while others were so shy they wouldn’t even walk onto the runway by themselves. Rose had the whole runway model attitude and poses down cold while Lily gleefully danced her way down the faux catwalk, did a pirouette, and skipped back. Chris did an amazing job as our emcee, and both the adults and kids seemed to laugh and have a good time. At the end of the two hours, I don’t think I could button one more itzy-bitsy, teeny-tiny, satin button or find one more missing shoe without a vat of caffeine and a nap. Kids were exhausting.

When it was over, Lily and Rose were still running around like dervishes in their second, third, or fourth outfits of the day just burning off energy. It didn’t take long to clean up, but we were all tired so it just seemed like it took forever. I was very glad Casey and I had stayed up preparing the food for fondue the night before. All we had to do was heat the three fondues, cheese, meat, and chocolate, and put the items to dunk out on the table.

Eventually, we walked into our apartment carrying a load of birthday gifts. We opted to not open presents at the party because, apparently with twins, gifts are a landmine. Some parents buy one larger gift for both twins to share, others two smaller ones, and even then, some give the same gift for each child and others different ones. The last thing we wanted was for anyone to feel badly for whichever choice they made.

After stacking the last of the presents on the piano in the dining room, Casey took me by the hand, led me into the living room, and sat me on the sofa. “Your parents are walking over from their place, and I told Chris and Ivan to take the long way so we could have a few minutes of quiet.” Ivan and Chris were driving Casey’s Element back to our place with the girls, a couple bins of party stuff, and more leftover food.

We sunk into the sofa with my head on Casey’s chest. “Today went okay, I think.”

“Better than okay. Rose and Lily were thrilled, their friends seemed to have a good time, and the other parents were impressed. We rock.” Laughing, we just rested together for a few minutes before I felt Casey tensing under my cheek. “Are you still happy we did this? It’s made for a lot of adjustment and stress.”

Somehow I expected a more difficult question. “I love you, and I will never regret making a family with you. In a perfect world, we might have taken a little more time to get here but I can’t say I am disappointed in where we are. Yes, it can be exhausting. Yes, there are more things keeping me up at night. It’s only been a few months, and I already love this life we’re building.”

“Sara could still turn up and take it all away. We have to stay realistic about that.”

“I am. I just... I know it’s selfish because the girls deserve to have a relationship with their mother, but part of me prays that she never comes back.” I was ashamed to admit that. The twins deserved better than for me to wish that on anyone. The next part was almost harder to admit. “Nightmares about losing the girls have been bothering me a lot. It’s always a variation on a theme. Lately it’s been the girls trapped in an orange VW Bug sinking into quicksand. I can’t save them, and I’m forced to watch them sink out of my reach. Sometimes there’s a tiger, not quicksand—you get the idea. And those are tamer than the ones I had before we had a court date scheduled. I’m scared, Case. I don’t know what will happen if the girls get taken away from us. I love them so much.”

Casey rubbed my back. “I know, honey. I have the same fears. You can’t worry about what Sara’s going to do. We have no control over her. All we can do is love those babies and make sure they are as safe and happy as we can make them every single day. We’ll deal with the future when it happens. Embrace the present because we’re going to blink and we’ll be taking them to look at colleges. Okay?”

“I hear you. I’m sorry. I really do know worrying is a waste of time, but it doesn’t seem to stop me.”

“You just be you, Bennett. Everything else will work itself out eventually,” Casey said as he leaned in for a quick kiss. “We need to get moving. There will soon be two little girls and five assorted guests storming the castle, demanding to be fed.”

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## Chapter 9

Time flew by again. Family court judge Valarie Uchida gave permanent guardianship to Casey and me without much excitement. She questioned how hard we tried to notify Sara of the proceedings. Richard Franklin, the investigator we used to look for her, was the best. Once the judge saw his report detailing our efforts to find the twins' mother, she was satisfied we'd done our due diligence and issued the order.

Richard had found a lot of information about Sara's past, including a few things I was hesitant to share with Casey. She did indeed fly to Washington, DC where she made a connecting flight bound for London. After that, the trail went frosty and had stayed that way for over a year and a half. Richard was still looking for her but Africa was a big place, and it was likely Sara was using an assumed name so she wouldn't be found.

On a shockingly empty Saturday afternoon a few months before we anticipated filing for adoption of the twins, I was home alone for the day. After getting things done all morning, I had settled on the couch with a nice oatmeal stout, a mountain of leftover spicy kale chips that turned out a little too spicy for the girls, and a foot-high pile of law journals I hadn't gotten around to reading. Casey was out shooting some restaurant interior, and Lily and Rose were shopping with my mother. She had taken them to the mall and then to afternoon tea at one of the historic hotels in Beacon Hill right near our old place.

Argh. The move. Once Casey and the twins moved into my apartment, it didn't take long for us to realize we needed more room. The old place would have been perfect for just Casey and me. With the girls, though, there just wasn't enough space or storage. Little girls seem to generate huge amounts of stuff that magically multiply over time. We bought one LEGO starter set and now we have a giant plastic tub devoted to nothing but LEGO pieces. I have no explanation for it other than self-replication.

Anyway, once we decided that a move had to be made, we found a great place in one of the outer boroughs of Boston. It was walking distance from a subway station in a nice family neighborhood, and it had a one-bedroom apartment in a walk-out basement with enough square footage and light to serve as Casey's photography studio. The main part of the house was twice the size of my condo with three bedrooms upstairs and a bonus room in the attic that served as a guestroom for Nate most of the time.

When we first talked to Lily and Rose about the move, we somehow believed they would be excited about having their own rooms, but no. They had an epic meltdown. We really shouldn't have been surprised; they shared a twin bed most nights and being in separate rooms might as well have been different planets. The powers that be told us this was normal for twins and would change on its own when the girls were ready. So the twins had a bedroom and a playroom to use as they wanted.

I had no sooner picked up a six-month-old copy of the Harvard Business Law Review and settled in for some light reading when the doorbell rang. I thought it might be Nate dropping by to watch college basketball with me. I didn't really care about sports, but I followed college basketball. Nate's brother Caleb played for Xavier our first two years at Dartmouth, and it had become a habit. I answered the door barefoot, wearing jeans and my "Love Makes a Family" sweatshirt that Sandy gave me after Casey and I got engaged over New Year's. I was more than a little bowled over by who I found on our doorstep.

With average height, bright blue eyes, and shoulder-length, curly red hair... She looked a lot like Rose and Casey and a little like Merida from the movie *Brave*. Sara. I had been dreading this day since we decided to seek permanent guardianship of the girls—but part of me always knew it would happen. At least I was the only one home. The rest of the family didn't need to know what I was about to do.

"Hello, Sara. I'm Bennett Whitmore, Casey's fiancé. Please come in." She followed me into the living room where she looked at the dozen or so photographs of various groupings of our family, including a big eleven-by-fourteen family portrait of me, Casey, Lily, and Rose. It was the first photograph taken in his new studio. "Please have a seat." Sara still hadn't said a word to me. It was a little unnerving. "So what can I do for you?"

"I wanted to see Lily and Rose, and let them know I'd be taking them home soon." She smiled meekly like I wouldn't react negatively if she looked weak.

"That's not going to happen. First, Casey and I have permanent legal guardianship, so you need to find an attorney and see a family court judge before you get visitation, never mind custody of the girls. Second, I will break you before you mess with my family."

"They're my daughters. I have rights as their mother."

"You should have thought about that before you abandoned them for a year and a half. Why are you back?"

“I’ve been working in Sudan, and I ran into someone I knew from Medicine Without Borders. He heard that Casey was looking for me to serve me notice of a custody hearing. I flew back to the States as soon as I could. I never wanted Casey raising the girls. My mother was supposed to be caring for them. This is not an appropriate home for children. I don’t want them growing up believing homosexual behavior is acceptable.”

“Well, they already know that families come in many different combinations, and two gay men and two little girls is a good one.” I gestured to my sweatshirt. “As you can see, we believe that love makes a family, not some outdated belief that *Leave It To Beaver* is the only model of a family that works. In any case, it doesn’t matter; you don’t get a say anymore. You chose to abandon your children with your mother whose health and financial situation are too precarious to take on a pair of lively four-year-olds. Sandy, Casey, and I didn’t choose this path lightly but it was the best thing for Lily and Rose. Two judges have already agreed with us so far.”

“Mom is sick? She never said anything.”

“Why would she? You’ve been absent from your family since you left the country eight years ago. Casey’s the one who supported her through her diabetes diagnosis and held her hand through her angioplasties.”

“I would have been there if I’d known.”

“Like you were there after your father died? Try again, sister. Unlike your mother, I see through the Saint Sara act.”

“Who do you think you are?” That freckled complexion I knew so well reddened with contained fury.

“I’m the man head over heels in love with your brother and daughters, not to mention I adore your mother. You don’t deserve them. You abandoned your children, Sara. One day, you just decided you didn’t want to be a mother anymore and *you* walked away. Lily and Rose are happy and healthy in a good, stable home. We will do anything to protect them from the cruel realities of this world and that includes you.”

“I’m going to file for custody. They should be growing up in a God-fearing home. I won’t let you corrupt my girls with your sinful lifestyle. It’s not right.”

“For what it’s worth, this may not be a God-fearing home, but it is a God-loving one. We’ve found a wonderfully accepting Episcopal Church here in our neighborhood, and we go to Mass as a family most Sundays. Your mother was

the one who encouraged us to find a welcoming church home for us and the girls, and it's been a wonderful experience. In fact, Casey and I just finished our premarital counseling with Reverend Angela and we found it quite valuable." All true, except the most Sundays bit. It was more like *a lot* of Sundays, but still...

Sara might have choked on her tongue at that point. She seemed both amazed that we had a religious life and horrified at the idea of a church accepting our family openly within its ranks. "I will not stand for my daughters to be raised like this. I will find a way to get custody back."

And here we go. I was done playing. "Oh I don't think you will. If you go through with this, I will make sure every single secret you have is dragged through family court. I will scorch the earth beneath your feet, leaving you defenseless and alone. I already know about your affair with a married doctor in California and your chatroom activities with the priest in Arizona. I'm sure there's more, and I will spend a great deal of my considerable wealth to find it. You will spend so much on attorney's fees, you will never get out from under it, and in the end it's unlikely you will win. If you do, you will be so bloody and broken you will never recover. I promise you that."

"Children deserve to know their mother."

"They do and I'm not unreasonable. Here's my offer. Either sign a voluntary consent for adoption or go away for another six months whereby the court will declare you unfit, and the adoption will go through anyway. Then Casey and I will welcome you back to the family and allow supervised visitation. Eventually you could earn as much contact with the girls as they want. And just to sweeten the pot, I will never tell a soul, including Casey and your mom, that you were here—or any of your other dirty little secrets. Take it or leave it."

Sara opened her mouth to speak but closed it again without saying anything. "Before you make your decision, take a good look at this picture." I walked over to the mantle and grabbed a picture of our whole family including the four of us with Sandy, Nate, and my parents laughing on a beach in Maine from last summer. "I dare you to find any sin in that photo. Casey and I can provide Rose and Lily a life you can't even imagine. They will have two parents who adore them and be there for them until the end of time, along with the best schools, and a close extended family. I can promise you, Sara, they will want for nothing, emotionally or financially." Okay, I stretched the close-extended-family thing a little, but I was making a point.



“I can’t believe Casey would allow this.”

“He probably wouldn’t, if he knew. I don’t let him see this side of me in my personal life; it’s usually reserved for a courtroom. That’s the only other condition of this arrangement, should you accept it. I won’t tell Casey or Sandy about our deal and you won’t either. If you do, you’ll find yourself facing criminal abandonment charges in North Carolina. Just so you know, that’s a felony, and you’ll be facing up to a year in jail. So think about all that before you choose.”

“This isn’t right.” Sara stammered.

“This is absolutely right for Lily and Rose. They need a stable home life without worrying that their mother is going to disappear again to feed her Mother Teresa complex. Your halo is already rather tarnished. Don’t make this worse for them or for yourself. Here’s my card. Let me know what you decide.” I walked to the front door and opened it. I stood there for a moment, waiting for Sara to take the hint and leave.

She finally walked out the door, only to turn back as she reached the walk. “This isn’t over. I will get my girls back.”

“You might, but it will cost you everything. Ask your lawyer about my reputation. I’m a successful attorney and well known for being ruthless in pursuit of justice for my clients. Imagine how merciless I will be defending my family.” She scowled at me as she climbed into her rental car and drove away. I stood guard watching until she disappeared around the corner. At that point, I could only hope I’d done enough to scare her off. I might have exaggerated my reputation for being ruthless just a little. Although I’m definitely known for being *relentless*, I have too much interest in finding common ground to be truly ruthless. I practice civil litigation. It’s almost always in everyone’s best interest to find a resolution that doesn’t involve a courtroom.

Back on the couch in the family room staring at the clouds through one of the skylights, I drank my beer and then a second. I halfheartedly tried to slog through some more of my reading and didn’t get far. I was too full of worry and anger to concentrate. A couple hours later Casey came home full of things to tell me about his shoot and after an “Oh my God, the kids aren’t home” blow job in the family room, he actually told me about them.

Never did I mention his sister’s visit or the deal we made, and I probably won’t. It may be self-serving, but if I can protect him from the heartache of Sara’s narrow-minded attitude and the prospect of losing custody of the girls,

I'm going to do it. Maybe I'll tell him one day after the adoption is final and the opportunity presents itself, though I doubt it.

An hour later my mother dropped off the girls with new raincoats and umbrellas along with a stack of books, including the entire Ramona Quimby collection. Once we heard about their day with Gramma Jo, the four of us snuggled up on the couch under an old hand-knit throw that came from my grandmother's things, and I read a few chapters of *Beezus and Ramona* to Casey and the girls while we waited for dinner to be ready. If you think I wouldn't do anything to protect these moments and this family, you haven't been listening.

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As I sat at my desk making notes after my meeting, I couldn't help but notice my wedding ring. Titanium with rosewood burl and lapis lazuli band inlay. Casey had them custom-made for us by a jeweler in New York. He claimed that the inlay was as close to our respective eye colors as he could find. The two of us banded together forever. It was a miracle. The wedding itself was wonderful, if I do say so myself. It was held at the Harvard Club with just thirty-some-odd guests. Tears were shed, promises made, rings exchanged, everything you expect from a wedding happened in due course. We even found a six-member swing ensemble to play through dinner and a little dancing after. Casey says the Great American Songbook and jazz standards just suit me somehow. I don't necessarily think I'm old-fashioned about everything but he's right about the music. A slow, jazzy version of "I Only Want to Be with You" was our first dance song and I whispered the lyrics in Casey's ear the entire time we danced. Our three-day honeymoon to Vermont was everything we needed it to be, and the lovely couple who own the bed-and-breakfast went out of their way to make our visit magical. It wasn't perfect. Casey forgot his gloves; I broke a binding on my skis the first run of the first day and twisted my knee, though luckily I was fine the next morning. Stuff happened; we dealt with it and moved on. Maybe it was perfect after all.

I looked over at Rose and Lily sitting at the conference table coloring and just watched for a few minutes. People think that twins have this mystical telepathy, but I don't think that's it anymore. My latest theory is that they know each other so well, so intimately, that they can read each other's micro-expressions more accurately than the rest of us. And then I watched them color and I wasn't so sure. They had twenty-four crayons spread in front of them and both were drawing pictures for Suzanne to thank her for entertaining them

during my meetings. Every so often, one of the twins just handed the other a new crayon for no apparent reason, and the other took it and started coloring with it. No words were spoken through the entire transaction. This happened repeatedly in both directions without any prompting, and it wasn't like they didn't pick new crayons on their own as well. Somehow, Lily just knew that Rose needed cerulean blue at that moment, and it was too far for Rose to reach. Twins are weird and wonderful and complicated and a blessing every day.

“Bennett, you better skedaddle. You're supposed to meet Casey at the café in twenty minutes.” Suzanne stood in the doorway to my office peering at me over her bright purple reading glasses. She had loosened up a bit since we left Bradlee, Perkins and Whitmore as had I. Making the decision to change jobs wasn't as difficult as I expected. One of my favorite clients was a division manager for one of the big biotechnology companies in Boston. When his group was spun-off into a separate company, he offered me the general counsel position and I accepted. I get to do a broader range of legal work and manage the entire in-house legal team without the insane number of hours I had put in previously. I can't say my parents were all that pleased with the change, but I think they understood my reasoning in the end.

“Darn it. Girls, finish up quickly and get your stuff put away. Uncle Casey will be grumpy if we make him wait too long.”

Lily hopped off her chair and brought her drawing over. “Miss Suzanne, thank you for playing with us while Poppy was working.” She smiled and handed over a picture of Suzanne working at her desk, if the violet glasses were any indication.

“Thank you, Lily. I'll hang it on the file cabinet in my office.” Suzanne enjoyed having the girls come by. She looked at me a little puzzled. “The ‘Poppy’ thing is new.”

“Just this morning. It's going to be a while before it stops making me grin like a loon.” I was still so touched by our conversation on the street this morning. We repeated the presentation of a picture from Rose before we got everything together to head home.

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## Epilogue

*Casey gets the last word.*

Sunshine reflected off the cars creeping down Clarendon Street as I claimed an outdoor table at the bakery-café and parked myself under an umbrella in the corner with a good view of the sidewalk. I lifted my sunglasses from the neck of my hemlock-green T-shirt and put them on as I watched for Bennett and the girls to come around the corner. It wasn't long before I saw them coming towards me. "Oh, fucking hell. Bennett let the twins dress themselves," I said to myself and apparently the older couple at the next table who snickered with me.

Rose, in particular, has a quirky fashion sense and can be quite difficult when she's not feeling an outfit. But there they were. Bennett looked hot as ever in his new gray suit and cornflower-blue tie. Rose was wearing a pink twinset with the sweater tied around her waist, a fluffy tulle ballet skirt, pastel striped tights, and purple Converse sneakers. Lily, God bless her, was dressed much the same but her twinset was blue and her tights were lavender, blue, and white. You could see people on the street smiling as my little family marched down the sidewalk. They were a sight to see.

I snapped out of my admiration in time to grab my camera and take a few photographs along with a short video of the trio. Mom loved those pictures. She had just been up to visit for a week before the adoption hearing and party, and we'd see her again next month when we dropped Rose and Lily off with her. Bennett and I have been married for almost four months now, and we are finally taking a real honeymoon. I booked us a great beach-chic resort on the Outer Banks about three hours from my mother's place. It's got all the quiet Bennett wanted with enough stuff to do to keep me from losing my mind.

Bennett has come a long way in the last two years. Despite loving that man with all that I am, I've never known anyone who needed to get out of his head more than my husband. Husband. I use that word a lot these days—partially from the novelty but mostly just because I am so awed that this sweet, gentle, shy man is legally mine. Okay, maybe I'm a little possessive but Bennett doesn't seem to object.

Even though he still tries so hard to be perfect, there's no way for him to live up to that kind of standard. Since our very first date, I've been dragging him out to do new things he couldn't possibly succeed at on his first try. He needed to see that sometimes the experience was worth more than the outcome,

and we've had a stupid amount of fun along the way. The Boston skyline he painted on our first date still hangs in my office at the new house. Bennett can't imagine why I love the thing so damn much. To me, it represents my belief that Bennett might just need me, that there's something I can give him that he couldn't find anywhere else.

From the moment we met something about him spoke to the deepest part of me. I noticed him immediately at the staff meeting that first morning. I thought his classic businessman haircut and slim figure in that dark taupe suit were so fucking cute. At first glance, his big brown eyes and thick, sweeping eyelashes didn't really stand out. Once I caught him staring at me, though, the gold and amber flecks just sparkled and lit his whole face. When we actually met, his shy stumbling and tongue-tied charm were endearing, and I could feel the underlying loneliness and vulnerability that colored Bennett's worldview. From the very beginning, I had this overwhelming need to protect and nurture the bits of that giant heart he only let me see.

Bennett's relationship with his parents continues to improve. I keep encouraging him to include them in the things Rose and Lily have going on but it's still a little uncomfortable sometimes. Doug and Joanna have embraced the twins as their grandchildren. Doug even took a day off of work to come to court and watch the judge finalize the adoption. He and Joanna hosted a huge party to help us celebrate, so there's not much room for me to complain.

At the party, Lily was wearing her "Future brain surgeon because being a princess sounds really boring" T-shirt. Doug asked her if she really wanted to be a doctor, and Lily looked up at him with a coy smile and said, "Yes, 'cause I want to help people like my mom and my grampa." And they talked about how she'd have to work hard and go to school for a long time. At the end of their conversation Doug floored me. "You know, Lily, being a doctor is great and it feels really good to help people, but never forget that the people you need to care for first are your family. If you forget that, one day you'll wake up and realize that you missed something important that you can't ever get back." I'm pretty sure he knew Bennett and I were listening to the exchange. Glancing at my husband, I saw the sheen of tears in his eyes and slid over to wrap my arm around his waist. He dropped his head on my shoulder in response and took a little comfort before we both went back to the party. Although our extended family may be a work-in-progress there was progress on both sides.

The lack of drama surrounding the adoption was surprising. Mysteriously, a week after our wedding a letter from an attorney in Holyoke came in the mail.

Enclosed were adoption consent forms for the twins signed by Sara which made the entire process more or less a formality. I knew Bennett had information about Sara he wasn't sharing. I didn't know what it was but he was protecting me from something. His poker face isn't as good as he thinks it is. At least not with me. I let Bennett keep his secrets on this one. He doesn't like showing the manipulative bastard side to me. I get that. No one wants their darkness exposed to the person you love most. I'm just grateful that the four of us are a legal family now and no one can take that away. I should feel badly for Sara but I don't. She made her bed, and if Bennett made her lie in it I'm okay with that.

As soon as Rose saw me she made a beeline for me. "Daddy... Daddy! Poppy helped us make motions and 'plaints. He said you'd be the judge and decide." I looked up at Bennett, saw the unshed tears in his eyes, and knew I wasn't hearing things.

"That's awesome, ladybug. Come sit with me while Benny gets some snacks for us. You too, bunny." The girls climbed into the two chairs across from me and started talking about their day.

Bennett dropped the girls' backpacks and his briefcase next to me. "One peanut butter cookie, one oatmeal raisin cookie, two fruit tarts, two iced coffees and two orange-mango juice things. Correct?"

"Yes! Thank you, Poppy!" Lily was our polite girl. Rose echoed once prompted.

I looked up at my husband. "Sounds like you've had an exciting day."

"We have. We'll tell you when I get back." Bennett ducked inside to collect provisions. It wasn't long before he returned, slid the tray onto the table, and sat down beside me.

We passed the food out and while the twins were occupied with their cookies, I turned to Bennett and smiled. "Daddy? Poppy? When did this happen?"

"This morning in the middle of Copley Square by the fountain. They asked if it was okay and of course I said yes."

"Why am I Daddy and you're Poppy?"

Rose never missed a thing going on around her. "Benny is 'Poppy' because he's one of the flowers... Rose, Lily and Poppy." She rolled her eyes like I was an idiot. "You're 'Daddy' because you're in charge. Jackson Edelstein told us that's how it works."

I turned to Bennett. “I officially know more about Brad and Allen than I needed to.” Brad was a big fuzzy bear of a man that I suspected Allen called “Daddy” long before the kids came along. They were a nice family. I kept meaning to invite them over to dinner but it hadn’t happened yet. Bennett laughed under his breath.

Lily’s eyes were watery when I turned back. “Uncle Casey, are you mad? I told Rose we should ask you first. This is big.”

“Come here, bunny.” Lily walked around the table and climbed into my lap. “I’m not mad. Not even a tiny bit. It feels really good to have you call me daddy. I was just surprised. Love you, Lil.”

“Love you too, Daddy.” She kissed my cheek and moved back to her seat and her half-eaten cookie.

I was overwhelmed. I tried to cover it but Bennett rarely misses how I’m feeling. He reached over and held my hand for a second. “I know, love. I can hardly believe this is real either.” Bennett glanced at the girls and laughed. “Rose and Lily have submitted several motions and complaints to the court. Would you like to hear them?” He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a small sheaf of drawings. “Lily, can you tell Daddy what motions and complaints are, please?”

“Motions are things you want to happen. ’Plaints are things you don’t want to have happen anymore. Right, Poppy?”

“Exactly, sugar. The first is a motion from Rose. She would like hamburgers for dinner.” Bennett handed me a crayon drawing of burgers on a grill that looked suspiciously like a spaceship signed by Rose.

“Yes. So ordered.” I laughed as the girls cheered.

“Next is a motion from Lily. She would like a kitten.” Bennett seemed very happy not to be the one who had to say no on this one.

“No, I’m sorry, Lily. We can’t have a kitten. It would be too dangerous for Elsa and Anna. Cats eat guinea pigs, bunny.” The girls asked for a pet when we moved to the new house and after much research and consultation with the local pet store, we settled on guinea pigs. They’d been great fun so far and the girls loved them. Ivan even made them little Frozen costumes. I swear no one can say no to our girls but me. Lily didn’t seem upset about not getting her kitten, so I didn’t say anything else.

“So the last one is a class action complaint from Lily and Rose: they don’t want to go to bed before dark anymore.” Bennett looked a little sheepish about this one. I had a feeling he put them up to it. We had been struggling with bedtime since it began staying light later, and he hates fighting with them and enforcing bedtime. I had no such compunction as I was the one who had to get them up and ready in the morning.

“Okay. We’ll try pushing your bedtime back for the summer, but if you don’t get up when you’re supposed to or you’re crabby, it’s going right back. Alright?” My warning was for Bennett, not for the twins, and his flushed grin told me he knew he’d been busted.

As the older couple at the next table prepared to leave, they paused at ours. The woman who appeared to be in her early fifties, maybe, smiled brightly before speaking to us. “My husband and I just wanted to say that you have a beautiful family. Glenn’s brother, Ronnie, died in eighty-five and he never got to live in a world where he could sit openly at an outdoor café with his partner, never mind have children. You’re very lucky. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Standing beside his wife, Glenn hadn’t said a word; I guessed he was still feeling the loss of his brother and assumed that dying in eighty-five meant Ronnie died of AIDS during the darkest days of the epidemic. I looked over my shoulder at Bennett and felt in my soul how lucky I really was. “We are sorry for your loss. If it brings you any comfort, know that we never ever forget how fortunate we are. Men like your brother lived and died with more bravery than we will ever have. I promise you they haven’t been forgotten.” And they hadn’t been, at least not by me. I see what Ivan goes through to stay healthy, and I can’t imagine the nightmare men like Glenn’s brother endured. We stood to shake their hands and say thank you for their kind words.

Over the last year and a half we’d received a lot of compliments on our family, a lot more than we heard condemnations. There had been a few minor incidents along the way, but none were as bad as the first one we had in North Carolina. I gotta say, I have three inches of height and about thirty pounds on Bennett, but he’s fierce about protecting his family. I’m proud to say he’s continued his self-defense training and moved on to mixed martial arts this year.

Later as we walked to the parking garage where I left my car, Lily sat securely on my shoulders while Rose rode on Bennett’s hip. I held my husband’s hand, felt the warmth of the summer sun on my face, and knew



nothing would ever be better than this moment. Our life wasn't all puppies and days at the beach, but it meant the world to us to be as legally bound together as four souls can be. We were a loving, mostly happy family. What more could anyone ask for?

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Jae Moran is a New England girl, born and bred. She has tried to live elsewhere but she always longs to return home. Living in the Lakes Region of Maine with her partner-in-crime of more than twenty years and a pack of crazy dogs, Jae spends her free time playing with the multitude of sexy men who live and love in her imagination. Jae's been writing since she learned to hold a pencil but it has taken her a while to share her stories with the rest of the world.*

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