



AN
UNEXPECTED
ACQUISITION

L.L. BUCKNOR

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

AN UNEXPECTED ACQUISITION

By **L.L. Bucknor**

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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By **L.L. Bucknor**

Photo Description

Two men sitting over candlelight, one is seminude and looking frustrated. The other is nude, bound in rope, and passed out.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

What do I have to do to get this guy's attention?! Over the years I've been there for him when he's needed me. I've mooned over him, sent him flowers, I even gave him a cat! How can he not know I'm in love with him? I know he's clueless, but I'd hoped he'd notice me by now. So what if I've had to basically kidnap him, and tie him up, just to get him to, finally, have a romantic meal with me? When he wakes up, well... I haven't thought that far ahead yet. I'm acting on desperation here. But I'm really hoping that when he does, he'll finally see me.

I'd love some comedy but also some moments of unrequited longing from our MC. I'd like for them to be either best friends or business partners.

There doesn't necessarily have to be sex, but if you could include a scorching hot first kiss, that would make my day.

Sincerely,

Kristan

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: accountant, business owner, coworkers, friends to lovers, frottage, humor, light bondage, men with pets, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 28,665

Dedication

Dedicated to my M. ~ Love you more than words on a page.

A, K & L ~ Thanks from the bottom of my heart for all the help.

A million thanks to this event and the team!! Raevyn, Barb—thank you!!

Big thank you to Kristan for a fun prompt.

AN UNEXPECTED ACQUISITION

By L.L. Bucknor

Prologue

November 2010

“Don’t fuck this up, Weller.”

Jonathan Weller was very nervous. The “spilled his coffee on his once white shirt and now he had to wear an old red blazer from last Christmas to cover the brown stain” kind of nervous. He didn’t have time to change, and he prayed he didn’t look as ridiculous as he felt. He’d meant to take it out of his car for months now and thanked his past self for forgetting, otherwise he’d look like a giant coffee stain. This was the first client he’d have on his own, outside of family and friends. His accounting firm, Flynn & Reynolds, was pretty tied up with a huge client’s audit—all available and seasoned hands were on deck. Being the newbie junior accountant in the company *and* needing the experience, his boss farmed him out to take care of the business owner’s financial statements.

Despite entering his new client’s address into his GPS app incorrectly three times, Jonathan finally reached his destination. He sat in his car, giving himself an internal pep talk. Though he might not be the most experienced, he wasn’t a quitter. *I will rock this job. I can’t fuck this up. I won’t fuck this up... once I get rid of these nerves.* The client needed help with preparing new systems and organizing day-to-day finances of the business. Jonathan had looked over the client’s holdings in his accounting firm’s initial workup. SRB Corp owned two beauty salons, a spa, two franchised convenience stores, and a mixed-use building. The small corporation had been in business for years, so Jonathan assumed it’d be mostly tidying and tightening up their GL or general ledger.

He smoothed back his collar-length, dark-brown hair while looking in his rearview mirror one last time. He crossed his light-brown eyes as an attempt to dispel some of his nerves and made a nonthreatening “I want to assist your company’s financial systems, so trust me with your livelihood because I’m ninety-five percent sure I know what I’m doing” face. He fussed with his face, stroking his goatee as if any stray hairs were out of place. He gave his most confident stare in the mirror. He thought he could pass for knowing what he was doing. *Confident in my cherry-red Christmas blazer? Yeah right.*

Enough stalling, he had to get this show on the road. Wiping his sweaty palms on his pants, he exited his car, picked up his laptop bag and took a deep breath.

He looked to the house when the front door opened... by what looked to be Mr. Balian's assistant. The scruffy guy looked way too young to own multiple businesses. He imagined Balian to be older and with, hopefully, organized books since he didn't have much experience in handling anything crazy. But his client didn't need to know this.

As Jonathan got closer, he pegged the guy as Balian's assistant for sure. The guy had to be late twenties, shorter than his five foot eleven by a few inches and way too disheveled for an early Tuesday afternoon. Rough night? His shirt was wrinkled, a scarf thrown haphazardly around his neck that sported a tattoo spanning off to the back of his head. There were barely concealed red lipstick marks staining his ink and skin while he sported a heavy five o'clock shadow. The guy looked in need of a good bed. He smelled pretty good, which was a win. With the way the shorter guy appeared, Jonathan imagined him to smell like a brewery, or the aftereffects of consuming a brewery.

Jonathan stood tall and held his hand out in greeting. "Hello. I'm Jonathan Weller from Flynn & Reynolds. I have an appoint—"

The faux-hawked man slowly looked him up and down. "And you're so not who I expected," he said with a raspy voice and bags under his blue eyes.

What? "I could say the same for you." Jonathan gaped and berated himself for not thinking before he spoke. He knew how to hold his tongue, yet now he blew it. He could kiss this client good-bye. He'd be fired with no references other than from his family. Great start to your career, Weller. "I m-m-mean—"

"I apologize. I spoke out of turn first." The faux-hawked man put his hand over his chest. "I owe you the apology. I'm Rafi, by the way. Nice to meet you, Jonathan Weller from Flynn & Reynolds." He shook the proffered hand and winked.

Rafi was hot—black hair, blue eyes with a tan complexion and fit. If the circumstances were different, Jonathan would have ogled him with his current on-again boyfriend, Hugo. It was something the lovers liked to do when out together. Though the kiss marks all over his neck provided evidence enough Rafi was straight, it didn't hurt to look. And look he did. Maybe they'd work together in the future while he helped Mr. Balian. He could discreetly look his fill then.

Jonathan pulled his hand back and fiddled with his laptop strap. "It's nice to meet you, Rafi. We can pretend it never happened."

Rafi scratched his head and waved him inside. "Come in. My sister, Kami, called to remind me about our meeting today. I nearly forgot. Last night was

my thirtieth birthday party, huge bash to end a weekend of celebrating.” He talked as he led Jonathan inside the immaculate family house, through a hallway and out into the backyard. “The office is in the garage, Jonathan. What was I saying? Oh yeah, my party. So many people, so many lap dances, so much booze. Best thirtieth ever. Not that you’d know yet from the looks of you. How old are you anyway?” Both men climbed the stairs to the top of a converted garage and entered a space with a lot of boxes. Jonathan saw a computer desk with an empty leather chair, two other chairs off to the side. He wondered where Mr. Balian was.

“Uh, twenty-five. Sounds like you had a true bacchanal, Rafi.” He looked around the open space and didn’t see any rooms, other than a tiny bathroom to the right of the desk. He hoped the boxes were items that needed to be moved and not paperwork he’d need to go through. It would take him forever to go through them just by the look of the bulging cardboard. He’d talk to Mr. Balian about his current systems and filing. He had his portfolio of Balian’s businesses and property holdings in his bag.

“Yeah, man. It truly was. I usually don’t get hungover but last night, me and the boys let loose for the dirty thirty, you know?” Jonathan didn’t think he’d get much help by asking Rafi about the business’s accounts. Rafi looked like someone you’d have around for a fun time, Jonathan thought as he smiled back. Something infectious about his smile. “Shame we didn’t meet earlier, or I’d have invited you.”

He watched Rafi sit down in the leather chair behind the desk. What’s going on here? “Will Mr. Balian join us soon?” Jonathan looked around again because maybe he missed another room or door.

“He already did. I’m Balian. Though you can drop the mister, it makes me sound like my dad.”

“*You* own SRB Corp?” Jonathan forgot to filter again. He had to be kidding. There had to be someone else.

“I know right? Get this—my parents put me in charge and went into forced retirement. My dad ran everything like a tight ship, right? But he had a heart attack last year, had a stent put in and the whole nine yards. Couldn’t get back to one hundred percent. My mom helped out once he got sick, but it stressed her out. So last month, they dropped the bomb about retiring, left the coop. I’m the youngest, and the only one without a career or adding to the next Balian generation, so they gave me the company a little early. It was always going to be mine, the company. I thought I had more time to enjoy life before it became

paper pushing and numbers. So now, they're on a grandkid slash extended vacation tour of America. The joys of being the only son in a family of girls." He shook his head and gestured wildly. "There I am, managing our spa and salons for the last couple of months, when my mom tells me it's time to take over. Boom, I'm in charge of everything. I got steamrolled without much of a grace period. Though Kami helps me out in between her kids' practices and homework."

Jonathan waited for Rafi to tell him he was kidding. He had to be joking. "You were in charge as of last month?" Not to go off of appearances, but Rafi didn't exude management skills. Who was keeping tabs on his businesses right at this moment while he was sleeping off a weekend's worth of fun?

Rafi yawned and nodded. "Bro, I'm going to be honest with you, I need help with a lot of the bookkeeping. It's why I called your company. It was easy with managing three stores—pick up payroll, make sure inventory was in, and clients were happy. But being in charge of the whole shebang? It's a lot. My dad had the head for numbers. I truly don't know how he kept it all together. I guess I got more of my ma's hairdresser personality than my dad's love of numbers. The spa, salons, franchises and apartment complex are so much to handle. My mom did it for eight months, I'm sure I can beat that record with your help, right? You can guide me with what I need to do. I'm not going to lie, I'm a little lost."

Shit. He tried to keep a neutral face. The hope that he'd have a setup company with a knowledgeable admin went through the door. An acute case of tunnel vision happened as he listened to the amount of work that just got piled on him. He could just imagine the state of Rafi's accounts.

Try and keep it professional, Weller. Keep up the appearance. "Where are your books? Let's see what state you're in, and we can start from there."

"You're looking at them," he said as he spun in his chair with his arms held out. The boxes were as he feared. One corner of the room looked organized, with dates and holdings' names neatly labeled for anyone to see. The piles closer to Rafi were not. He felt a bubble of fear in his stomach. This wasn't looking like an easy job, the longer he stood there.

Rafi got up and picked up the nearest one off the floor and opened the box marked October 2010 on the desk. Something yellow and pink slid from beneath the messy pile of papers, a box of condoms and ladies underwear. Jonathan stared at Rafi in disbelief. There was a box of rubbers and a ladies' pink thong inside a box of business receipts.

“Damn, so that’s where that girl’s underwear ended up.” He chuckled. “This is last month’s receipts from our spa. Kind of had to throw everything in there since I didn’t have much time. The staff got paid so I consider it a step in the right direction as the head cheese. I brought the box over from my apartment—blowout start to the weekend festivities.” With a lascivious grin, he started to describe the flexibility of strippers—in detail as Rafi dumped God knows how many papers with dubious stains on top of his desk, not attempting to hide “that girl’s underwear.”

Jonathan couldn’t hear over the sound of impending doom inside his head.

Oddly enough, his impending doom sounded like an emphatic description of the glorious art of ass clapping.

Chapter One

January 2013

Jonathan and Rafi's first day was the start of a mixture of business and friendship.

In the two years since that Tuesday afternoon, Jonathan finally was able to complete Rafi's books with plenty of extensions. Jonathan expected the month Rafi was in charge to be a mess. What he didn't expect and made the job harder was Rafi's well-meaning mother, Rubina. She borrowed money from one business to pay another business so the trails were messy and hard to decipher direct money paths.

Jonathan was a staple in Rafi's office two days a week trying to decipher the paper trail. Surprisingly, SRB wasn't in the red during those months. Rubina paid everything on time and didn't ask her children for help. Rafi's month of being in charge wasn't as bad as Jonathan thought. He expected the sucker punch of Rafi's rudimentary filing, but his mother's accounting was a total knockout.

In the beginning of their first year working together, Jonathan had his work cut out for him. The party boy he'd met didn't want to quit then. Rafi was an ex-club promoter, and though he had his predestined job thrust upon him earlier than expected, he did not want to put in the effort. After the second week of trying to piece together Rafi's lacking organizational skills, Jonathan asked him if he planned on running his company or handing it to someone who wanted the position. Not his best moment, and it should've gotten him fired. Instead, it gained him a friend.

Together, they were able to recreate the 2010 ledgers. As they pieced together receipts and ledgers, Rafi started to show more interest in fixing his company's tracking problems. The corporation made money, but finding the pattern during the months Rafi and his mother were in charge took time for the newbie accountant. Jonathan thought Rafi's impetus to showing more interest was his father's death in 2011, after a couple of months in SRB's financial trenches. During the first month or so after Rafi's father's passing, Jonathan thought the man-child would give up and try to hand the company back to his mother or sisters.

But Rafi didn't.

Rafi went from dumping receipts into boxes, to organizing and following up with each business. He tried to improve his business acumen by asking questions, so many questions it led to Jonathan giving Rafi his phone numbers and personal email address because he kept trying to reach him on the days Jonathan wasn't there at Rafi's office. Then, since they got along so well, the phone calls changed from just being work related. They integrated themselves into each other's lives. It jumped from asking about each other's day to a meld of families, friends, breakups, and dating information sharing. They started to lean on each other outside of work. Jonathan couldn't believe he started to look forward to hanging out with Rafi after work. The man-child proved to be dependable and, more importantly, fun. Rafi *never* met a stranger and always had a story.

Today was Jonathan's last weekly visit until next quarter. Rafi had moved the main office away from his parents' home last year. Since Rafi had no plans of living in his parents' house, his goal was to move the main office into his apartment complex in a few months, using the salon's office as SRB's temporary home. Jonathan knew Rafi was ready, the older man finally putting his degree in business to good use. He felt a twinge in his stomach just thinking about not seeing Rafi on a weekly basis. Even on the holiday weeks, they made plans to meet up. He wasn't going to analyze the gut clenching. He was at a weird place on the personal front. Probably the cause for the belly flutter. It was either that or gas.

Jonathan gained a great friend in Rafi. His initial impression was not too far off base, except he'd been wrong about Rafi being straight. Rafi was actually a very happy bisexual who had no qualms discussing most of his raunchier conquests. But just as easy as it was to share that aspect of himself with Jonathan, he also shared his family. It was inevitable, according to Rafi. *You see the coffers, you might as well see the rest.* Rafi proved over time that he was more than competent to handle his job when he applied himself.

Jonathan visited the spa today, the smell of shampoo and hair products wafting through the air into the little office in the back where he was stationed. Rafi's second eldest sister, Nina, let him in since Rafi was busy at another location. Or so he thought.

He turned to the door when someone opened it, expecting a stylist or Nina to want to talk for a couple of minutes. Instead, Hurricane Rafi came in the door wearing a big smile and blond streaks in his spiked hair, a new addition since the last Monday he had seen him. The change made him more handsome. Not that he'd tell Rafi, or he'd have an even bigger head than usual.

“Hey, there’s my favorite person!” Rafi clapped his back and hugged him. Jonathan checked out his tight jeans and close-fitting sweater under his vest, and Rafi’s cologne scented heavily in the room. Jonathan loved the spicy musk. Rafi left his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder, winking as he sat in front of Jonathan.

“Your favorite person? I bet you’ve said this multiple times today.” He’d heard that greeting used on too many people and spoken too many times to actually believe his friend’s salutation. “What do you want, Balian? Nina said you were busy with an angry customer at the other salon. From what she described, it was going to take a while.”

“And it did. I called Nina once I left, and she told me you were here. So you got invited into my plans for the night.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. No asking? He had mediocre plans but plans nonetheless. “I did?”

“Yep. A regular customer, Mrs. Janowski, usually sees my sister, Sara, exclusively. Sara’s on vacation. Janowski needs an emergency appointment. She’s pissed Sara can’t come in, but what does she want us to do, fly to Aruba and hand deliver her just to cut her hair? We have a new stylist who needs to build his base. Great kid, he cuts like a dream. He did my hair, no problem. But Janowski ice-queened him, claims he ruined her hair. She embarrasses him in front of everyone, and I just happen to be there to hear her one-sided tirade. So I let her yell at me for nearly an hour, talked her into letting the new kid try again free of charge, gave her two free gift certificates, and apologized for letting her ream me in front of everyone. My balls have finally descended from being *Janowskied*.”

“Everything back to functioning order then?” he joked once Rafi took a breath.

“Damn right.” He sighed and turned his soulful stare onto Jonathan. “You. Me. We’re going out tonight. I need a drink or ten.” He held onto Jonathan’s hand, latching onto his index finger. “C’mon,” he cajoled.

Jonathan tried to pull his finger out of Rafi’s grip, but Rafi did not let go. He tried keeping his eyes on the work in front of him instead of looking up at Rafi. He knew his friend was making that damn irresistible pleading face that he could not say no to.

“I’m not taking no for an answer either, Weller. Just so you know.” He let go of Jonathan’s finger once Jonathan met his gaze with a grin.

Jonathan planned on drinking beer and catching up on his DVR. Maybe invite Hugo over if he didn't have anything planned. His ex had asked what he was doing later tonight via text message, but Jonathan hadn't replied as of yet. "Can I take a raincheck for tonight? Maybe meet up next week?"

"Bullshit." Rafi shook his head and began to look mutinous. "It's Friday night. We're going out. Vijay and Marco want to meet up for drinks, so you're coming. I'm not going to see you at work in God knows how long—"

"Three months. It's not like I'm being shipped off to a new country. And you can call me if you need me, you know that." He didn't think Rafi would need him as much since he'd pretty much passed Jonathan's rapid-fire questions to assess his knowledge of how to use the new software he'd installed. The salons and spa had been using antiquated systems that probably worked for Rafi's dad but didn't work for Jonathan. Rafi was game for anything Jonathan suggested, since he was more used to club promoting than heading SRB and looked to Jonathan for guidance on the financial aspect.

"But it's going to be weird without seeing your pretty mug around here on a weekly basis."

Jonathan waved his middle finger in response. Rafi couldn't turn the charm off, but Jonathan was immune to most of his flirty compliments. He knew they meant nothing to his friend, not that he wanted them to since Rafi was not his usual type. Rafi was the life of the party, and Jonathan was the weird, quiet kid who gravitated to the same quiet people. "How's the single life treating you?" He finally let go of Jonathan's finger but moved closer. Jonathan's gaze strayed lower, watching his shirt tighten across his chest.

"Er, fine. It's not like I haven't broken up with Hugo before. We're still friends." He and Hugo had ended things amicably two weeks ago. When Hugo suggested taking a break, Jonathan agreed. He thought they were trying to stay together because they were used to each other, boyfriends from college freshman year with breaks scattered through the years together. Everything between them stopped feeling spontaneous awhile before calling it quits. He wondered what Rafi's angle was with his line of questioning.

Rafi seemed to answer the questioning look Jonathan must have worn. "Breakups. Never been in that situation before." He pulled out his cell phone from his pocket and let his fingers fly across the screen. "I have a friend, Darius, right? His girlfriend left him for another chick. He got super depressed, tattooed her name on his arm, listened to bad music and stalked her at her job

for a month. You're not going to do that? Because I can't afford to listen to mopey indie music, it bums me out." He stopped typing on his phone to gage Jonathan's answer.

Jonathan snorted. "You don't have to worry. I'm too indecisive to get a tattoo. Mopey indie music hasn't ever been my scene. And there'd be no point in stalking Hugo if we amicably broke up. I'm fine, Rafi. Honestly. In fact, I planned on beer and television tonight." Rafi widened his eyes and kept quiet. Jonathan waited another minute in case Rafi blurted out whatever caused that look he just gave him, but Rafi remained quiet, so he continued going through the general ledgers. Rafi kept looking up and then looking down at his phone. Jonathan tried to ignore him, but he started to pay more attention to Rafi's fidgeting. He was the one who usually fidgeted, not Rafi. He was going to give him five more minutes before asking what was on his mind, but Rafi broke.

"You almost done? I know everything is good on my end. I balanced out the ledgers last night."

"Just about," Jonathan said as he watched his friend fidget with his phone. His face looked like he had something more to say, but anytime Rafi opened his mouth, he'd close it. Silence and fidgeting? Not usual Rafi behavior. His friend wasn't going to drop the subject of going out with him. Jonathan looked away to finish his work and ten minutes passed by without Rafi saying a word. He wondered how long his friend would hold out.

"You know, I'm pretty sure you'd have a great time with me."

Nineteen minutes, a Balian record.

"I don't doubt it."

"And I'm sure they have television and beer at the lounge I had in mind."

"Good to know."

"And if they don't, we could always search until we find a proper bar equipped with your demands."

Fuck it. He could watch television alone tomorrow. "I'll join you." He could text Hugo that he already had plans. Breaking routine wouldn't hurt.

"I'll keep you company until you're finished, Jonathan. Then we can head out together. You look great by the way. Love the man bun! Hey, tonight can be a tribute to the single life and a sort of going away party. Think about it. I can be your wingman, guide you into the right pair of boxers. You've been

away from the dating scene so long, you'll probably need a GPS to find a potential hookup."

"You mean I should lead with my Eagle Scout glory days? I'm pretty badass with knots."

Rafi looked worried. "Dude. No. Let me do the talking first, okay?"

"I'm kidding."

He watched Rafi tighten his lips, his fuller bottom one nearly covering his smaller upper lip, trying to figure him out. Jonathan was a fan of that face. Then he berated himself. He spent too much time around him if he could rate his favorite Rafi faces.

"Truth or truth, Jonathan?"

Jonathan playfully groaned. Rafi liked to ferret answers about him through this line of questioning. Instead of truth or dare, he'd ask "truth or truth", leaving no way to avoid a question with a dare. It was something that helped pass the time when Jonathan sifted through boxes of finances during that first year.

"I'm sure it's my turn to ask a question."

"I can't remember. So let's make it my turn."

Jonathan couldn't think of anything to ask him at the moment anyway. The man had no filter most times. "Fine. Go ahead."

"You and Hugo. It's over for good this time?"

"I don't know. Who knows what will happen in the future with us, you know? We love each other and are best friends. That will never change. We were pretty stagnant together the last couple of months. It didn't hurt this time around when we called it quits." Jonathan was sort of happy when Hugo asked to separate, but he'd never admit it out loud.

Jonathan expected a response as he entered a number in the computer. There was only silence. He looked away from the screen to find Rafi staring at him.

"What?"

"He was your only boyfriend, right?"

"Yep."

“You need to branch out to different cock. You’re home free, man. Take advantage. You’re a good looking guy, young, no attachments, nice ass—”

Jonathan stopped typing. “You’ve checked out my ass?”

“Habit.” He shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “Anyway, you might need pointers in the conversation-starter department but the other things are prime commodities in the meat market.”

“What else, how good I give head?”

“I thought that was a given.” He looked deadly serious.

Jonathan entered the last figure and double-checked the balance. “Finished.”

Rafi jumped off the desk and grabbed Jonathan’s hand. “Let’s go!”

Rafi chose a pub not too far from his apartment, so Jonathan parked his car, and they drove over together in Rafi’s car. The moment Rafi hit the door, he was in his element. While they got beers, he talked to the bartender and staff animatedly like they were old friends. While Rafi talked to his friends, Jonathan sent a quick text message to Hugo that he’d see him next week—he usually helped with filing his taxes this time of year. He finished his beer while reading Hugo’s quick reply to make sure to bring something to cook when he did. Jonathan was the better cook between them.

Rafi nudged him and pointed to an empty table. They sat down and waited for his other friends, Vijay and Marco, to join them. Rafi offered to get another round of beers, and Jonathan noticed Rafi making prolonged eye contact with a ginger-haired guy who was way too obvious at the corner of the bar. He thought Rafi could do better with someone who was at least semi-subtle. The guy stood at the bar, full-on staring when Rafi walked back to Jonathan with their beers.

“Rafi!” Vijay and Marco arrived, and they good naturedly greeted each other. Vijay swiped one of Rafi’s beers and started a conversation about some girl he and Rafi knew. Rafi pushed the other beer in front of Jonathan and winked at him while talking to his friend. Jonathan smiled back and tuned out whatever story Vijay and Marco talked about.

Rafi tried to include Jonathan in the conversation, but he preferred to coast along and grunt or nod his head while drinking his beer. Tuning back in, Vijay and Marco were regaling the table about football scores and the upcoming

Super Bowl, something Jonathan definitely was not interested in. He watched Rafi participate in the conversation, but his eyes were going back to the red-haired man at the bar.

“I’ll get us some more beers.” Rafi jumped up and swaggered his way to the bar. Jonathan knew Rafi wouldn’t pass up a sure thing, and the way the ginger eye-fucked his friend, it was most assuredly a sure thing. Marco picked up the next round after ten minutes of waiting. A half hour later, Rafi was still at the bar. Jonathan’s phone vibrated. He noticed Rafi’s friends look at their phone screens too. Rafi texted an apology about not bringing the drinks. Vijay and Marco guffawed, gave Rafi thumbs-up signs and catcalled.

Jonathan: *I see why you’re held up. ;)*

Rafi: *I can ask if he has a friend.*

Jonathan: *No, that’s all you. Go for it.*

Rafi: *You sure?*

Jonathan: *Have fun, man. There’ll be a next time.*

Rafi: *Next time, you’ll come with me to the bar. Tag team them. ;P*

Jonathan would have taken that opportunity if he was in Rafi’s shoes. He wasn’t disappointed. No, not him. He watched Rafi leave with the guy from the bar. Okay maybe he was a little disappointed. But only because he thought Rafi could have left with someone less obvious.

Chapter Two

Other than text messages, Jonathan hadn't spoken to Rafi since last Friday. Jonathan had more than enough work to keep him occupied. The texts would range from pictures Rafi took while working, with a funny recap of what happened, and weird story links he found online. Even when he wasn't around, Rafi still kept him entertained. Who wouldn't chuckle from silly donkey memes sent at random times during the day? Another week passed without seeing Rafi. It was weird, but maybe it was time to get back to his old normal. With snowstorms making it hard to travel, there were plenty of days he got to work from home. Before he knew it, spring had arrived, and he'd only met with Rafi for a few days scattered here and there. Jonathan would've thought, since they were unable to see each other as much as they did in the past, their friendship would wane.

That wasn't the case.

Jonathan's social circle was not as extensive as Rafi's. Jonathan didn't know how his friend kept the faces and names together. He'd be lost and sure to mix them up. Out of the small band of Jonathan's friends, his closest would be Hugo—they've known each other from freshman year. Hugo read him the best and called him on his bullshit.

When Hugo invited him to his elementary school's Spring Festival, Jonathan accepted. Hugo was nervous about the production since he was coheadlining with a new coworker. Hugo's principal gave some of the newer staff a chance to shine. He'd show his support for his friend, even if he'd rather swim in shark-infested waters while wearing meat pants, than sit in an elementary school for more than an hour. Small children made him uncomfortable, possibly due to being an only child. But he knew how much it meant to Hugo, so he'd try to pay attention and congratulate his friend at the end of the show. While trying to find a seat as close to the back row as possible, he bumped into Rafi's sister, Kami. Or he should say, she literally bumped her hip into him to get his attention.

"Jonathan, it's been some time. How are you? Why are you here?" She knew he had no nieces or nephews since she had whipped out a pile of photos of her brood when they first met, and he had told her he was an only child then. "You let your hair grow longer. I like it." She was also a part-time hair stylist as well as assistant, of sorts, of SRB Corporation.

“It’s great to see you, Kami. I haven’t had time for a cut.” He fiddled with his hair, pushing the longer bangs out of his eyes. He was about three weeks overdue to cut his dark-brown locks. He’d been wearing more stubby ponytails and buns lately. His personal time usually took a nosedive at that time of year, and things like haircuts and shaves got pushed to the back burner. “Hugo’s a teacher here. He and another new teacher helped create tonight’s program. I’m here for moral support. He’s the newer kid on the block, and he was nervous.”

“You’re such a good boyfriend. My hubs has track practice duty tonight or else he’d be here with me to see my youngest girl in her starring debut role as Flower Number Five.” She rolled her eyes and grinned. “You don’t mind if we sit together do you?”

“Of course not.” Now he could look like he was an interested party at tonight’s event instead of a creeper for not having a device plastered to his face for the entire night. He saw more than his share of enthusiastic, proud parents for tonight to last him a lifetime. He let Kami lead him to a seat in one of the back rows. Once they sat down, he leaned closer to her ear, “Me and Hugo broke up, actually. I’m just here supporting him as a friend.”

Kami tilted her head to the right just like Rafi usually did. She patted his leg in a consolatory manner. He didn’t need consoling. Kami looked like she wanted to say something more about the news, but her phone rang. She smiled at her screen. “My husband. Let me talk to him now before the recital starts. I’ll be back. Thankfully, Amaya won’t be on until the middle of the show. I have to speak loudly when I talk the hubby down.” He watched her walk away as the lights were lowered.

He watched a few numbers of miniature people singing about the sun and rain, and applauded when it was appropriate. He knew Hugo spotted him from the stage. He waved at him in between songs. Jonathan tried to resist playing a game on his phone, but it vibrated.

Rafi: *I hear you’re at this big time Broadway show.*

Jonathan: *Box seats too.*

Rafi: *Oh yeah?*

Jonathan: *It’s good to have friends in high places. ;)*

Rafi: *I’d ask you to hook me up, but I think it’s outta my price range. ;P*

Jonathan: *Balian what are you doing?*

Rafi: *Work. :(I'm hungry. Hey, you eat yet?*

Jonathan: *I could eat.*

Rafi: *Let's do it together. When is the show done? You can give me the highlights.*

Kami returned, tapping his shoulder as she sat down. "How many songs performed?" she whispered.

"Four," he whispered back.

"Good, my kid's in the sixth. My brother called while I was on the phone."

"You happen to tell him I was here too?"

"Of course." She looked at Jonathan's vibrating phone in his hand. "Rafi?"

Jonathan smiled and held up his smartphone. "Yep." The song ended and the crowd clapped. Jonathan joined in briefly and then went back to his conversation with Rafi, who already followed up with another message.

Rafi: *I still owe you for the last time we went out.*

Jonathan: *You don't owe me a thing.*

Rafi: *Well I want to see your face, eat some grub, and unwind.*

Jonathan: *Long day?*

Rafi: *The longest.*

Jonathan: *Anything crazy?*

Rafi: *Nothing out of the ordinary. This being responsible thing is for the birds.*

Jonathan: *I hear ya.*

Rafi: *What are you in the mood for?*

Jonathan: *Um, would it be okay if Hugo tagged along?*

Rafi didn't reply right away. Rafi's niece performed with her grade, dressed as a tulip. Jonathan gave her a standing ovation, along with Kami. When he sat down, he checked his phone. No answer. He started to get worried, but Rafi replied:

Rafi: *Sorry, had a phone call. Sure. :)*

Jonathan: *Great.*

Rafi: *How much longer? I'm just about done here. Eyes crossing from comp screen.*

Jonathan: *Beats me.*

Rafi: *Asked Kami. She said less than 30 minutes. Meet me at that diner we usually get lunch from.*

Jonathan: *Cool.*

Jonathan barely paid attention to the rest of the show. He thought about dinner with his friend, so happy he would see him. It has been a while. He did make sure to smile when Hugo, aka Mr. Durand to the ten-year-old-and-under set, took a bow with his students. Hugo with his mop of curly hair and black-framed glasses, waved again at him. Kami tugged his elbow, so he bent down to hear her.

“The curly fro and glasses is Hugo?”

Jonathan nodded. Hugo was a pretty good-looking guy and mixed race like Jonathan. Taller than Jonathan, fit, with intense brown eyes. He always pulled more than a few gazes when they went out. Jonathan definitely understood her reaction.

She winked with enough sass that it reminded him of Rafi. The siblings did have similar eye color, though hers was more in the gray family. Kami's daughter ran to her mother, asking loudly if her mother saw her “performance.” Kami nodded enthusiastically, put her on her hip, and waved good-bye to Jonathan. “Tell my brother I said hi.” Amaya waved and chirped enthusiastically about the good job she did.

Jonathan smiled and made his way to meet Hugo in the front of the auditorium. Hugo kneeled, tying the shoelace of a kid in a leaf costume. “Great show, Mr. Durand.”

“Thanks to the students. I owe Mr. Weller for attending. How about we have dinner at—”

“Hold that thought. I can top that. Rafi invited us to dinner. We should leave now though. Are you done? Need help?”

Hugo stood tall in front of him and smirked. “You know what? You should go, and we can have dinner another time. I'm going to have to help cleanup with a couple other teachers. I appreciate the offer. Tell Rafi I said hi.”

“You sure? I mean I can text him we'll be late. I can—”

“Jonathan. Chill out. It’s more than enough you came to support me. Go have dinner with Rafi. Seriously, it’s fine. We’ll catch up later. I know where you live. I’ll have leftovers instead.” Hugo patted his arm in farewell and turned to pick up the construction paper cutouts from the front of the stage.

Jonathan left the emptying auditorium. The crowd had thinned enough that it took him only a few minutes to get to his car. He parked in front of the diner and got out of his car. Standing in front of the building, he pulled out his phone from his jeans pocket to text Rafi to see if he had arrived, so sure he made it before his friend.

“Weller! Get your ass inside already,” Rafi called out jovially from the entrance. He held the door open for Jonathan to join him. Once he reached the top of the stairs, Rafi hugged him tightly. Once he let go, he kept an arm slung across his shoulder. Together, they walked to the hostess station. “You’re looking swell by the way. Where’s Hugo?” He peered behind him.

“I could say the same for you. Hugo sends his apologies. He couldn’t make it. He had to stick around for clean up.”

He shrugged. “Party of two, please,” he told the teen at the podium. Jonathan used that time to take in his friend’s changes. Rafi had cut off his hair and sported a buzz cut. He looked a little older with close-cut hair, closer to his age and just as handsome as the day they met two years ago. With Rafi’s arm still across Jonathan’s shoulder, they were led to a booth in a secluded corner. Jonathan tried to give his friend some space as they walked to their seats, but Rafi wasn’t having any of it.

“So how was Amaya’s recital? Was she the best flower you ever saw?” He laughed. “Kami was bored as hell, according to her messages. I couldn’t believe it when she told me you were there tonight.”

“Hugo wanted support. It wasn’t that bad.” Having Rafi’s sister there also didn’t hurt.

“I’m betting it wasn’t that great either, though I know my niece was the star of the show. It’s the Balian blood.” The waiter came to take their orders. They’d visited enough times that they didn’t have to look at the menus. Once the waiter left their table, Rafi took a drink from his water while staring at Jonathan intensely.

“What?” He pushed his hair out of his eyes and behind his ears.

“You going to watch Hugo’s students means you’re trying to get back with him?”

“Just friends like the last time I told you.”

“Hm.”

The waiter returned with their drinks. Once he left, Jonathan asked, “What’s with the ‘hm’?”

“Nothing. I think it’s nice you’re so willing to help out your friend.”

“I’d do the same for you if you ask.”

“Trust me, if I invited you to go with me to my niece’s recital, I’d be figuring how to get out of it for myself. Speaking of, the next time I have a family shindig, would you come with me?”

His pesky stomach started flipping. He drank his soda, hoping that might help. “Sure.”

“Great. My sisters already love you. Well, the ones you’ve met. My sister from San Diego, Nora, is flying in next month. You can meet our family oddball when you come with me.”

“Why is she the oddball? What’s happening next month?”

“She became a nurse. In a family of mainly hairdressers, it was a different career path.” The waiter returned with their food, setting their plates in front of them. After they each took their first bite, Rafi answered, “Next month will be one year since my dad passed. I’d be honored if you came with me. We’re having a dinner with family and close friends, which you are.”

Jonathan got flustered. He was flattered. He felt honored for being considered to accompany him to something so special to Rafi.

“I wouldn’t even consider Marco or Vijay. They’re not what I’d call family friendly.”

He was a safe choice. He didn’t know if he should be honored or not, since safe wasn’t exciting. He nodded and continued to eat his sandwich and fries. “Truth or truth, Jonathan?”

“You should just call it truth, you know.”

“It makes the person playing feel like they have a choice.”

“I shouldn’t answer you just for that.”

“You can’t resist the almighty truth or truth. No one can.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“You’re stalling. First time you had sex?”

Jonathan choked on a fry. He quickly drank his water. “Are you serious, Balian?”

“Dead.” He stared across the table and held his gaze. “I’ll share mine.”

“I can’t even guess what it’ll be. Knowing you, it’s going to be interesting.”

“One of my mother’s clients, Gregory Stavros. I was fifteen.”

“And he was?” He finished his sandwich and eyed Rafi’s fries. He might be skinny, but Jonathan did enjoy eating.

“Hung like a donkey. The first couple of times hurt like a bitch.”

“No, that is not what I meant.” He couldn’t stop the images in his head. Picturing Rafi having sex with anyone did not need to play in his head. “How old was he?”

“Older.” Rafi took a sip from his glass, as if that would deter Jonathan.

“Like by a few years?”

Rafi smirked. “Sure.” He stole a couple of fries from Rafi’s plate. He always ended up leaving a few, sometimes Jonathan liked to think just for him.

“More like a lot of years, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe. What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?”

“You’re the one who wanted to know about our first times. You and your nosy games.”

“Oh yeah. Well, my mother used to cut Gregory’s hair. Dark eyes, dark hair with a little silver in it—”

“He had gray hair?”

“Open your eyes a little wider, why don’t you? A little silver; he wasn’t ancient. Can I finish?” He waited for Jonathan to signal he wouldn’t interrupt again. “So Greg would stare at me when I came to help clean the shop. I made sure to catch his eye when no one was looking. He saw me at the pizza parlor after school one day, offered me a ride—”

“Obviously—”

“Head out of the gutter, you. He fucked me the next day. Best three weeks of my life.”

“What happened? He got locked up?”

“He was in his twenties, tops, Jonathan. It wasn’t like I went in looking for hearts and flowers. In fact, I’ve never gotten flowers. That was pure hormones and lust. He knew how to fuck.” He leered. “Now your turn.”

“I doubt I can top that.”

“Lemme guess. You and Hugo, college freshman year.” Rafi polished off his burger, looking so smug.

“Wrong. It was my girlfriend, Jennifer Moran, freshman year in high school, at her house, after school. Not the best couple of minutes in my life, but it got better with practice. We broke up by junior year.”

“Really?” Rafi paused in sipping from his straw to goggle at him.

“Don’t look so shocked.”

“I thought you were gold star. I would’ve put money on it.”

“Shame that you didn’t. I would have been richer tonight. Why’d you think Hugo was my first?”

“You said you guys were together since freshman year. You guys keep breaking up and getting back together. I thought he was your only experience. You obviously like being in a relationship ’cause you keep going back into one. I don’t understand it, but more power to you two.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. I’m sure a match exists.” He hoped he was still friends with Rafi when the time finally came. His brain refused to imagine a partner for Rafi.

“I highly doubt that. I’d rather taste all the sweets in the bakery than stick to the same doughnut. I have the attention span of a fruit fly.”

Jonathan didn’t think Rafi should sell himself short. He’d grown some since the first time Jonathan met him. “My turn. Have you ever been in a relationship?”

“Does a month-long series of one-night stands count?” Rafi’s self-growth was still a process.

Jonathan shook his head and finished the rest of Rafi’s fries.

“So, no.” Rafi smirked. “Hey, if I’m ever crazy enough to settle down with a partner, I’d like someone with your qualities. You’re loyal as shit. I mean, you went to listen to kiddies wail about flowers.”

“Spring. It was their spring recital. Hugo did a great job too.”

“See?” He pointed his glass at Jonathan. “Total dedication. Suffering for their happiness. That’s a great trait for a partner. Plus, I wouldn’t mind for them to have a nice round ass.” The waiter chose that time to return for their empty plates. He did a double take at Rafi. Rafi continued on. He had no shame most times. “A nice looking face wouldn’t hurt, not a deal breaker though. Beauty fades, but a booty can be forever.”

“Ugh, Balian.” They both laughed as the waiter hightailed it out of there. God knew what ran through the waiter’s head. “How’s the new hairdresser?”

“Why? Do you want a cut? I like your length.” He laughed. “I like the urban caveman look you got going on. It fits your features. Hey, can I ask you a serious question? I think you could figure I was working my way to it.” *Oh my God, he was going to ask him out on a da—*“You don’t feel forced into coming with me next month?”

Jonathan chided himself for even going down that avenue. It couldn’t have been more apparent that Rafi was not interested in anything other than friendship. Not that he’d say yes to Rafi even if he asked.

“Of course not. I can’t believe it’s been a year already. I like your family. It’s not a hardship. Besides, I can say no to you Balias if I want.”

Rafi smirked and grabbed the check.

Jonathan pulled out his wallet and tried to grab the bill with his other hand.

Rafi pulled the bill closer to his chest, away from his grip. “C’mon, I invited. My treat. I owe you anyway for bailing that day.”

“No apology necessary. How did that work out for you? With the guy from the bar?”

“I barely remember. Not even worth the mention.” Rafi drummed his fingers against the tabletop and changed the subject. “We need to hang out sooner rather than later, Weller.” He grabbed his jacket off the seat and stood to put it on.

“You want to get me laid?”

“That, and you’re good company. I promise to do my duty in getting you new dick the next time we go cruising. Not this weekend, though. I have to help out at the spa. I can’t believe my decline in free weekends lately. This is a sad state.” Rafi paid the bill.

“But the silver lining is that you’re doing a great job in charge.”

Rafi grumbled as they walked toward the parking lot. “Being an adult blows.”

Jonathan couldn’t stop his smiling. “You’re smiling pretty hard over there, Jonathan. Though I do enjoy seeing your dimple coming out to play. I have an early morning, so I’m going to say good-bye for now.”

With a brief hug and quick joke, Rafi drove off. Jonathan paused before starting his car, replaying their dinner conversation in his head. He chided himself over thinking Rafi would want to ever date him. From what he’d witnessed, Rafi liked beautiful and closer to easy.

Meaning not him. Never him.

Chapter Three

Meeting the entire Balian family was quite the experience.

Rafi and his family befriended, laughed, loved, and mourned hard. As an only child of divorced parents who could barely say three civil words to one another, the Balian family was as opposite as they got for Jonathan. They treated him like a long lost family member, though Rafi not being an arm's throw away might have added to their warm welcome.

Raucous and full of life, Jonathan could see where Rafi got his outgoing personality from. The family was just as vibrant as he was. They loved each other openly and grieved just as openly. Jonathan witnessed the boisterous, life-of-the-party side of Rafi in all of the interactions he'd ever had with the man, but the grieving son was something Jonathan rarely encountered. Rafi fell into his arms after choking up in tears while trying to share stories of his father with everyone. When Rafi couldn't finish, he sat next to Jonathan for the remainder of the evening, leaning into him. Jonathan returned silent support, leaning back on his mourning friend while talking to other family members.

Rafi hid his pain from him pretty well, but he planned on letting him know that he could talk to him whenever he wanted before he left the party to go over to Rafi's place.

He had thought nothing of Rafi inviting him over to his apartment to give him his belated birthday gift after the dinner party. When Jonathan had completed his last quarterly visit earlier in the week, Rafi had told him he had a big surprise for him, but it wouldn't be ready in time for Jonathan's birthday.

Not that Rafi hadn't helped celebrate on Jonathan's actual birthday. He and Hugo had been treated by Rafi with a visit to a strip club for his birthday. That was one awkward night for him, being egged on by his ex and his friend. Both men trying to outdo each other with the entertainment in between the numerous drinks and making Jonathan blush. They had a good time. Body shots and birthday cake, what wasn't to like?

So he could only imagine what Rafi had planned for tonight. Rafi wouldn't give him any hints, no matter how hard he tried to trip him up. They left the family dinner with promises to visit more often, hands laden with leftovers and one of Rafi's sisters telling Jonathan to come by the salon for a trim.

They drove in separate cars to Rafi's apartment. Because it was Jonathan's first time there, he didn't know what to expect as he walked in but finding a sparse penthouse with a well-stocked wine cabinet was not it.

Rafi took off his shoes at the door, Jonathan followed suit. Together they carried the bags of food from the family gathering to Rafi's bare kitchen. Other than kitchen appliances that looked top-of-the-line and barely used, there was no indication Rafi lived there. When Rafi opened his fridge to show how empty it was, all the times they had gone out to eat now made sense.

"You need to go shopping," Jonathan blurted out while staring at the emptiness. How did his friend survive?

"I have the essentials: booze, coffee, cereal, and menus to the best restaurants in town."

"So what do you usually cook?" It looked like it was cereal and air sandwiches if the fridge was an indicator.

"Cook?" Like this was a new concept.

Jonathan wasn't a chef by any means, but living in a single-parent home for most of his life, he had learned how to feed himself quickly. His father's idea of a fancy meal was box macaroni & cheese. When his dad remarried, his stepmother refused to eat food from the freezer or boxes and taught them how to eat real food that didn't come with instructions. And as he got older, both his collection of recipes and his cooking skills grew. "Do you have pots?"

Rafi shook his head and closed the refrigerator door. "Why? If push comes to shove, I travel to one of my sister's or my mother's place for a home-cooked meal, though not as much as of late because Ma's back on her "time to settle down and be an adult" tangent."

"Knowing how to make meals on your own may help with that." Jonathan couldn't stop himself from opening a cabinet door, only to find various boxes of cereal and little else. "Or having food in the cabinets."

"I have food."

"Technically, you do." He squinted at an expired can of wax beans. Really? "But man cannot survive on booze and cereal alone."

"Good booze. I have some pretty expensive shit here." He proudly directed Jonathan to his well-stocked wine rack. Jonathan couldn't tell how expensive they were because wine wasn't his thing; give him a beer any day. He took

Rafi's word on it since the rack was filled, and his friend started to touch the wood reverently.

"Take out the wine, and add toaster pastries and frozen pizza, and it's like revisiting my first year with Hugo. He was a disaster in the kitchen. If I could show him how to not burn a meal, I'm sure there would be hope for you."

"I'm game, Weller. Just point out the pots I should get and pick up the groceries for me."

"So I'm shopping with you now?"

"I'm not getting tortured by myself." Rafi threw his arm around his shoulder and led him to the living room. "You're the one who suggested it in the first place. The least you could do is accompany me. Besides, you know you're going to be all secretly smug when you do come with me."

"I do not get secretly smug."

"You do. You fold your arms and make a mini duck face. You pucker your lips when you know you're right. Like this." Rafi demonstrated, and Jonathan tried not to stare at his mouth. What was it with a full bottom lip that made him want to stare? "Ask Hugo. I bet he knows what I'm talking about." Jonathan didn't even know he did that. "Anyway, we're not here to talk about your lips. It's gift time." Rafi stood in front of his coffee table and pushed him toward it. There was a neon-green card on top. This is what he was so anxious to give him?

"Go on, open it."

Jonathan opened the envelope to a card with a nearly naked man on front. Definitely chosen by no one else but his friend. A pamphlet fell out when he opened the card.

"Surprise!"

He skimmed the booklet. It contained information about an exclusive resort in Miami.

"We're going to Miami!" Rafi started to sing the song off-key and dance around while Jonathan read the sticky note attached. Rafi had paid for a boys' weekend in Miami for them. Just looking at the amenities, the place was way out of his price range.

He cringed at how much attending would cost. He couldn't go. "But—"

“Before you give me any excuses, it’s booked for the Fourth of July weekend. Plenty of time to put in a request for time off from work. I know I need a break, and you do too. Vijay’s dad is supremely loaded. He’s letting us use his private jet, meaning no air fare. Bring Hugo if you want. We’ll have plenty of room since we pretty much have the entire floor to ourselves. Me and the fellas haven’t had a boys’ weekend in forever. You have to say yes, it’s already paid for.”

He thought of everything didn’t he? He was sure Hugo would jump at this chance to go with him especially since it would be during summer break. This was very sweet of Rafi to think of including Hugo. “Thank you.” He gave him a brief hug, but Rafi was having none of that. He held on and slapped his back enthusiastically. He couldn’t believe how generous Rafi was being. He had six months until Rafi’s birthday to try and top this gift, unless it included his kidney. He doubted he could afford it.

“It’s going to be fun as fuck. Marco’s counting this as his preengagement bachelor party. So that means he’s going apeshit all over that town. I can’t believe he wants to do this.”

“Go apeshit in Miami?” Jonathan could believe Marco going apeshit for anything involving a party.

“No. Get engaged. He’s only known Amy for like three months, but he thinks she’s ‘the one.’ He gets a taste of new constant pussy and boom, she’s ‘the one.’ This has been his third ‘the one’ in a year. Though I hope they last long enough for him to keep the parrot.”

“Parrot?”

“She has a friend or something who breeds them. She gave Marco a parrot, and the thing is funny as fuck. You walk in the door, and it screams out ‘nasty fucker’ to greet you. He knows a lot of filthy words. I’d get one too, but I’d have to feed it and clean the cage.”

“You’d prefer a pet that could feed and clean up after itself?”

“Do they have something like that?” Oh God, he was serious.

“Goldfish maybe?” Let’s see if Rafi could feed himself before bringing another living creature into the mix. He listened to Rafi talk about how “kick ass” their vacation was going to be. Sun, fun and hotties. They’d fly down on the Wednesday night before the holiday and be back Sunday night in time for

the work week. He had a feeling about how the weekend would turn out, but a gift was a gift.

Like always, once Jonathan's April birthday passed, spring vanished and summer was officially here.

Jonathan had now been at his company for three years and made strides at his accounting firm, building his clientele, and having a firm network, outside of family and friends. He didn't have to research as much as when he'd started with Rafi.

Speaking of his friend, Rafi was now the proud owner of a set of pots, but using them was a different story. The business owner had found a space that he wanted to move his office into, and it was right next door to the original salon. Fiscally, Rafi was solid for the move, but he called Jonathan more often for advice, phoning at odd times, genuinely worried about taking this step, and wondering if his father would be proud of his choice for the move.

Jonathan reassured him each time that it would be fine. During the last conversation they'd had about floor patterns and what their first meal would be when Jonathan came over to show Rafi how to make food fit for consumption, Rafi sounded choked up. He was reminiscing about a funny story of his father cooking breakfast for the Balian family when they were younger and burning it so badly the fire department had to come. Jonathan could tell he was trying to put on a brave front and decided he wanted to cheer his friend up.

The next day, he'd sent a bouquet of daisies to Rafi's house, having remembered his friend's comment about never receiving flowers. He'd thought Rafi would get a kick out of them, and maybe give him a call after work or send him a text message, his usual *modus operandi*.

What he didn't expect was Rafi showing up to his house after work to full-body hug him and take him out to dinner. Visiting each other's homes then became routine after that flower delivery. Who knew daisies could have that effect on a person?

Rafi had tried to get him to go out to dinner that night, but Jonathan talked him into food shopping together instead, an activity Rafi couldn't charm his way out of doing. Rafi grumbled that first time, but Jonathan could tell he'd secretly enjoyed picking out his own food—he'd especially enjoyed haggling at the farmer's market.

Shopping at the market became a fun activity with Rafi, not that Johnathan expected anything less. Rafi, always ready to make his point, really loved bargaining with him and the stand owners at the farmer's market or, for that matter, anyone who came along with them. Most times, Rafi won the battle.

Jonathan usually was free on weekend mornings, something Rafi didn't complain about when he joined him and Hugo. He thought Hugo got off easy because Rafi didn't subject him to his game of truth or truth. He and Hugo would playfully tease each other when they were out together. Jonathan noticed Hugo eyeing Rafi more often when he thought Jonathan wasn't looking, making him unsure if his ex was interested in Rafi. Hugo didn't seem like Rafi's type either. His brain refused to picture them together in any capacity, full mental block with triple padlocks. He tried not going there in his head; he got really cross just thinking about it.

Hugo's excitement for their July trip with Rafi and pals was contagious. Hugo and Rafi would countdown the weeks each weekend market trip. Once July first finally arrived, their upcoming trip finally sunk in. No more countdown. Vacation was finally here. The bachelor's party turned into a true bachelor's party for Marco. Marco and his "one" had broken up.

He was so heartbroken, he drowned his sorrows in enough cranberry vodkas to stock a bar. Of course his pals had to also help him along the way. Vijay promised to assist Marco in getting rid of his heartbreak by exploring Miami's female population. Rafi seconded this idea. Hugo smirked at the heteros and assisted with drinking as well, Jonathan couldn't resist joining the bunch. Nothing said vacation like free booze. Jonathan only vaguely remembered how he got off the plane and checked into the suites at the resort.

That weekend was a haze of beach, clubbing, tanning, and drinking. Jonathan rarely saw Rafi, just what he imagined would happen when Rafi gifted him this trip back in April. He and Hugo visited tourist spots since they were usually the only two out of their group awake by noon.

Flirting with cute boys with Hugo was different this time around as just friends. It used to be playful and arousing in the past. Now, when Hugo pointed or nudged him to look at a random bangable stranger and compared them to Jonathan, he wasn't into it. But when Hugo flirted with him, kissing his cheek or nuzzling his neck at sporadic times as the weekend progressed, he could safely assume he wasn't interested in Rafi.

The other thing was... he wasn't interested in resuming a physical relationship with Hugo. Those types of gestures were usually the prelude to

Hugo grabbing his ass or rubbing himself on him which led to them having sex; it was their cyclic pattern. They'd have sex together during off periods; it was easier for both of them since they knew what they liked and could cut out the preamble.

Simple, easy, hot, and steady... yet he didn't want ex-sex with Hugo. Jonathan hadn't had sex in months and didn't notice. He wanked off in the mornings when he could and didn't turn down a chance to fuck... until now. When Hugo started nibbling on his ear while they were alone on their second-to-last night, he felt nothing.

As he was getting ready to rebuff Hugo, Rafi barged into the suite's living area wearing a pair of board shorts and aviators and a wide-open mouth.

"Left my wallet." He hurried to his room without looking in their direction.

Jonathan pushed away from Hugo on the couch, surprised that he felt guilty for being caught. He wasn't doing anything wrong. "No, Hugo." He tried to whisper and hoped Hugo caught the hint.

"You want to wait until Rafi leaves?"

"No." He left his arm on Hugo's, not to ward him off, but to let him know not tonight, not anymore. He stared in his friend's eyes, trying to ease his rebuff.

Hugo didn't say a word when Rafi came out of his room, loudly announcing that he'd left a couple of VIP tickets to some club on the table. When Rafi opened the hotel door, he heard a high pitched annoying giggle with a loud "took you long enough," that did not sound like Marco or Vijay.

He turned to look, but Rafi had already closed the door. He wondered who Rafi's "fuck of the night" was, forgetting the person sitting next to him momentarily. Hugo cleared his throat, bringing him back in the hotel room, instead of out in the hallway where Rafi was doing God knows what with God knows whom.

Here he had Hugo, sitting there ready and willing, looking as gorgeous as he always did, and he wanted to see who Rafi's "flavor of the hour" was? What was wrong with him?

Hugo gave a small pat on the arm that he forgot to remove. "I guess it's truly over then."

"I really want to be your friend, Hugo. If I gave off the impression that I—"

“You don’t even have to finish that sentence. Let’s call it vacation horny madness. It snuck up on me.” He ran his fingers through his fro, took a deep breath, and stood up. “I’m going to check out the club Rafi left tickets for. You wanna join?” The offer sounded friendly enough.

“Nah. I’m going to swim in our private pool one last time. Have fun.” Someone should because he couldn’t believe his actions and thoughts for the night.

“I’ll let you know if I see Rafi at the club.”

“You don’t have to. I’m sure he’ll be there and everywhere tonight.”

Hugo grinned and turned away with his hands in his pockets. “Hugo?” He turned. “Are we cool?”

“We’ll always be.”

Jonathan believed him and went for his swim.

No one returned to their suite until the wee hours of the morning. The next day Rafi was actually awake in the morning. He mumbled something about sightseeing while inhaling a massive mug of coffee and sporting bedhead. Rafi had let his curls grow out some on the top.

He was going to comment about Rafi taking a walk to the man bun side, but Hugo came out and helped himself to coffee. More than Rafi, he looked worse for wear.

“Dude, I’m surprised you’re up after last night.” Rafi scoffed and then yawned loudly. He started a chain reaction in the hotel nook.

“Can’t shake the teacher schedule no matter how hard I try.”

“And he’s tried,” Jonathan added. “Rafi said something about sightseeing today before we leave tonight.”

“Sounds fun.”

“You should totally go. I’m just going to—” Rafi’s cell phone cut him off. He looked at his screen and unlocked it after checking the number. “Excuse me, fellas. You two should definitely go on without me,” he answered, winked, and spoke into his phone, taking his coffee mug with him toward his room.

Before he left the room, Hugo asked, “Guy from last night?”

Rafi held the phone to his chest. “Something like that.” He left the room, deepening his voice for the caller.

“You should have seen this guy last night, Jonathan. I thought they were going to have an anatomy demonstration on the dance floor. Rafi always pulls tens from what I’ve seen. But the guy last night was an eleven.” Jonathan tuned out Hugo’s description of the “ebony god.” He practiced his selective hearing skills for most of the day, giving minimal answers when they took thousands of pictures and walked through South Beach.

He was in a mood but put on a happy face all the way onto the plane. He’d had a lovely time with each person individually, and as a group. But the image of Rafi and the “ebony god” on the dance floor left a sour taste in his mouth. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep on the flight all the way back to New Jersey.

Jonathan hugged everyone good-bye and tried not to rush Hugo off the plane since they drove together to the airport. Jonathan felt... off. Maybe boys’ weekend overload? He’d worry about it when he was in his own bed. He didn’t have to work the next day which meant Jonathan planned on vegging out before having to get back to the daily grind. He loosened his stubby ponytail and showered, leaving his luggage on the floor. He’d deal with unpacking tomorrow. He’d deal with everything tomorrow, including thinking.

When he finished and put on a pair of boxers for bed, he plugged his phone on the charger on his bedside table. He noticed a few missed messages. Rafi had texted him when he was in the shower.

Rafi: *Good night Weller.*

Rafi: *The next vacation we’re going to sightsee together.*

Rafi: *That’s an order*

The contents of his stomach did somersaults after he read the message for a third time. He punched his pillow and turned off the lights. He needed to stop these thoughts about Rafi before they worsened. It would only end badly if he continued these unwanted, secretly stimulating thoughts of his friend.

Maybe it meant he should get back on the dating scene? Maybe his body was ready, and his head just got stuck on the first available man it saw.

Or maybe he was lying to himself. Jonathan muted his ringer and went to bed.

Kami, Rafi's sister and sometimes assistant, let him in to check their books for his quarterly visit later that month. Rafi was tied up with the new office remodeling. She let him know how picky Rafi had become with the new office space. She'd never seen her "chill little bro's anal side" before.

That just made Jonathan burst out laughing. Kami said Rafi was rubbing off on him.

"Naughty," he managed to gasp out in-between laughing.

Kami wadded up a sheet of paper and threw it at him. "You two belong together. If you can get your head out of the gutter for a few seconds—"

"Sure." Jonathan mimed zipping his lips.

"I like this side of him. It can be annoying, what with the five a.m. text message about the same shade of green paint for the office walls."

"You're right they did look the same. He sent color names and pictures of swatches of what looked like the exact same color." Good to know he wasn't the only one getting early-morning messages. He should be happy it wasn't a phone call because he was crap for an early-morning major decisions.

"I like the change in him. He's sort of responsible now, which is something he'd never tried to be. Vijay and Marco and all the others were living the rich-kid life, with no real responsibilities, and everything was a party. Some of it's toned down now. Did you know he actually spent last weekend at the deli and salons, going over their books—all night? He slept at the salon to *work* again Sunday morning. My little brother willingly did this! I think you're a good influence on him."

"I'm sure it's more of running a company and wanting to make your father proud than me."

"I agree, but I still think you're also a part of the equation."

"If I take credit, you should as well. You Balian's make a great team." They truly did. Kami didn't roll over to Rafi's subtle demands. She stood up to him and was deadly honest about anything that didn't work. She cared about the staff and customers just as much as her brother did. And it didn't hurt that she had the patience of a saint to deal with irate customers and employees from time to time. She was the good cop to Rafi's bad cop.

"Any time I see him, your name isn't too far from his lips."

He ignored the heat on his face. "He's a great friend."

“Uh-huh,” she drawled and smirked. “How was Miami? All Rafi would talk about was the temperature.” Her phone chirped. She cursed when she looked at the screen. Jonathan would bet it was Kami’s husband. The man didn’t seem to be able to survive without his wife manning the fort at home. “I gotta take this. The hubs is picking up the youngest and her friends from summer camp. He also mixes up their addresses—no sense of direction I tell you.” Kami walked out of the office. She had a tendency of talking very loudly when she was on the phone.

In the meantime, Jonathan went over the figures while Kami took her phone call. When she came back, Kami asked about Miami while working together. Jonathan regaled her with the highlights. Talking about his trip reminded him of those pesky thoughts of his friend, including the ebony god. He berated himself for thinking that while trying to answer Kami vaguely about the nighttime activities of the friends. He shouldn’t care who Rafi screwed.

“Jonathan, I gotta go, it’s later than I thought.” She kissed him on the cheek and picked up her purse. “See you at the barbeque next month!” Kami called out from the doorway. The last time they spoke, Rafi had invited Jonathan to be his “plus one” at an upcoming Balian barbeque. Jonathan, being the family-safe friend, came to the rescue and accepted. Things were better when he stayed in his lane. His brain seemed to latch on to that idea.

Or maybe it was because he didn’t have the stimulus in front of him on a daily basis. He didn’t think anything of it when Rafi bailed again from going to the market that weekend. Or the next. By the third weekend, he wondered how much work Rafi was getting done to the new office. He still texted or called him at random times for questions about the business, but everything seemed to be running smoothly since the last quarterly visit he had with Kami. He was not pining for missed friend time with Rafi. Jonathan went shopping with Hugo and their usual friends. He and his coworkers caught a couple more happy hours; he was finally losing his “newb” status. All was going fine.

It didn’t hit him until the day of the barbeque that he didn’t physically see Rafi in over a month since Miami. When he saw Rafi pull up and get out of his car in a thin tank top and jeans, he realized how much he missed seeing him. And all those feelings he thought he’d managed to push down came right back up just from looking at his friend in the flesh. He’d cut his hair back into a curly mohawk, his face scruffy as usual, something reminiscent of the first day they met. Except there wasn’t any lipstick staining his neck, and his friend looked even hotter without that pesky hangover Rafi denied having. Jonathan tried to

give him a friendly arm pat when he remembered to greet him but Rafi was having none of that. He fully embraced him and pulled on a loose strand of hair.

“Weller, aren’t you a sight for my eyes. Looking good. Like the shirt, you look great in green, man. And your struggle beard is coming along nicely.” Rafi had a five o’clock shadow at noon, so anyone else’s, especially Jonathan’s with his light patch of facial hair, were struggle beards to Rafi.

“Good to see you too, Balian.” He bumped into his friend, Rafi following him to his car, making sure to bump into him along the way. The affectionate Rafi continued touching him in minor ways like brushing their fingers or nudging him with an elbow as they drove in Rafi’s car.

While Rafi caught him up about the last few weeks, Jonathan couldn’t stop himself from searching for all the changes in Rafi since he’d seen him last. One thing was constant—Rafi smelled the same—part cologne, part soap, and part him. Jonathan thought the touching would maybe tone down once they arrived at his family’s home but nothing doing. Rafi kept touching him all day while they were together. It felt like old times, with Rafi’s normal touchy self, though Jonathan was beginning to notice just how much. The entire day, he stayed close to his side. Their rhythm went back to that happy pace they seemed to have. And if he noticed Rafi more often that day, noticed the curve of his ass in his jeans, or the way the top curl had a way of falling on his forehead no matter how many times he tried pushing it back, it was only because he hadn’t seen him in so long. And damn, were those jeans tight as hell!

They played with the kids, cracked jokes with the adults, and ate enough food for an entire week. All in all, they had a wonderful time together with Rafi’s family. When they drove back, Rafi interrupted their silence and digestion with a question he didn’t see coming. “How is Hugo?”

“Fine since the last time I saw him.” Jonathan wondered where that came from.

“Oh.”

Rafi continued driving. Jonathan noticed the constant contact stopped. Or maybe it was wishful thinking on his part. When turning a corner, he asked, “So how does the relationship version of Jonathan work? You still go out on the weekends?”

“Usually the same as nonrelationship Jonathan works.”

“Oh.” Rafi paused and wore his thinking face.

God knows what else his friend was thinking. Jonathan was prepared to “truth or truth” Rafi if he didn’t spit it out soon.

“So it’s cool to invite you and Hugo out next weekend? I’ll try not to hit up too many places packed with singles.”

“How very accommodating.” He raised an eyebrow. “I’ll ask Hugo next time I see him. I’m down for going wherever you choose. I’m sure Hugo wouldn’t mind either. Don’t change it up on my account.”

“You and Hugo get down like that? I didn’t think you guys were the type.”

“Type of what? What are we talking about here?”

“To have thirds. With the way you two look, you’re bound to get picked up or taken to a back room. So if you’re doing the open relationship thing, good for you. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t like sharing my partner with someone else. I mean I’ve had ménages and quatres before. Those were work, fun but work to try to include everyone at the same time, you know? Anyway, good for you two.”

Another mental image he didn’t want to picture. *Just great.* “That isn’t my style either, Rafi. However, Hugo and I aren’t together.”

“I saw how much you *aren’t* together on the couch in Miami.”

“No. It wasn’t... Hugo wanted... I didn’t... that was a mistake. Nothing happened. Trust me on that.”

“Are you sure about that? Because when I saw Hugo at the club that night, he was beaming like a thousand watt lightbulb when I asked about you. He’s totally into you, bro.”

“We’re not back together.”

“Oh.” He looked down toward his lap at a stoplight. “Well, I never did help you score. Next weekend, it’s on. Bring your fine self and those big brown eyes, and you’ll have the men creaming their pants. Show them what they’re missing.”

Rafi talking about creamed pants just made him wonder if Rafi was ever so infatuated with another person that he jizzed in his pants. Then Jonathan’s cock started to like his train of thought. For the rest of the car ride, Rafi jabbered on about his office and finally settled on a date to open while Jonathan allowed his imagination to run wild.

He tried to not picture Rafi tenting his pants, but his head nixed the idea. Then his evil brain didn't only want Rafi ejaculating in his trousers, it wanted pants off too, and naked Rafi was in full force. Would he have a skinny, long cock? Short and stubby? Cut or uncut? The images made the rest of the ride uncomfortable for Jonathan. Not daydreaming—or in his case, *night*-dreaming—about his friend was a forgone conclusion.

Rafi suggested something or other; Jonathan wasn't fully paying attention now that he unleashed the sexy thoughts beast inside his head. He could barely hear Rafi over the moans he added to the images floating in his mind. He was thankful his shirt was long enough to cover his fly and hopped out of the car without looking like he was sporting major wood for his friend.

Hightailing it out of the car, before Rafi tried to exit and come inside to shoot the breeze, Jonathan waved and ran up the short flight of stairs. He called out good night, as he opened the door, going inside. Once he closed the door, he leaned against the wood, looking at his crotch as if it were a traitor. Because it was. Or his brain was the main culprit. Fuck.

He might need to revisit dating sooner, rather than later, because thinking about Rafi in a sexual light and sporting wood that would never be touched by his friend was just a road that ended in failure. But if he maybe meandered down said road for a few minutes, would it make any difference?

And if he jerked off that night to the image of bending Rafi over, rimming his delectable ass, it would only be just this one time. So meander and masturbate, he did. Jonathan went full force with spank-bank material from today's memory alone. He stared so hard at his friend's body tonight that he could probably draw his ass on paper. It was round and big enough to fill out the back of his pants, with just enough bounce when he walked. His cock was so hard, it didn't take much effort to bring him to the precipice. Thinking about parting those cheeks and tonguing Rafi down sent him over the edge. He breathed deeply as he caught his semen in his hands. He finally opened his eyes and looked down at his lower half. He'd barely had a chance to push down his pants, he had gotten so excited. Pitiful.

And he would never tell a soul. His private one-time jerk-off session starring his friend would only be the one time. He was determined. Jonathan figured, since they hadn't been visiting each other as much lately, he got it out of his system.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Rafi returned to being a dominant presence in his life. He resumed weekly shopping with Jonathan, hanging around and inviting him to different places whenever he had free time, which seemed to be more often than not. And if Jonathan thought that maybe having other people, namely Hugo, as a buffer would be an option, he was sadly mistaken. Hugo stopped shopping with them the last couple of weekends, blaming it on back-to-school madness. He also declined joining them at the clubs each of the times Rafi asked, using school as an excuse. The less of Hugo he saw, the more Rafi filled in the gap.

Jonathan could have called his other friends or gone out during his downtime on his own. But anytime Rafi called and asked him to accompany him to a new place or an old favorite, Jonathan didn't want to refuse. Just being around his friend made him happy. The pair got back into their groove, relaxed, fun, and friendly. Nothing even hinting that they would ever be anything more than just really great friends, if the times Rafi would try to guide him to potential partners were any indication. However, Rafi would nudge him away from the guys who were basically there to bone for the night. He claimed the easy pickings to be unworthy of Jonathan's time. Jonathan thought Rafi might've just tried to steer him away from past conquests. Being single and sort of hung up on his friend didn't stop Jonathan from looking at other men. Jonathan met a couple of great guys, and he even added their numbers to his phone. However, he knew he wasn't going to call any of them.

He might be horny, but he wasn't ready to get back into the dating scene. His head just wasn't ready yet. His weekends consisted of watching Rafi from the sidelines of his life. This went on for weeks. And his one-time boner situation metamorphosed into more nights filled with dirty fantasies of Rafi. He rationalized it was due to basically being in each other's pockets.

Jonathan couldn't think of someone as a potential sexual partner unless they had a connection on some level. And the strongest connection he had, besides Hugo, was with Rafi. And his sexualized thoughts of his friend were turning into an obsession that, thankfully, Rafi didn't pick up on. Rafi continued being himself. Though when Jonathan thought about it, Rafi hadn't been sharing crazy sex tales lately. He usually heard secondhand news from Vijay, and Marco would cackle about the "flavor of the night" Rafi had left with. Sometimes, he didn't know how Rafi dealt with those two.

At the next quarterly visit, Jonathan hoped his friend wouldn't be present or he would embarrass himself with a chubby in his khakis. *Please, please, please.* He breathed a sigh of relief when Kami was the one to work with him that day.

Rafi was out in the field. His penis might not have been as relieved as he was. But he could actually focus on the task at hand, instead of him and Rafi together on any available flat surface. Those thoughts plagued him later that day in the privacy of his home.

The next big event for Rafi was moving to his new office space that he planned to officially open on his father's birthday. Jonathan went over to congratulate his friend on opening day in October. He noticed the giant daisy bouquet he'd had delivered was displayed front and center on Rafi's desk. He discovered Rafi's love of flowers and tried to indulge him when he could. Another thing he noticed was his friend's pensive mood after greeting him. Rafi faked a smile and gave one-word answers upon Jonathan's questioning. Thinking about his father.

Jonathan sat at the edge of his friend's desk in a classic Rafi move he thought for sure would get a rise out of his friend. But he got no reaction at all. After watching him sigh for the hundredth time, while looking at pictures of his family on the wall, Jonathan figured he'd let Rafi have today to be pensive. The stilted attempts at conversation weren't going to improve Rafi's frame of mind.

"I could go for a bite to eat. You hungry?"

"Nah. I'm going to go check in at the store in a couple of minutes. Check figures, inventory. Boring stuff."

"You sure you don't want some company? I only have one client this afternoon to get to. He's usually a piece of cake."

"No, it's okay. Don't change your plans. Thanks for the flowers again. And for visiting me." He hugged Jonathan, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. He was getting the brush-off. Since Jonathan hadn't lost a parent, he figured Rafi was entitled to a day to mope. Just for today.

Tomorrow, it was a different story.

He called Rafi the next day, and it went to voicemail. He sent a couple of text messages. No replies. Jonathan went about his day, working with clients, but by the time he made it home to eat leftovers, he still didn't have a response from his friend. Silence wasn't like Rafi in the slightest, so Jonathan went to sleep with a plan in mind.

He called Kami to see where Rafi was for the day, but she told him he took the day off. He only had two clients who were fairly easy, so he was finished before noon and drove to Rafi's building. Someone was exiting, so Jonathan

got inside without having to alert his friend or have Rafi ignore him. He made his way to the top floor and knocked on Rafi's door. Rafi opened it, yawning and wearing only sweatpants. He rubbed his buzz cut, looking like he just woke up. Totally not typical Rafi-like behavior. Well, in the last year or so.

"Weller, what are you doing here?" He didn't look pissed, so Jonathan took it as a positive sign.

"Having lunch with you. Let me in." Rafi stood in the doorway, holding the door open.

"And if I say no?"

"You won't." He was ninety-nine point nine percent sure Rafi would let him inside.

Rafi rolled his eyes with a semblance of a smirk. "That's my line." He moved inside to let him pass by.

Jonathan waited until Rafi locked his door. "I called."

"I saw," he said with an apologetic tone. "I kinda needed a few mental health days." He stood across from him with his arms folded.

Jonathan thought he was entitled to them. He rarely took any time for himself.

Rafi walked to his sofa and sat down into a comfortable position. He glanced at Jonathan with an "are you coming or what" face. He muted the flat screen while Jonathan sat next to him. Jonathan wondered if he should ask him directly what was up or lead up to asking Rafi how he felt when Rafi took the decision away from him. In less than a minute of sitting next to each other, Rafi scooted over and put his head in Jonathan's lap and faced the television.

Jonathan's dick worked with him for once and understood it was not the time to get happy. Because shirtless Rafi might be lying in his lap, but it was sad, shirtless Rafi.

Rafi unmuted the news. "A building collapsed today, killed ten people," he said in a monotone. "And someone found the head of a missing college girl in a garbage bag this morning two towns over."

"Okay, Ray of Sunshine, let's watch mindless television instead. Let's turn off the depressing shit and save it for another time." Jonathan found a reality television marathon with housewives of some town he didn't care about. It had to be better than watching the news.

“I thought we were having lunch.”

“We are. I ordered pizza when I left work.”

“Damn it, that means I’m going to have to get up again. You know it’s hard finding a comfortable position on your bony thighs. It’s like lying on sharp sticks.”

He playfully smacked his shoulder. Rafi reached over and tapped him back on his forearm. The buzzer rang. “I’ll get it. Don’t move; it’ll be harder to find that soft spot for my head.”

Jonathan waved his middle finger. “I already paid, by the way. Ass.”

“What about it?” Rafi stuck his tongue out and smacked his ass in front of Jonathan before answering the door.

Rafi brought back pizza and placed it on the coffee table then left the room to bring back a bottle of wine and two glasses. Rafi poured, and they both picked up a slice with their favorite toppings.

“You remembered. You’re the best.” That was Jonathan, the ever thoughtful friend.

They ate and drank—Rafi more than Jonathan, who really couldn’t get into the taste.

“We just have to find the right wine for you, Weller. You’ll see.”

Jonathan doubted that day would ever come. After finishing their lunch, they went back to their previous positions on the couch. Horrible shows passed, and ridiculous fights happened on the screen. They laughed at the antics together, with Rafi going back to his spot after his third glass of wine—he had to finish Jonathan’s. The mindless television did its job, and both men got sucked in, taking breaks to use the restroom and eat more pizza.

After the eighth show, Rafi spoke, “Thank you.” Jonathan didn’t have to ask what for. He rubbed his shoulder in response and yawned. “You’re working tomorrow?”

“Late. Why?”

“Sleep over. I have a guest room and television with crap shows to watch. Come binge with me tonight.”

“With an invitation like that, how can I resist?” He’d just leave with enough time to change in the morning. Jonathan was glad he went with his gut and didn’t go home to probably (definitely) jerk off to another Rafi-filled fantasy.

“That’s why you’re my best friend.”

Chuffed at Rafi’s declaration, he was going to return the sentiment, but Rafi ruined the moment.

“Even if you have poor liquor taste.”

He smacked him with a throw pillow instead.

Chapter Four

Rafi: *Whatcha doing?*

Jonathan: *It's 8:58 on a Saturday morning, Balian. Take a guess?*

Rafi: *Sleeping off a wild night of blow and hookers?*

Jonathan: *You only got a third of that sentence right. Good night Balian.*

Rafi: *You're awake. Come jogging with me.*

Jonathan: *Snow on the ground still? Unless it magically disappeared overnight, have a nice day.*

Rafi: *I have a treadmill at my place. We can have protein shakes.*

Jonathan: *Vijay flaked out on you again?*

Rafi: *We both knew he wasn't going to stick to his resolution.*

Jonathan: *Rafi, even Vijay knew he wouldn't exercise with you for long.*

Rafi: *Join me. You'll love the results.*

Jonathan's morning wood was onboard with that statement. Rafi had started a health kick right before his birthday in November and actually stuck to it. Thankfully, he roped Vijay into joining him since he had the freer schedule. Once it started to involve more mornings than he was willing to give up—prime hangover recuperation time—Vijay bailed.

The holidays were finally over, and tax season was upon Jonathan. He would grab every inch of sleep he could get until the nightmare was over. Rafi arrived back in town from spending Christmas and New Year's in California with his sister earlier last week. They met to exchange Christmas gifts—Jonathan was now an owner of an expensive bottle of Cabernet—Rafi wouldn't surrender—and Rafi got a cool watch he saw that he could use to track his heart rate while exercising. Rafi? Stoked. Jonathan? Not as much, but he faked it and reveled in Rafi's longer than usual hug when they swapped presents. Yesterday was Rafi's quarterly visit which had been brief. Rafi made the time fly by describing his San Diego vacation photos he had uploaded online.

Jonathan didn't miss the pictures with the same girl over the course of half a week. Said girl who had a proprietary grip on Rafi in nearly all of the pictures. His fantasies of his friend didn't slow down with Rafi's absence. But Jonathan apparently didn't have to worry about being obvious, Rafi evidently didn't notice him, especially not after Rafi telling him about being cock-teased by a drag queen while in California and what they did together afterward.

There might have been a little ache on the inside, but he knew his infatuation would never go anywhere. If he kept telling himself this, maybe his head would finally get the message.

February came and went, and he started to dream about his friend involuntarily. He tried not to act like a hanger-on when they went out or stayed in. Winter was pretty brutal, meaning their visits were short while Mother Nature let them have it. He didn't have to worry about embarrassing himself in front of Rafi too often. Or ignore the pang of disappointment if they went out, and Rafi left with someone else.

March was a repeat of February except this time he barely saw Rafi with all the clients and projects he worked on. He was busy most days of the week, and their schedules conflicted. Rafi made sure to text him pictures of things he did, to include Jonathan when he wasn't there with him. Unintended taunts reminding Jonathan that he didn't need him to have a good time. He wished Rafi only knew just how badly he wanted to be anywhere other than behind a desk crunching numbers at this time of year. Rafi didn't share just the fun times. He made it his business to call Jonathan when he had to fire his first employee. He was torn up about having to terminate the teen who stole from the job, letting his friends not pay for items, and slacking off when he thought no one was around at the convenience store. Jonathan reassured Rafi he wasn't a dickhead, that it was just part of being in charge.

During the first half of April, Jonathan could barely respond to the pics or funny memes Rafi found. He was just too busy. The paperwork was going to bury him alive. He didn't have clients as interesting as Rafi was to keep him on his toes. His clients didn't have any pink lacy thongs or condom boxes to surprise him with and help break the monotony. He couldn't believe he missed having Rafi keeping him on his toes. A good, or not so good, effect of the tax season was the decline in the number of Rafi sex dreams. Instead, he dreamed of misfiled forms filled with monstrous numbers that tried to bite him when he got too close. April fifteenth didn't get there fast enough for the junior accountant because being surrounded by numbers in both his nonawake and waking hours was starting to get to him.

When Hugo called him over for buffalo wings and beer two days before his birthday, Jonathan was coherent enough to accept. Hugo knew how crazy this time of the year was, and he'd usually give him a few days after April fifteenth to defrag his brain. Hugo gave Jonathan his birthday gift early since they wouldn't be able to meet up then because Hugo was going hiking in the Poconos with a pair of work friends.

"Open it up. Don't wait on my account." He munched on a wing and looked at him from the corner of his eyes.

Jonathan opened the bag and pulled out a box of hiking boots. "Er, thanks."

"I expected more enthusiasm from an Eagle Scout." He threw away the bones on his plate.

"This Eagle Scout hasn't gone hiking in quite some time." Jonathan took a sip from his beer bottle.

"We never did return to the college hiking club after that first month." He wiped his hands with a napkin and then wiped his mouth. "Jesus, you'll be twenty-nine in two days. I got an invite for my high school ten year reunion the other day. Where did the time fly? I swear we were college freshmen last year."

"I still can't believe it."

"You know you were the hottest guy in our school, right?" Hugo smiled around the mouth of his bottle.

"Actually, you were, Hugo."

"I thought we'd be together forever. I started taking things for granted even when we broke up all those times. I figured you'd come back. You always did."

Oh fuck. "Hugo—"

His friend held out his hands to stop Jonathan from speaking. "No, no. Hear me out. I'm kind of happy you didn't come back this time around. It took me months to realize that. That we love each other, and we don't have to be together and can still be in each other's lives. I stopped waiting for you come back. Started dating and—is it going to be weird to overshare?"

As long as he didn't tell him about a tryst with him and Rafi, he didn't mind. "No. It's cool."

"The first time I had sex with someone else other than you, I called him your name."

Jonathan almost spit out his beer. “How embarrassing. I hope his name started with a J so you could play it off.”

“I don’t even remember it now.” Hugo shrugged. “He got all pissy afterward. I totally deserved it.” Hugo widened his eyes, and Jonathan grinned. “It helped, in a way, because I still wanted you, even when you weren’t looking at me the way you used to. And I missed it so much. But I finally accepted it.”

“This is about Miami?”

“Partly. I also realized something else that you’re not admitting to.”

“Which is?”

“You look at Rafi the way you used to look at me.”

His face heated up, but he had to deny it. “I do not.”

“Being one of the recipients of the Weller intense you-make-my-heart-beat stare, I think I’m a better judge than you.”

“I don’t know what you thought you saw in Miami but—”

“It’s not *just* Miami. It’s every time you two are together. At first, I thought you two were fucking. The way you two vibe off one another, I’m surprised you haven’t already. I feel like the third wheel when I’m around.”

“First off, Rafi doesn’t see me in that light. And we’re friends, *best friends* according to Balian.”

“Uh-huh.” Hugo delivered a snarky look. “You don’t deny you’re attracted to him?”

He let out a shaky sigh. “It would be pointless if I did.”

“But if you had a chance, you would be with him?”

“There’s no chance of that happening.” Of that he was so sure.

“Why? Because he’s bi?”

“Has nothing to do with it. Rafi is sexually free. He could settle down with whomever he chooses, but he has to *want to*. He’s not there yet. And the bigger factor is he sees me as a friend, not fuck-buddy material. That’s all he does at this point. Fuck buddies and nothing more.”

“You do realize your feelings for him, though?”

Jonathan didn’t want to voice them. It’d give him hope that he knew would have nowhere to go. He should have known Hugo might’ve picked up on his feelings. “Am I obvious?”

“Not really. Your face tends to light up when you talk to him. Or talk about him to me.”

Shit. “I swear I didn’t feel this way when we were together.”

“I know, but I was tired of waiting for you to talk about it to me.”

Jonathan gulped his bottle of beer. “It’s a little freeing to actually say it out loud to someone else. Maybe it’ll help with the fantasies.”

“Fantasies?”

“I’m not going into detail with you but I might’ve daydreamed... and dreamed about Rafi naked.”

“So maybe you could be a fuck buddy? He’s a not a bad guy. Not my type but definitely looks like he knows how to work a body out.”

Jonathan stared at his friend and pursed his lips. Hugo just shrugged.

He’d only been in relationships. He was a serial monogamist, and he owned it. Even if he was in the longest period of being single in his entire dating life. He made the mistake of mooning over Rafi, but it’d wane after a while, right? His brain would catch up with his libido soon enough.

Jonathan’s birthday passed. He celebrated with coworkers and friends over the weekend. Rafi had to help with his stores, so they waited to meet up on the next available day. It happened to be the Balian dinner to remember Rafi’s father. The dinner was a repeat of last year, though Rafi appeared to be stronger this time around.

When he overheard Rafi telling numerous family members he was “playing the field” when asked about settling down, he couldn’t stop the grip of disappointment in his throat. Or when he overheard Rafi telling a cousin that Jonathan was just his “best friend who’s been there for me whenever I needed him,” his throat hurt. Happiness and disappointment all rolled into one giant emotion the size of a bowling ball that was stuck in his windpipe.

Talking to Hugo about Rafi was a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he had someone to voice how he felt, and a curse because it made him wish for the possibility though he knew it was futile. The touches from Rafi that he now noticed was *all the fucking time* they were around each other didn’t help matters. If he could go home and chastise himself for doing this *to* himself, he would have.

But he couldn't turn down a friend in need. When Rafi spoke about his father, he spoke without getting too choked up. Once Rafi was finished, he sought out Jonathan, gave him his Rafi grin. His throat opened some.

They went directly to Rafi's place after leaving the dinner, another repeat of last year. Rafi told him it was to give him his birthday gift, but Jonathan suspected it was for company as well. While Rafi ran to his bedroom, Jonathan noticed the difference from the first time he visited. Rafi started to make his place homier. There were pictures hanging on the wall. When he went in the kitchen, it looked like an actual kitchen instead of demo model of one. And the walls looked different. The color?

"Hey," he asked when Rafi came out, "you painted?"

Rafi held out a medium-sized box in his hands and grinned. "Yeah. I thought it needed something. You've mentioned the emptiness in the apartment before. You like?" He grabbed Jonathan's hands and handed him the box. Did Rafi look anxious? Jonathan watched his eyes flit to the walls and his gift. *Ah, a mixture of both.*

"The walls look great."

"Did them a few weeks ago when you were in crazy-accountant-hermit mode." He pointed to the box. "Now open it up. I like watching reactions when opening gifts."

Who was he to deny his friend? He pulled the elaborate string and tore the wrapping paper as neatly as possible. He hammed it up, opening his eyes as widely as he could. Rafi gifted him a watch, and from the looks of it, a really expensive computer bag with a million compartments.

"Thank you, Balian." It was really nice. Jonathan turned it over and noticed his initials monogrammed on the front flap.

"You need something to carry all your crap you lug around. Be as organized as I am." He winked.

Jonathan laughed out loud at that. Need he remind him about their first year working together?

"Happy birthday, Weller." Rafi hugged him and held on. Jonathan wrapped his arms around him and tried not to make his hold too desperate. This was such a thoughtful gift. Rafi spoke in his ear, "Thanks for being my friend."

Jonathan patted his back in return, savoring being in his arms in that moment.

Rafi tightened his grip. “Fuck, I miss him all the time, you know. Not just today.”

“I know.”

Rafi held on for another minute and then cleared his throat. “Want to have a drink? Wine for me, beer for you?”

Jonathan placed a hand on his chest. “Oh, you sweet talker you.” Rafi seemed to finally get the fact that wine and Jonathan were a lost cause.

“Ass.”

Rafi got their drinks. They sat on his couch, reminiscent of last year. Jonathan even found bad reality television to watch—D-list hip-hop stars and their scripted drama. They sat next to each other and pretended to watch. Neither spoke, comfortable with their silence.

“I wish you would’ve met my dad when he was healthy. He would have gotten a kick out of you.” He took a deep breath. “Did you know he was the first person I came out to? Well, I kind of had to. My first year in college, my dad visited me at my dorm unannounced one morning, and caught me with a closeted phys ed junior who had one hell of a mouth. Nearly sucked my brains out my dick a few times. Suffice to say, after my dad showed up that time, Dad never visited again without calling first.” He chuckled. “My dad had just stood there, staring at me and him, but didn’t say a word. So I’m there trying to figure out what to say because it was *exactly* what it looked like. My father just froze. Dad stood there for a few minutes just staring at the spot ol’ Hoover was sleeping. I actually teared up, could you believe it? Dad finally looks at me, and I’m crying, waiting for something. He just turns and leaves. I’m thinking it’s the end of the world, and fucking stood there with the door unlocked, imagining the end of life as I know it. He comes back to my room twice in who knows how many minutes—it could’ve been a year for how long it felt. The last time he hugs me and asks if all the girls I brought around the house were a lie. I told him they weren’t, that I’m bi. He just nods and sits. Then he asks questions, so many questions, but he stayed all day and told me he loved me after every answer.”

“Great man. You know he knew how much you loved him right?”

“The best dad I could ever have,” he choked. Jonathan nudged Rafi’s knee with his. They both looked at their drinks.

“Truth or truth, Weller?”

Jonathan didn't even play-argue this time. "Truth."

"Good choice." He smiled. "How did you come out to your family?"

"I told both my parents once I started dating Hugo. My mother was more upset that I reminded her she was a parent than about me being gay. She's a world away, living in Trinidad. We're indifferent toward one another for the most part. My dad and his wife were fine with it. My dad said he was more surprised when I had girlfriends. My stepmom is totally supportive of anything I do. She finally gets to be a parent through me. I could tell her I'm a Martian, and she'd probably join a UFO-support group. She's phenomenal." Jonathan ran his fingers through his loose hair and shook his head. "No horror story to tell."

"That's cool. Your father seemed like a pretty chill guy when I met him that time." Rafi met his dad last year when he stopped over Jonathan's one night for paperwork.

Rafi played with his wine glass, looking contemplative. Jonathan watched him, as he always did. Watched the way his lashes touched his cheekbones, the way the light gleamed and made his irises look a totally different shade when he blinked. He started to get lost in the look of his face.

"My dad never told anyone about that day in my dorm room. *I* never told anyone about that day to be honest."

"Thanks for trusting me to share."

"You're my best friend, of course, I'll share."

"But what about Vijay? Or Marco?" Or half the other people Rafi always seemed to hang out with? He wasn't fishing. They were Rafi's friends before he came into the picture.

Rafi held his gaze from the corner of his eye. "You're the one who sees the real me. You get me."

How could he not love Rafi? With one hand, he squeezed Rafi's arm in response, and the other, he grabbed his bottle of beer and took a healthy gulp, nearly choking. *He loved him?* He tried to recall all of his feelings about his friend over time. All the times he had wished to be next to Rafi in those pictures of him enjoying life. All the times he breathed in his scent, that mixture of cologne and the spicy scent of his skin. The ways Rafi would look at him at the right angle, and he could swear he could feel flutters in his chest. The lust...

God, the lust he felt for his friend. *Oh Christ... he was in love with him.* He was a fucking cliché, in love with a man who wasn't looking for a relationship.

This could only end with heartache and unsatisfied boners.

Chapter Five

Jonathan Weller now lived in the dawn of Rafi, the age of love and lust, in the year of Balian. He wouldn't lie to himself and think he was mistaking friendship for love. He quit denying his feelings because he wanted the whole Balian package.

His heart might've realized it before his brain acknowledged his feelings. He was more of the head-in-the-sand type. In his twenty-nine years, he'd been in two long-term relationships. And in both, he was always the one pursued, never one to make the first move. Never the first one to realize they were in love and definitely not the first one to say it. He always wanted to be sure before saying the words to someone else, be sure of himself.

The way he felt about Rafi was new territory for him. Jonathan needed to analyze and process what the hell he was going to do. Walking around half-mast whenever Rafi was near, for the rest of his life, would not be a valid choice. He also knew having to watch Rafi fuck his way through the next couple of years and pretend to be fine with it couldn't be an option for him. Not if he wanted to stay sane or remain in his life.

And not having Rafi in his life was definitely not a choice.

Trying to woo someone? New territory. And with the new frontier came the fears. The biggest being rejection or a negative change in their friendship.

But he had to do something. He walked through the "feelings door", so he couldn't go back.

Jonathan knew Rafi was relationship-material worthy, but his friend just needed to see this for himself... and see Jonathan as a potential partner.

In the meantime, he maintained his best-friend role, unsure what his next step would be.

Weeks passed since his revelation, and summer was almost there. Jonathan was asked to head a big project at Flynn & Reynolds, so his free time was nonexistent. His wooing plans were on hold for the time being as the job got more demanding.

And then an unexpected gift for Rafi fell in his lap.

His coworker was trying to unload her grandmother's kittens at the office. She rescued them from her grandma who couldn't care for them any longer, but her wife was allergic.

“Jonathan, they really are the sweetest. I dare you not to fall in love with these guys.” She waved a picture on her phone, of white-and-gray fur balls with blue eyes, in his face. He agreed; they were the cutest.

“They are adorable.”

Minnie, his coworker, saw that she had hooked him with the pictures and went in for the kill as he inspected the picture for a closer look. “And no fuss. All they need is a good home, someone with a big heart to love them. They are all a bunch of cuddle monsters.”

He couldn’t have pets in his apartment because it was part of his lease. But... Jonathan knew just the person to give it to.

“I’ll take a kitty.”

Minnie smiled triumphantly. “We can go to my house after work. You can choose a kitten.” Jonathan did just that.

Jonathan and Minnie left work and stopped at a local pet chain store before going to her house. Minnie showed him the basic items he’d need since he was clueless about pets in general. He might’ve gone a little overboard with the cat paraphernalia. Once the purchases were done, they headed over to Minnie’s house where he met a grateful and sneezing Rhonda, Minnie’s wife. Rhonda mouthed “thank you”, while Minnie ran down basic kitty care and gave him a number to a vet after he finally selected a kitten that tugged his heartstrings a little harder than the other felines.

He called Rafi while he put his newly purchased cat carrier, complete with meowing kitten, on his front seat. Jonathan put his hand on the cage door, and the kitty rubbed against his fingers, quieting down. Damned if he didn’t like the little bugger already. He was pretty sure Rafi would too.

Rafi picked up. “What’s up?”

“What’re you doing?”

“Getting ready to become one with Netflix.”

Really? “It’s Friday night.”

“I know. I wanted to catch up with this show I caught at the salon. Damn Kami and some of the stylists keep telling me how great it is.” This wasn’t the first time Rafi had stayed in for the weekend. It just became more prevalent as the years progressed. He wondered if Rafi noticed. “What are you doing? Come over, man.”

He looked at the feline. “Not a problem. I’ll be right there.”

“Get ready, buddy.” He couldn’t stop looking at the big blue eyes. Reminded him of his friend’s. “Do your best to look adorable. You’ve got a new owner to gain.”

Jonathan was buzzed into the building. He didn’t have to knock when he got to Rafi’s floor since he waited for Jonathan in the doorway. “Hey! It’s felt like forever. You look—what is that?” He pointed to the carrier.

“My coworker told me his breed is called ragdoll. Apparently this is great because they’re very mellow.”

Rafi squinted his eyes. “Interesting. Why do you have a ragdoll cat here? Are you cat sitting?”

“He’s yours. Happy birthday.”

Rafi folded his arms. “My birthday is in November.”

“He needed a good home. Yours was the best one I thought of.”

“Why not your home?”

“Can’t have pets. Part of my lease. Look at him.” Jonathan held the carrier next to his face. An errant strand of hair got in the way, and he put it behind his ear. “He had to be given away. My coworker can’t keep him or his siblings. She told me his sad little history. It made me think about the best person he could be given to.”

“And I was your first choice?” Rafi looked at the carrier like it was a big pile of poop.

“Of course. C’mon take him out, hold him.” Rafi moved back to let Jonathan in, and took his plastic bags filled with cat products. “I always wanted a pet. Him living with you would be the best of both worlds, well, if you keep him that is.” Jonathan opened the carrier, and the kitten walked to Jonathan’s hand, the fur ball helping his sales pitch. They made a great team. While holding and petting the kitten’s back, Jonathan rubbed his face in the soft fur. The kitten purred on cue. Rafi’s heart had to melt just a little, Jonathan’s did. This moment was impossible not to soften the hardest of hearts.

“He is cute. I’ll give him that. I just don’t know if I’m cat material.”

“Of course you are. He needs love and belly rubs. Well, food too. Water would also go a long way. Hold him for a second.”

Rafi held out his hand hesitantly. The kitten looked at Rafi and gave a tentative meow. His eyebrows softened as he stroked the kitten's back while Jonathan held him against his chest. "Give him here. He hasn't clawed me yet."

"Oh kitty wouldn't do that. Would you, Kitty?"

Rafi scooped the cat out of his hands, inadvertently brushing against his nipple, which hardened in response. He was grateful his shirt wasn't thin enough for it to be prominent.

"What's his name?"

"I thought you'd like the honors. Since he's yours."

"Didn't say I'd keep him."

"Didn't say you wouldn't, either. Look at Kitty. He loves you already."

"Kitty? You can't name a kitten Kitty."

"I needed a stand-in for now. 'Hey You' is overrated."

"A face as adorable as this, he needs a boss name to match."

"Boss?" It had a certain ring to it.

"I'm going to have to ask you to refrain from naming my cat."

Jonathan grinned. "He's your cat now?"

"Maybe." The way he cradled the kitty, it seemed like it *was* his kitty.

"Don't deny the feline pull. It's strong. I'll help you with Kitty's care."

"How about Mateo?"

"Mateo the kitty?" That was different.

"I always loved the name Mateo."

"Mateo?" The cat looked up and looked toward both of the men.

"He knows his name. Well, Mateo, looks like you're bunking here for the next two weeks. If it doesn't work out, I have a niece that would never let you go."

Jonathan was sure his niece would never get to keep Mateo. "Truth or truth, Balian?"

He met his eyes, and Jonathan felt sucker punched from the picture he made holding the wee *furllet* against his chest. He forgot to ask his question.

“What’s the question, Weller?”

“Why Mateo?” He seemed to know what to name the cat right away.

“Hot name. This is a handsome cat, so he needs a hot name for when he grows up and macks on potential mates.”

“Oh yeah... you’re keeping him. Let me show you the stuff I bought.” He went to the overstuffed shopping bags.

Rafi told Mateo while Jonathan lugged the bags over to the pair, “I’m a sucker for big brown eyes. And apparently big blue eyes too.”

Jonathan tried to pretend he didn’t hear that, but his steps were lighter for the rest of the night. He ended up staying over for the weekend, both of them enamored with Mateo. It was disgusting, two men fawning over a cat. But it happened. Especially to Rafi aka Mr. Two-Week-Trial. Jonathan knew this gift was the right choice if the next week’s morning messages from Rafi were any indication.

Rafi: *Look at him sleeping. He’s the cutest fucking thing ever.*

Rafi: *OMG look at him curled up on the pillow. Like he’s been here all his life.*

Rafi: *Look.*

Rafi: *At.*

Rafi: *Him.*

Rafi: *Wanna go with me to the vet?*

The steady stream of pinging woke Jonathan up with dry eyes and morning wood. He checked the clock, nine fifteen a.m. Groaning, he checked the messages with one eye opened.

Jonathan: *Are you seriously texting me the same picture of Mateo sleeping on a Saturday morning? I would like to catch up on my sleep today. Good night, Balian.*

Jonathan: *P.S. so much for not liking him*

Jonathan rolled over in bed, placing his smartphone on his pillow. He thought he had gotten the last word in and would play with himself when he woke up later.

Rafi: *So are you coming or what?*

Rafi sent a selfie of him and Mateo, both wearing shades... shirtless.

This was the first time in his life that he was jealous of a cat. Now, he had a picture to jerk off to since he was awake. Working out certainly had its benefits. He rolled over and searched his drawer for lube.

Waste not, want not.

Good news: Mateo was a great excuse for the friends to spend even more time together.

Bad news: Jonathan spent more time around his friend.

There was a difference between how he felt now and before that realization. The constant contact with Rafi—not being able to have him for his own, not being able to sleep next to him, not being able to kiss those fucking lips that rarely stopped moving when he was around—was slowly disassembling him inside.

The quarterly visit in July? Rafi did his routine, talked about work, his family, and not being able to remember the last time he was rip-roaring drunk or got laid. Jonathan messed up entering an entire month of receipt data when Rafi mentioned his abstinence.

All he had were mental images of both of them fucking on the desk. He hadn't had sex in forever either. How easy would it be to mention that to Rafi and then push the paperwork off the desk and offer himself as a sacrifice?

He let Rafi ramble on about trying to hit up a couple of bars within the next month, while he tried to cover himself by pulling his shirt from his pants, without garnering any attention.

When they did go out, more than a month had passed. It ended up being after Labor Day when they could finally find a date that worked for both of them. Rafi did his usual, though it was just the two of them that night—no Vijay, no Marco, or any other of fifty million acquaintances. Jonathan should have worked up the nerve then, but he didn't. If Rafi just gave him one sign, one indication that he was interested in him... he'd... well he didn't know what he'd do. He couldn't think past tackling him.

Rafi was in his element that night, stylish, and slightly sweaty from dancing in the lounge they were settled in. Jonathan watched his friend saunter his way off the dance floor to where he was sitting. Rafi tugged his hand, wearing a

determined look on his face. Jonathan was joining him on the floor. No was not an option.

Jonathan got up and let Rafi lead the way to the middle of the dance floor. He started to dance with Rafi, otherwise he'd look like a jackass standing there while Rafi gyrated in front of him. Rafi smiled and grabbed his hips to get him to move faster to the beat. Jonathan closed his eyes and let himself go.

"Now you got it. Weller." The song changed to another dance song, the beat a little frenetic, but Jonathan got into the groove. Rafi spun him around and leaned closer to his back, still touching his hips. Jonathan moved his hands to graze Rafi's, moving together to the beat.

They kept this up for two more songs. Jonathan was happy he didn't face Rafi because he was sure he'd look like a loser with the grin he couldn't stop sporting. He kept his eyes closed, enjoying that he was with Rafi at that moment.

Rafi's chest rubbed against his sweaty back, his hands hovering on Jonathan's sides when Jonathan heard, "Hey."

Jonathan turned his head, looking into Rafi's eyes. *This is it. He can finally tell how I feel.* Jonathan would say yes to whatever he suggested because he was ready for Rafi.

"That guy to your left, with the green skinny jeans has been eye fucking you for the last couple of songs. You should make your move, Weller."

He stopped hearing the music, stopped dancing. Rafi nudged his head toward the direction where, indeed, there was a man in green pants boldly looking their way.

"I'll leave you to it, man. Gonna call it a night, take a cab home. Go get 'em, tiger." Rafi smacked his ass playfully and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

Jonathan turned to watch his friend leave alone. Green Pants got tired of waiting and sidled next to him, offering to buy him a drink. He politely declined, choosing to go to the bar alone. He needed another beer or something stronger. He didn't know what to do about his Rafi situation. What was that? He could have sworn Rafi felt their closeness, would have made his move. What was wrong with him? Rafi just didn't seem to think of him as more than a friend. Was he just dragging out a lost cause?

He stood at the bar, sipping his drink and replaying the night's events. His hope didn't diminish.

Jonathan called a cab for himself later, not feeling drunk but not taking chances. He sent a message to Rafi to have a good night. There was no response from his friend that night or in the morning.

By afternoon, he was slightly worried. His phone pinged later that evening, but it was from Hugo telling him to pick a weekend because they were going hiking. After checking with his schedule, Jonathan gave him a date, and then another message pinged right after he hit send. This time from Rafi.

Hey, overslept. Hope your night was a great one. Going to eat and sleep some more, cuddle up with Mateo. Later.

Rafi was silent since last night, and that's all he had to say? Jonathan looked at the text again. It was polite but closer to brushing him off. Shit, maybe a Rafi-free weekend was what Jonathan needed. Time to analyze what happened and form what his next move was going to be because he wasn't sure he could stick his head in the sand for much longer.

Rafi resumed texting him Mateo updates at random times, but he didn't get another invite to go out. Before he knew it, Rafi's dad's birthday was near. He ordered a bouquet of daisies to be sent to his house, coinciding with his and Hugo's hiking adventure.

When he and Hugo arrived at the hiking trail, Rafi sent couple of "best bud" images and thanked him with a picture of Mateo in front of the glass vase.

Hugo asked, "What did Rafi send to make you light up like a jack-o'-lantern?"

Jonathan grabbed his bag, handing Hugo his bigger one. He might've overpacked for their trip. Jonathan was prepared for any type of emergency.

Jonathan passed his phone, with the latest Rafi picture, while he strapped on his backpack.

"Cute cat." He handed him his phone and led them onto the trail. "You two hook up yet?" No beating around the bush for Hugo.

And thank God. "No." Then he proceeded to vent to Hugo about the last time he and Rafi went out. He purged his feelings while hiking through the woods, pausing to catch his breath at certain points. Maybe he should have gone jogging those times Rafi invited him because he was a little out of shape. And they hadn't encountered any steep inclines yet.

"Why haven't you made your move?" Hugo raised an eyebrow. "If you're worried about Rafi not returning your feelings, the man is *sending* you cat pictures of a cat which you two *share*."

“He also tried to set me up to get new dick.”

“And did you jump on said new dick?” He didn’t wait for Jonathan to answer. “No? Then it doesn’t matter.”

“Can you revert to puberty at a later age? Is that possible? I’m all mixed up for this man. He walks in a room, and I’m half-mast, writing sonnets in my head. And he’s such a great guy. He doesn’t realize his potential. I just want him. I’m tired of the friendship and the emotions and not getting the rest of him.”

“Then do something about it. Make a gesture, and if it doesn’t work out, well, I’ll help pick up the pieces, and we’ll put you together again for the next guy. Though I’m going to be honest here, I think Rafi will say yes. And if I had to choose a guy to follow after me, he’d be the one for you.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t need the approval but Hugo’s blessing didn’t hurt.

“You’re welcome. Though watching you get squirmy for him amuses me as a side benefit. Now move your ass, we have more ground to cover.”

Jonathan used the rest of the time trying to plot what his next step would be. He had to lay it all out, take his lumps no matter what they may be. He ran a few ideas with Hugo, but he ultimately decided cooking a romantic dinner at his place would be the best thing.

He messaged Rafi when he got home before he talked himself out of it.

Jonathan: *Balian, when you are free next?*

Rafi: *Why? Where we going?*

Jonathan: *My place. I want to cook Italian.*

Rafi: *You still coming for the quarterly next week?*

Jonathan: *Yeah?*

Rafi: *After work, you and me then.*

Oh, he was ready. He’d keep the romantic aspect of their dinner a surprise. It’d be cool.

He barely slept that night from worrying.

Chapter Six

Jonathan looked at the clock again for the hundredth time in disbelief. Rafi was over two hours late for his surprise seduction dinner that was now ruined. That damn Vijay. He was sure he and Rafi were guzzling drinks at this point, and “fun time Rafi” forgot about Jonathan and their plans.

Earlier, he completed his quarterly visit without Rafi, which was good in a way since his horny ass would have probably passed out from his nerves. Since Rafi was out at the spa, Kami was in the office. She talked him into a much-needed haircut. His hair had grown to shoulder length by then. She brought it to his nape, leaving enough length to put it out of the way when he wanted. He missed a text from Rafi while Kami had her scissors out—Marco got engaged again. He was going out for drinks and would be late by a half hour, tops.

Jonathan looked to the clock again, just about ready to pull his newly cut hair out at that point. Jonathan was sure the meal he’d cooked was dried beyond recognition in the warmer. He stared at the set table, the candles waiting to be lit, and wine sitting in melted ice. Ruined. The night was ruined. Maybe it was a sign to not even waste his time.

Frowning at the clock, he was pissed and disappointed... but mostly pissed. He took his frustration out by actually cleaning his living room. He planned on moving his hiking gear to the empty bedroom since his overpacked bag still sat on the floor from the last time he used it. It bulged from all the supplies he’d crammed inside, so full he’d never closed the top properly. His scoutmaster would not approve if he ever saw the travesty.

He tried sorting out the rolls of toilet paper and nylon cord chaos he had on top when his doorbell rang insistently along with a couple of hasty knocks. He jumped and dropped the heavy bag, spilling the contents on the floor, including the toilet paper and cord. He nearly tripped on a plastic garbage bag in his haste to get to the door.

“I’m coming!” He yelled at the door while righting himself. His mood had not improved, and yet he rushed to answer the door. He was angry at himself.

“That’s what she said!” Someone answered back rowdily. It sounded like Vijay. He rolled his eyes and opened the door to find Rafi holding on Vijay’s shoulders, looking fifty-one shades of intoxicated.

“It’s Weller! Vijay, it’s Weller! He’s the bestest friend of my friends!” He waved his arm and nearly fell over. Rafi started to laugh at his mishap. Vijay held him upright and laughed along with Rafi.

Jonathan took in his expensive-looking shirt and dress pants, surprised he looked as neat as he did.

“Weller!” Jonathan did not find Vijay calling him by his last name as endearing as when Rafi did it. “Listen! Rafi totally mixed his drinks, man. He was good after the fifth round, kinda lost him at the tenth. Or maybe it was the ninth. I dunno. I kinda lost track once when Marco’s fiancé brought out this Caribbean moonshine. Forgot how she pronounced it, something exotic. Fucking strong as Teflon, man. I sipped mine but Rafi chugged like a pro.”

“I can see. He can barely stand.”

“Yeah. I was going to bring him home to sleep it off, but he kept talking about you and dinner, so maybe you can feed him, yeah? I have Marco’s future sister-in-law waiting in the car. She’s single and horny, so…” Vijay handed Rafi to Jonathan with a smile. Jonathan braced his arms under his armpits. Rafi smiled and touched his face. “So pretty, Weller.” He threw his arms around his shoulders and leaned heavily into him. “The best.” He dropped his head on his shoulder and played with his hair.

“You good, man? Cool. See ya!” Vijay ran down the short flight of stairs and jogged to the waiting car without a backward glance.

“Wait! Vijay! What—” What was he supposed to do with a drunk Rafi? If he put his mind to it, plenty of things, but he’d rather have his best friend coherent before anything sexual began.

“Can’t be late. Weller’s making dinner.” Rafi held on as Jonathan guided him inside toward the dinner table.

“Too late, Balian.”

“I’m late?” He stopped walking and looked into his eyes. “Fuck me, Weller. This was supposed to be important.”

Like it was my fault. Jonathan pushed him to a chair. “Have a seat, Rafi.”

Rafi tried to sit. Unsteady, he tipped over the big bowl of salad onto his shirt and pants. The wilted salad that was covered in dressing now covered Rafi’s front. Rafi laughed. Jonathan couldn’t help laughing along with him as he tried to pick off the dripping greens without lingering on any of his fun bits.

Rafi was no help, just tilting to the side in the chair, chuckling like having a messy shirt was the best thing ever invented.

Worried about ruining his shirt, Jonathan decided to unbutton it. He'd clean it in his washer and dryer after treating the stain. Unveiling Rafi's toned chest and tiny brown nipples brightened his mood. The dressing was greasy enough to make his chest shine. Watching Rafi's nipples pebble from the cool air made it even better. Trying to tone down his inner perv to a low boil, he tried to focus on the task at hand. Looking at the sopping mess on Rafi's lower half, Jonathan knew he should clean his pants as well. And if he had to remove them, it wasn't a big deal.

"This isn't awkward. Nope." Rafi smiled the smile of the drunk. He patted Jonathan's head, playing with the dark strands. "Going to have to take off your pants, Balian. This wasn't the way I imagined this scenario going." He put the shirt on the table and slid off Rafi's loafers. Rafi lifted his legs for brief moments to help him pull off his shoes.

"You're so good, Weller." We'd see how he felt after Jonathan took off his pants. "So good, so goood!"

He tugged the top of Rafi's pants, looking for the button and zipper head. "Raise up, Rafi. I gotta clean your pants. You knocked the salad over."

"Tossed your salad?" Rafi started to laugh all over again, but he sat up once Jonathan tapped his hips.

"Ha ha ha, funny, Balian. Hold onto my shoulders." Rafi threw both arms around his neck, leaning against him.

"You want in my pants." Jonathan made quick work of dropping Rafi's pants off his hips and tried not to feel guilty.

"I definitely do, you don't know how much." He looked down to pick up the fallen garment and had a mental pause. "You're commando?" Rafi's pants weren't tangled with his underwear. He couldn't believe there was a naked, drunk Rafi standing in front of him. His inappropriate boner situation made itself present.

A dream come true, and he couldn't do anything about it until his friend was sober. And there was a probability it still wouldn't happen.

"Sit, Rafi." He tried to keep his stare at the visible genitals to a minimum, but Rafi's penis was worth the prolonged glance. Thick, cut and veiny, he could

just feel that fat head resting on his tongue. Or sliding down his throat. He groaned softly as Rafi plopped down and leaned to the side, nearly toppling out of the chair.

Jonathan ignored the devil on his shoulder that wanted to ask Rafi to bend over to give him the full view. That would raise him to a midlevel pervert and he had to remember to keep the perv to a minimum. Rafi kept his eyes closed and smiled. “Weller, I’m a little sleepy. Gimme a few minutes for dinner. M’kay?”

“Wait, Rafi. Hold on.” He propped Rafi upright with a hand, trying very hard not to look down. He should get water into his friend, sobering him up, and help with the impending hangover. Then he worried about Rafi throwing up... maybe it was a good idea he took his clothing off. Jonathan tried to prioritize the most pressing needs. He needed to prop his friend up before searching for water since he seemed to want to be one with the floor.

Floor... floor, the rope! He could use that to tie Rafi to the chair. He let Rafi tip to the side as gently as he could and ran to the gray cord. He worried about Rafi asphyxiating, so he rushed back to Rafi and his cock (looking couldn’t be avoided). Rafi’s eyes were still closed. He moved to prop his friend up once more, this time twining the rope around his torso in the upright position. He looked over Rafi’s shoulder, and his friend still wore a dopey grin, eyes closed, and arms barely on the armrests. He finished tying him to the chair, his knowledge of knots finally getting some use. The rope wasn’t so tight that Rafi couldn’t escape when he wanted to.

“Rafi?”

“Hmm.”

“Let me get a glass of water, okay?”

Rafi dropped his head on his shoulder, grunted something under his breath.

Jonathan gathered his clothes, placing them on the kitchen counter. He filled a glass with water, turned off the warmer, and returned to his trussed-up friend. He eyed the five o’clock shadow, the dark curls, olive-toned skin, and open mouth. He totally hit midlevel perv at that point.

Rafi snorted or snored, sleeping it off.

“Rafi?” No answer. “Balian?”

His friend snoozed on. He put the glass of water next to the rolls and butter on the table. His night was not going according to plan at all. He searched for a

blanket to cover Rafi's lap that he wouldn't care if Rafi hurled on and went about cleaning his naked friend's clothes.

He got the stains out, washed, and put the clothes to dry—thankful they weren't "dry clean only." He didn't want to disturb Rafi unless necessary, so he ruled out dressing him in anything of his own.

He wanted to be close by in case Rafi needed anything when he came to, so he sat across from him at the table of lukewarm food. He poured a glass of wine for himself and waited for the dryer. He took a sip and made a face. He set the glass down. He only got it for their romantic dinner, knowing Rafi would enjoy it. He just couldn't get into the taste.

Rafi was secure in his seat, breathing normally. Jonathan closed his eyes for just a few seconds, the anxiety of the day gone, leaving him closer to sleepy. His few seconds turned into a few hours when he jolted awake and checked the clock on the wall. He smelled the food and remembered the ruined dinner and naked Rafi.

Rafi hadn't moved, thanks to the rope. The blanket pooled in his lap, hiding his fun bits from plain sight. He was jealous of the blanket. He went to hang Rafi's clothes in the closet, figuring his friend would want them when he woke up. He didn't think trying to dress him now would go over well, should he come to.

His stomach rumbled when he came back to check on Rafi. "Fuck it, might as well eat something."

He picked up the butter knife and slathered butter on the roll, devouring it in three bites. He grabbed another, buttering the roll in haste he was so hungry. He forgot to put down the knife, still holding it as he wondered if he could stretch over far enough to take Rafi's glass of water. He didn't want the warm wine.

He looked over at Rafi's chest and face. Then he noticed Rafi's eyes were open. He was the picture of serene, looking off to the side.

"Good, you're awake." He stuffed the bread into his mouth and chewed as fast as he could.

"Uh-huh," Rafi said slowly.

"Are you thirsty?"

"I could go for a drink." Rafi raised his thick eyebrows. "But I have a better question."

“What is that?”

“Can you put down the knife?”

“What?”

“Dear God, do you plan on *Misery*-ing me?”

“*What?*”

“Kathy Bates—that writer guy—sledgehammer to the legs.”

“Where is this coming from?” Rafi eyed his hand, with the butter knife, as if he held an actual sledgehammer in his hands.

“You try waking up tied to a chair butt-naked with your friend holding a butter knife in your face. You see what you come up with.”

“I had to tie you so you wouldn’t fall over. It was the first thing that came to mind.”

“And you had to tie me up naked?”

“You made a mess on your clothes, dropped salad dressing all over yourself. I cleaned you up. How was I to know you were commando?”

“So you looking my way with a butter knife doesn’t mean you want to carve me up and eat me with a nice Chianti?”

“You’re mixing up your serial killer movies. If I wanted to skin you, I wouldn’t use a butter knife. You insult my Eagle Scout capabilities. And I would’ve done a better job with the rope—at least, if I planned on murdering you. Roll your shoulders and you’ll see you can get out of the chair with no effort.”

“Dude, it’s like kidnapping.” Jonathan thought about it. Maybe it was, but it wasn’t his intention. “I wake up, and you have a set table, unlit candles, flowers, and wine. Wait—you hate wine.”

“I do. I really do. Not the bottle you gave me, though. I keep it in my cabinet because you gave it to me.”

“What’s going on?”

“You want to shrug your shoulders out of those ropes? It’ll make me feel less like a kidnapper—”

“Which you technically are—”

“*Unintentional*, Rafi.” He waited for Rafi to remove the rope from around his shoulders. “Better. How are you feeling?”

“Like this is the start to one interesting story. You went all out with dinner tonight from the looks of it. What’s the occasion?” Rafi held the blanket against his groin, looking comfortable.

“Truth or truth?”

Rafi creased his brow. “Not getting my clothes back yet?”

“I’m trying not to lose my nerve here.”

“What’s wrong?” He sounded sincerely concerned.

“I’m in love with you.” He took a deep breath and held Rafi’s stare, getting lost in the blue for a few seconds. “You don’t have to return my feelings. You don’t have to do anything. Hell, you could walk out the door now. Though I’d suggest letting me give you back your clothes first, and I’ll drop you home. You shouldn’t be driving, and your car is who knows where. But I love you. Romantically. And as a friend. I want to be yours. I want you to be mine. I don’t want pictures or selfies or recounting of what you did at whatever new place you discover. I want to be there with you. I want to share those things, experience them first hand. I want you, and I want a relationship. I can’t be your fuck buddy. I just can’t. I want to share myself *with* you. I had this romantic dinner planned out, and it’s shot to hell. We can have dry pasta and warm wine, and damn it, Rafi, say something.”

Rafi stared back and removed his blanket, folded it and put it on the table next to the butter. He stood up to take the wine glass on the table in front of Jonathan. He chugged the warm wine and made a face, all while being naked. Jonathan prided himself for maintaining eye contact.

“That’s disgusting.” He sat down with his legs open. “You didn’t ask a question, Jonathan. You’re supposed to ask me a question.” He smiled. “All these years, and you mess up my game.”

“Would you like to be in a relationship with me exclusively?”

“Well shit, I thought you would’ve kissed me first. Or asked for one. Or asked if you should take your clothes off too. I mean, it’s only fair. You got to look at me, and your blush says you did, Weller.” He waved a pointed finger. “I want to see your body too. You could have asked why I couldn’t find someone to have sex with for months because a certain, skinny, man-bun-wearing brunet

with big brown eyes who drives me wild wouldn't stop playing in my brain. Or why the thought of you with Hugo or anyone else makes me feel sick to my stomach. Like I nearly lost it when we were dancing at that club the other night. Couldn't stick around to watch you with that other guy." He took a deep breath and held his gaze. "Or why in the hell I share things with only you, like I seriously enjoy sharing parts of me, with *you*. Or why I like touching you so much that it's part of a habit now."

Jonathan swallowed and looked at his friend who smiled in return. He looked at his cock and back to his face. Rafi winked. "I love you too, Weller. You're my best friend. Never had one of those, not going to lose you now. How about we go about this with me in pants at least, yeah?"

They both stood. Jonathan moved to get the hangers. But Rafi moved behind him, turned Jonathan around and pushed him against the wall. They faced each other. Rafi stood so close, Jonathan couldn't stop from breathing heavily. He had naked Rafi in front of him after all this time.

"I lied. I couldn't care less about being naked in front of you. I just want to be closer to you." Rafi peered up into his eyes. "You never had to work for it."

Jonathan tilted his head and kept his arms at his sides. "What do you mean?"

"Any relationship you've had, the other person made the moves."

"I thought my friendly kidnap was a gesture of my intentions."

"I like ropes. They can be fun. But you're going to ask me out on a proper date. And leave your rope at home."

"Well—" He was cut off when Rafi pressed his torso against his. It was one thing to lust for Rafi's body from afar, but it was another to have a naked, hot chest against his clothed one. He could just about feel—oh yes, he felt Rafi's stiffening dick against his.

"Well?"

"Rafi, I want to kiss you."

"No," he teased as he rubbed his lips against Jonathan's. They stared and seemed to breathe each other in.

When Rafi pressed his lips against Jonathan's, he swore his heart leapt through his throat. Rafi rested his mouth against his and smiled against his lips. Jonathan smiled too.

Rafi grabbed his face with both hands and opened his mouth. Jonathan gripped his shoulders and slid his tongue inside for his first taste of Rafi. They both sipped and savored each other, feeling the other man out, finding the right rhythm. They turned their heads just to find the right angle to kiss and linger. Jonathan was ready to blow right then and there. He took one hand off Rafi's shoulder to slide in between their bodies and unbutton his pants. He was proud of himself for not grabbing Rafi's erection the moment they kissed.

"Ah, ah, Weller." Rafi widened the space between their bodies, taking his mouth away as well. "Hands off until we have a proper date. This is my first time starting a relationship. I want to do it by the books. Christ, I don't think I ever said that to a partner. And fuckity fuck, I have a partner."

"Can tonight count as a date?"

"I like the way you're thinking, but sadly, it can't. Now show me my pants before I take back my plan and throw your sexy ass on the floor. Then the couch. Then the counter and then your bed."

Jonathan looked at the engorged cock. C'mon. He couldn't be serious with his cock standing at attention, looking thick and veiny. If he just gave him enough room, he could drop to his knees and wrap his lips around Rafi's erection.

"Don't give me those eyes. I'm going to use the bathroom, put my clothes on, and eat. You wanna join me?"

Jonathan grabbed him for another kiss and pulled himself away from temptation before he offered himself as a pants-less sacrifice. They reluctantly separated. Though he was a little disappointed at not being under Rafi that very minute, he did enjoy watching his ass as he walked to the bathroom.

"First date tomorrow?" Jonathan called out to Rafi outside the door.

"Thought you'd never ask!" Rafi yelled over the toilet flushing.

How romantic.

Chapter Seven

Jonathan barely slept that night, which he paid for the next day at work. It took him forever to complete ledgers he could normally do in his sleep. When he finally left his client's house, he checked his phone. He needed to search for caffeine. Man cannot survive on the fumes of love alone.

He'd missed a series of texts from his lover? No, boyfriend. It was going to take some time to sink in.

Rafi: *Weller, we really are going to do this, right?*

Rafi: *Because if this is a dream, I'm going to be pissed.*

Rafi: *Can't wait for tonight.*

Rafi: *I also don't condone drinking moonshine on a weeknight. That's for the weekend.*

Mr. I-Don't-Get-Hangovers finally suffered like the rest of us common folk? Jonathan chuckled as he answered him back.

Jonathan: *You welching out on our date? My first time asking, and I struck out.*

Jonathan: ;)

Jonathan: *If you'd stayed over last night, I'd have given you the perfect hangover cure.*

He didn't get the key in the ignition before Rafi answered him back.

Rafi: *I never welch. Take that back.*

Rafi: *I wish I had slept over. Would have loved waking up next to you.*

Rafi: *Never done that before either.*

Rafi: *Christ, you'll be my first. Ha!*

Rafi: *Not hungover. I'm just... tired. And maybe a little nauseated. Maybe.*

Rafi: *We're going out tonight.*

Rafi: *Been thinking about it since you kissed me.*

Jonathan discovered he could survive on the love fumes and caffeine to get through the day. It involved the right titration.

By the time he met up with Rafi, he was a ball of twitching nerves. Jonathan didn't know how to rate the success of their date since it wasn't that different from going to dinner as friends. They went to eat at their favorite diner, nothing too fancy or out of the ordinary.

Well maybe the hand holding was out of their norm. And the kisses.

Damn, could Rafi kiss. And he was readily available to join their mouths together whenever Jonathan fidgeted... which was a lot. It helped some with the anxiousness.

"You're making it weird." Rafi chewed on ice from his glass. He drank water and ginger ale throughout their meal.

Jonathan nodded and drank his water.

"What are you freaked out about?"

Jonathan blurted out, "I want it to be the best date you've ever had." He didn't know why he felt intimidated but he couldn't help it.

Rafi tangled their legs together under the table. "We have that covered. You don't need to impress me or worry. What else?"

"I don't want you to get bored of me."

"Also, don't have to worry about that. You have this rope bondage thing that we need to put to good use. And I'm sure we'll discover a metric ton of other things we're going to be good at together. Anything else?"

"You're very calm."

Rafi started conversationally, "Well, to be honest... I've wanted to bend you over a lot of flat surfaces since that first day I met you. It's never changed. I'm happy I didn't try to do it back then because I wouldn't have gained a best friend. Also glad some other chump isn't in my shoes right now because if there was ever somebody to be my partner, it would be you. Now quit being in your head, and be here with me. Okay? Do you want to get the check, so we can move to the next portion of our date?"

"What's the next portion of our date?"

"I drop you off at home, kiss, and grope you good night. Then we head back to our respective beds, hard, and wanting each other the next day."

“Why wouldn’t we just have sex?”

The look Rafi gave him promised pure filth. “We will, but I don’t want you to think this is a one-off. I have a pattern. I want to break it—for me and for you.”

Jonathan signaled the waiter. “Check, please.”

They paid and walked to Rafi’s car. *His boyfriend?* It would take some time to get used to referring to Rafi like that in his head, much less out loud. His boyfriend played with his fingers the entire trip back to Jonathan’s place. He could get used to this.

Rafi walked him to his door. Jonathan waited for Rafi to make his move. Rafi stood there patiently. “Weller, what I’d like to do to you probably shouldn’t have witnesses... unless you’re into that.”

“All of that trouble for a kiss?” Jonathan turned to unlock the door. He was already half-hard the entire date. Why not fully tent his pants? He barely made it inside before his boyfriend was on him.

Rafi pressed him from behind, brushing his erection on his ass. Jonathan stopped in his tracks, rubbing back for a short span.

Rafi wrapped his arm around his waist. “About that plan I mentioned earlier tonight. I think my boyfriend’s first idea was a better one. Who am I to go against an awesome plan?” Rafi kicked the door closed, from the sound of it. Jonathan didn’t care as long as he got to kiss his friend. He pushed Rafi against the door. Both men grabbed the other, sliding hands around their torsos as they made out.

Rafi curled his tongue inside his mouth while his hand played with his bun. Jonathan felt the band release and his hair loosen. Rafi tugged on his hair while Jonathan moved his mouth to the side of his neck. He sucked on the pulse point while Rafi sucked on his ear.

Jonathan panted, “What about making an example?”

“Weller, we’ve been practically dating for four years. I think it’s time.” Rafi started to hump his groin. “Don’t you agree?”

Jonathan liked that idea so much he pulled off Rafi’s leather jacket and threw it to the ground. Rafi got the message and took off Jonathan’s jean jacket. They stood apart to strip in front of one another. Once they were done, they each took an eyeful of each other’s bodies. Rafi turned Jonathan around,

guiding him to the bedroom with his hands on Jonathan's hips. He squawked. "You have a tattoo above your ass? Why did I not know this?" He felt Rafi touch the dragon he had across his lower back.

"Hugo and I got one during spring break, sophomore year."

"Listen, I like the guy, but let's not talk about him when we're naked okay? It's going to be only me and you in that bed tonight, Weller."

They scrambled onto the sheets, kissing, and groping like Rafi promised earlier that night. Jonathan squirmed under him, held onto his waist, and flipped them over so he was on top. He frothed against Rafi, looking down to see their cocks trickling precum. He nearly grabbed both of them to playfully jerk them off, but he remembered lube. He leaned over to the side drawer.

Rafi must've read his mind because he spat in his hand and gripped the both of them. He pressed their hard-ons in one palm and stroked. Jonathan opened the tube and squirted the slick into their palms, joining Rafi's nimble hand.

He played with Rafi's thick head, flicking his slit, which Rafi apparently liked if the force he bucked his hips with was any way to tell. Jonathan pushed his hips down, their friction making him even harder. They worked simultaneously to get each other off. The bed slammed against the wall from the force of their grinding hips.

"Wait," Rafi gasped out. Jonathan leaned down to lick his collarbone. "I wanted to fuck you." They stared into each other's eyes, breathing deeply. "You're going to make me come too soon. Been hard all night." Rafi bit his shoulder and then kissed the mark.

"Same here." It felt like it had been a yearlong hard-on, based on the way he felt at the moment. "We can do that next time. My last condom is in my wallet." He hadn't had to go condom shopping in a while. He'd kick his own ass once they were done but he could not move from the bed, not in that hot and heavy moment. He felt too good.

"Pants too far." They gasped into each other's mouth. Jonathan tightened his hands over Rafi's, stroking with a sure grip.

"Anal on the second date?"

"Deal." Rafi started to thrust like a madman. The slippery slide of their dicks and desperate pace was beginning to consume Jonathan. "Or in the morning." They brought their mouths back together, tongue fucking each other

as they fisted their cocks to their hearts' content. Their movements became more frantic as they neared completion.

Jonathan started to come first, his semen spurting over their combined fingers. He flicked Rafi's urethra again, pressing down. He moved his head to suck on his nipples in between breaths as he came.

"Fuck!" Rafi shouted as his ejaculate joined Jonathan's. They twitched and trembled, riding high on their feelings.

Jonathan rested his head on Rafi's chest, wiping his hands on the sheets. Rafi did the same and held his head, tangled his fingers in his loose hair. They grinned and pecked their lips, with splattered cum in between their bodies.

"Why is it that we can't stick to a plan?"

Jonathan shrugged. "We work better when we play it by ear. There are no exact rules. We just make them up as we go along." He licked the sweat off the side of Rafi's neck, so content.

When he stopped, Rafi grunted. "We should clean off."

"We should."

They didn't move, searching each other's eyes instead. Being in the arms of the one you loved made the difference for Jonathan. The way Rafi beamed back with a sleepy grin, Jonathan could tell Rafi was thinking on the same wavelength.

"I can't believe rubbing one out together would feel like this. Why the hell haven't we done this sooner?"

"Because we're ready now."

Rafi didn't answer for a few minutes. The quiet was just as comforting as his snuggling. Jonathan enjoyed the way he would walk his fingers against his back. "I'm going to want to show you off to everyone, you know? I might be a crazy boyfriend for a while. I get total access to touch you, so I'm giving you fair warning, Weller."

"And I get to touch you too." He kissed Rafi's chest.

"Wake me up in an hour, okay? I want to go home."

"Why not sleep here?"

"Mateo." Good point. "And I have an entire box of condoms, Boy Scout."

“Eagle Scout, Balian.”

Rafi slid his hand to his nape to push their faces closer. “Weller, you’ll have a lifetime to explain the difference to me.” And he kissed his explanation right out of him.

The End

Author Bio

L.L. Bucknor loves to read... a lot, drink caffeine (coffee and tea—the best, yum) and has been known to do some things for chocolate (there might or might not be a case pending—j/k, maybe). She writes sometimes too. She used to write slash fan fiction for the masses many years ago. She figured it's time to get back into the game. A staunch believer in happy endings and the various paths one can take to get there.

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