

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

WHAT MATTERS MOST

J.R. Barten

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

WHAT MATTERS MOST

By J.R. Barten

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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Photo Description

The photo is black and white. In it is a middle-aged man with a buzz haircut and a short beard. He is wearing faded jeans. He is shirtless, and his chest is muscular and dusted with dark hair. He is smiling, looking down at a baby cradled in his arms. This child is about three months old, and she's wearing only a diaper. She has a tiny bit of brown hair on her head, and her mouth is wide open as she smiles back at the man holding her.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm the guy that gets up between 8:30 and 9 a.m., works out twice a day, drinks nasty good-for-you smoothies, has his life together and knows where he's going. Then my flighty, quirky, "there's always an adventure on the horizon", haven't seen in almost two years, sister just drops off this tiny pink thing with a note, and says her name is Lilly May. I was hoping it was a dog, like on-my-knees-begging-God it was a dog. Nope. What the hell was I going to do with this, this pink, pinched up face, crying baby?

Thank you so much,

Sincerely,

Brandy

P.S. Please don't do a historical or intense BDSM, I love GFY and first timer's however you don't have to go that route but I love HEA, other than that have fun and let your imagination run wild.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: mountains, hiking, pastry chef, doctor, baby, bipolar, drug use, sweet/no sex, gay for you

Word Count: 28,612

Acknowledgements

I was lucky enough to see this prompt the second time around, and it melted my heart. Thank you, Brandy, for such a wonderful picture and story idea.

Thank you to Jewel, who upon my desperate cry for help in choosing a name for the man in the picture, gave me the brilliant suggestion to call him “Brick”. That led me to Brixton, and I love how well that name fit right into the story.

Thank you to the DRitC crew. This is an amazing event, and you are incredible people who give so much of yourselves. I am humbled and proud to be a part of it.

To my wonderful beta readers and editors: you were there for me in my hour of need. (Which happened to be incredibly last minute, due to my tendency toward procrastination.)

Lastly, thank you to my wife. She’s been with me for sixteen years, and she still loves me. Now that’s something.

J.R. Barten

“Jen”

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Brixton

The gravel crunched beneath Brixton's feet as he wove his way through the pines and aspens lining his favorite trail near the Flatirons. Despite working at the restaurant until almost four in the morning, he was far too preoccupied to sleep. He decided to go for a run instead, knowing it was probably the best option for clearing his mind. To Brixton, nothing compared to the high he felt as he climbed into the mountains, sidestepping boulders and tree roots on his way to the top. No more than fifteen minutes in, and he was already feeling calmer. Thank goodness there was something that brought him peace—even if it was only temporary.

Last night had been a cluster of epic proportions. Not only had he gotten his ass chewed by one of the restaurant's co-owners for changing the chocolate in their best-selling dessert, but he also had to deal with his sister, who thought it was okay to send him a 9-1-1 text right in the middle of their peak service time. Brixton had asked her more times than he could remember not to contact him on a Saturday night unless it was an emergency. Well, apparently Pami thought announcing she was getting married counted as an emergency.

Under normal circumstances, this type of news would probably warrant an urgent message, but Brixton's little sister had been through at least a half-dozen fiancés in the last year alone. She was fickle, impulsive, and because she never stayed in one place for too long, she also didn't stay on her medication consistently. He worried about her a lot. As her primary guardian since she was eight, Brixton had learned the hard way that bipolar disorder, especially combined with ADHD in a young child, was nearly impossible to manage.

Hospitalization was the best solution, so they thought, when she was first diagnosed. The inpatient program did help Pami to a certain extent, but there was no regular outpatient treatment available for grade school kids. So, Brixton did what he could: drove her to her therapist weekly and made sure she took all her meds. He knew that routine was important for Pami—not just as a kid, but especially as a bipolar kid. Working two jobs to keep them in their little apartment, Brixton had very little free time, but what he had, he spent with his sister.

By the time she was ten, she had stabilized. Her doctor finally found a med cocktail that was effective in managing her rapid cycling, as well as her ADHD, without side effects that were *too* awful. Weight gain and anxiety, though they sucked, were not the worst Pami had experienced from prescribed drugs. These she could live with, though, because they were better than the incessant shakes and suicidal thoughts that accompanied some of the others. Despite their hefty price tag, Brixton was committed to keeping his sister on those meds as long as they were still working. If it wasn't for one of Pami's school nurses who helped them apply for medical assistance, Brixton would have been buried in medical debt before he was even legally able to drink.

Now that Pami had graduated high school and decided to "see the world" with her best friend, Tessa, all of that had changed. Brixton had begged her not to leave, foreseeing a future of mood swings and uncontrollable, if not dangerous, behavior. But Pami hadn't listened to him. She had stuffed what she could into her backpack and left only two days after graduation. Now, at age twenty, she was somewhere in the mountains near Portland, Oregon, planning to marry a man she's known less than a month.

Between the restaurant and his sister, Brixton didn't know how much more he could take.

As he approached one of the more popular trailheads at the Bluebell shelter, he took a break to use the bathroom and refill his water bottle. It was only seven thirty, so the parking lot was still pretty empty. Give it a few more hours, and this area would be swarming with hikers of all ages and abilities hoping to catch rock climbers rappelling from the first flatiron. The view from five-thousand feet up was spectacular in itself, but to witness the agility and grace of climbers as they hung precariously from the flatiron's edge—well, that was simply awe inspiring. Even to someone like Brixton, who frequented these trails almost daily, it was still a sight that took his breath away.

"Hey, Brix!"

He looked around the corner of the shelter to see Zeke, a neighbor and Pami's former high school boyfriend, waving at him from one of the picnic tables.

Brixton had always liked Zeke; he was a good kid, smart and had common sense, so he rarely got himself into trouble, which subsequently meant that Pami stayed out of trouble too. To say Brixton was disappointed when they broke up was an understatement. In fact, he may have taken the breakup harder

than Pami did. Zeke had been Brixton's hope of Pami finding a man with a good head on his shoulders, ambitious, and understanding of her mental illness. But when Zeke started college, and Pami decided to leave Boulder to explore, he broke things off with her. Education was important to Zeke, and Pami ditching her scholarship just three weeks before classes started was a deal breaker.

They were still on good terms, and Brixton secretly harbored the hope that they'd get back together again someday. But seeing Zeke with a pretty blonde pressed up against him made Brixton's heart sink to his belly.

"Zeke, how are you?" He made his way over, and Zeke stepped away from the table to give him a hug.

"I'm good. And you? Still making those fancy pastries at the Pearl?"

"I am. In fact I just finished there only about three hours ago. Last night was brutal."

Pearl Street Bistro was in a prime location right in the middle of the pedestrian walkway that split some of the finest and trendiest shops in town. Boulder wasn't nearly as populated as Denver, but with the university and its locale at the foothills of the mountains, it was a popular place, especially to the outdoorsy types. PSB or the Pearl, as most locals called it, was one of the best restaurants around. Brixton had been their pastry chef since he graduated from culinary school six months ago.

"Wow. We haven't been there in a while, have we?" he asked his blonde companion and two other men who had come over to join them.

"Nope," blondie said. "We should go."

Brixton smile politely at her and looked to Zeke for an introduction. He probably didn't want to know who she was, especially if she was Zeke's current girlfriend, but he had known that would happen eventually. Zeke was too good of a guy to stay single for long.

"Yes! We should," Zeke agreed. "Oh, Brix, this is my cousin, Ava, her older brother, Von, and his boyfriend, Peter. Guys, this is Pami's older brother, Brixton Douglas."

"Nice to meet you," Von stepped forward to shake his hand. "I haven't been to the Pearl yet, but it's at the top of my list of places I want to eat."

The boyfriend not so subtly looped his arm through Von's, as if he were marking his territory. "I've been," he said a bit dismissively. "We can go there, but I really want you to take me to Lucille's first."

Von glanced at Peter and then back at Brixton. Von had a really kind face. His eyes squinted almost entirely shut when he smiled, and though he was tall, probably had a couple inches on Brixton, he wasn't intimidating. In fact, Brixton immediately felt comfortable with him.

"I'm pretty new to Boulder. I just finished my residency in Chicago and took a position in the ER here to be closer to Ava while she's in school." He lightly tugged on his sister's ponytail.

"You two must be close."

"We are," brother and sister said at the same time.

Brixton looked from Zeke to Ava and Von. With them standing in a row, it was clear they were related. Each had traditional all-American good looks: blonde hair in varying stages of lightness, blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and smiles that most likely spent their teenaged years confined to metal braces. All three of them stood tall, sure of themselves, and when they smiled, you felt included. Brixton immediately liked Zeke's cousins.

Peter, the boyfriend, on the other hand, he wasn't so sure about.

Brixton was completely open-minded about sexuality and relationships. He understood that they came in different shapes, sizes, combinations, and kinks. Though he hadn't had a relationship last longer than a couple of months, he certainly wasn't opposed to those who did. He just took pride in knowing he wasn't getting sucked into the same type of codependency his parents had.

Nope. Relationships were fine for other people. Just not for him. And watching Peter possessively hold onto Von validated his belief even more.

"You like Lucille's?" Brixton decided that the best way for the guy to stop seeing him as competition was to be overly nice.

"I do," Peter gushed. "My best friend, Heidi, works there."

Brixton knew the place and most of its staff pretty well. Lucille's and the Pearl attracted the same type of patrons: wealthy, educated, and hip. Although he thought that Lucille's was more hype than anything. He had gone to school with the sous chef, and he had heard some pretty awful things about how employees were treated. The kitchen of a restaurant was not a place for someone with delicate sensibilities. In other words, crude language, heat, and stress were the most common themes in the back of the house. But Brix had heard about a really cruel manager at Lucille's. You couldn't pay him enough to work in that kind of environment. Kitchen staff had to work as a team, no

matter your place on the food chain. It could easily be a restaurant's demise if the crew wasn't committed to the same vision.

"Great." Brixton tried to sound sincere. "Heidi runs the front of the house, right? I went to school with Dex, the sous chef."

"Brixton just graduated from culinary school less than a year ago. He's already taken over at the Pearl as their pastry chef." Zeke was quick to jump in and sing his praises. From the annoyed look on Zeke's face as well as his cousin, Ava's, Brixton gathered that neither of them were crazy about Peter.

Von's eyes lit up. "I love desserts. That's the main reason I go out to dinner—to have dessert. Do you have crême brûlée on your menu?"

Brixton chuckled softly. *Did he ever*. The blood orange crême brûlée he had added to the menu when he started was their second best seller. "Blood orange." He smiled when Von's eyes got even wider.

"Yum! I'm definitely going soon."

"Let me know when you do. I'll put a special dessert sampler plate together for you." Seeing Von's boyfriend give him the evil eye, he added, "And you too, Peter, of course."

That finally got him to smile, which made his overall appearance slightly more pleasant. It wasn't that Peter was unattractive. On the contrary, he was very striking with his black hair, creamy skin, and almond-shaped brown eyes. Brixton just found jealousy distorts even the prettiest of features. Recognizing it often stemmed from insecurity, Brixton didn't have much tolerance for those who constantly fished for compliments. He found self-assurance and compassion to be two of the sexiest qualities in a person. Peter didn't appear to have either.

"We should let you go," Zeke said when he saw Brixton eyeing the handful of cars that just pulled into the lot. He had hoped to have the trails to himself, save the occasional rattlesnake and large contingency of birds. He'd better get on his way if he wanted to run the rest of the trail without having to dodge hikers out for their leisurely Sunday trek.

"Yep. Well, nice to meet you all." His eyes met Von's again, and he was treated to another winning smile. Brixton didn't usually find himself drawn to men, but this guy intrigued him. Maybe they could hang out sometime. Not that Brixton had a whole lot of time on his hands to be going out, but he liked Von's easygoing personality, so he might have to make an exception.

“See ya around,” Ava said as she and her brother waved and headed back to their table.

“I need to visit the restroom,” Peter informed Zeke, and he walked to the back of the building to the main entrance.

Brixton clapped his sister’s ex on the shoulder. “Looks like you’re doing well, Zeke. School’s good?”

“Yeah. I love it.” Zeke nodded but didn’t move from his spot. Running his fingers roughly through his hair, he finally asked the question Brixton had expected to hear by now. “How’s Pami?”

Brixton snorted and shook his head. “Pami is... Pami. What can I say? She calls me from all over the country with new friends and plans for her life. I’m still hoping she grows out of this phase and comes back home.”

Zeke stared at Brixton, as if he was searching for more that he wasn’t telling him. He could always read both Brixton and Pami so well. Brixton was relieved when he didn’t prod further. “Me too, Brix. Take care of yourself. It was great seeing you.”

“Great seeing you too.” Brixton was entirely sincere about that. Even though running into Zeke had interrupted his morning run, he was happy to have had the chance to catch up with the guy. Zeke had become like a little brother to Brixton when he and Pami were together, and Brixton missed him.

He popped his water bottle into the strap around his waist and turned back toward the trail. With one last glance at Zeke, who had rejoined his cousins, he tipped his head and smiled. It was good to see him. He was proud of Zeke for not giving up his dreams just because Pami had.

Pami. What was he going to do about her? Was there anything he could do when she was flitting across the country, never staying in one place longer than a few weeks?

Brixton took a couple of deep breaths, trying to relax and release all the tension from last night, and resumed his run.

By the time he was descending Green Mountain, it was almost ten. Trail traffic had picked up, and he had to navigate his way through an obstacle of casual hikers. He hadn’t seen Zeke and his group again, but he had run into a couple of friends he occasionally ran with. Brixton only offered them a friendly wave and kept on moving.

He was not an eager conversationalist in general and preferred to keep to himself, but he could be cordial when he needed to be. He knew how to mind his manners. Working as a chef helped him with that. The first time a customer insulted a creation he had worked hours to refine, he learned quickly how to bite back a response he knew would hurt the business more than that one crappy comment. Brixton evaluated every piece of feedback he received, whether it was constructive or not. His executive chef had accused him of being overly sensitive when it came to his recipes. Brix knew that having thicker skin would help him handle criticism, but he didn't ever want to get to the point of not caring what he put out there. If he lost his passion for creating food people loved, then Brixton knew he would be looking for a new job. He could never be a mediocre, apathetic chef.

Brixton slowed his pace as he hit the last mile before home. Because of his chat with Zeke, he was more than a half hour later than usual. Not that it mattered so much. Brix had the day off, as well as the next—a rare two-day break from the restaurant. He was looking forward to it, but at the same time, he wondered what he was going to do for a full forty-eight hours outside of the restaurant. With his sister gone, Brix spent almost all of his time at the Pearl. And when he wasn't there, he was running trails or mountain biking. He might go crazy if he didn't make some sort of plan for the next few days.

As he was stretching on his front lawn, Tracy and Samantha, his neighbors to the left, pulled into their driveway. Tracy stepped out of the passenger's side of their car and waved.

“Hi, neighbor!”

“Good morning, girls,” he called back, walking to the edge of his yard. “How ya doing?”

“Great. Just did some shopping. How are you?”

“I had a rough night at work, but the run this morning felt really good.”

Samantha popped the trunk of their small SUV and joined her partner. “You're back a little late, aren't you?”

Brix smiled and resisted rolling his eyes. He was a self-sufficient man. Ever since his parents were carted off to jail when he was eighteen, he had taken care of himself and his sister. So, it irritated Brixton to no end when people thought they needed to check up on him. He was alone, but he was happy. Nothing wrong with that.

Tracy and Samantha were two of the only people he allowed to mother him without protest.

“Yeah. I ran into a friend and took a break to talk to him for a bit.” The couple nodded. “It was Zeke, Pami’s ex-boyfriend. He was hiking with his cousins.”

“He lives just down a few houses, right?” Sam asked.

“He does. About three down from me on the opposite side. He’s a really good kid,” he added.

Tracy grabbed a few bags from their car. “Any word from Pami these days?”

He nodded. Tracy and Sam had lived in the townhouse next door since before Brixton moved in. They had been invaluable in helping him with Pami; Sam was a therapist and had actually referred them to the child psychologist Pami had seen during high school. They were like aunts to him. They knew his schedule, would keep an eye on the house when he wasn’t there, and invited him over for dinner and drinks at least once a month.

“I did. Actually last night.” Brixton gave the two a half smile.

They both looked at him wide-eyed. They loved Pami, but they also knew the pain she had put Brixton through over the years. It wasn’t surprising that they were concerned.

“What are you doing tonight?” Tracy answered before Brixton could. “Don’t make up some shit, okay? I know you have today and tomorrow off, so you’re coming to dinner tonight. No arguments.”

Brixton chuckled and shook his head, causing droplets of sweat to trickle down his neck and into his eyes. He wiped at his face, but his entire body was covered in perspiration, so it really did no good.

“Fine. I won’t argue. Can I bring wine?” He knew it was better to accept the invitation. He had been hoping for time alone that night, but he also really needed his friends. Thoughts about Pami had consumed him since her call, so perhaps talking it out with these two would give him some clarity.

“Nope. I’ve got this fresh fruit sangria recipe I’m dying to try. We’ll have that with grilled salmon and veggies. Sound okay?”

“That sounds great. Am I on for dessert then?”

“You bet you are!” She smiled and wrapped her arm around her partner’s waist. The two had been together for twelve years and still adored each other. Despite his aversion to couples, he really liked Tracy and Sam together. If he ever did venture into one of those relationship things, he’d want it to be like theirs.

“Good deal. See you at four thirty?” Both women nodded. “Okay, well I’m going to head in and take a shower. I can’t stand myself anymore.”

“Great, Brix. See you later.” Samantha grabbed her partner’s hand and led her to the trunk where they started unloading their bags. “Oh, by the way... were you expecting company this morning?”

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs leading to his house and pulled a few dead flowers from the daylilies he had planted last year along his front porch. “No. Why?”

“Just before we left to go shopping, a silver car pulled up in your driveway. A guy got out and went to your front door, but he didn’t knock. I offered to help him since I knew you were gone. He asked if you lived here—in fact he said your full name—Brixton Douglas. I said yes and wondered if I could get a message to you. He shook his head and sped off as quickly as he came. I didn’t recognize the guy from the neighborhood or the restaurant, but he seemed harmless.”

Brixton didn’t get visitors often, but he did, however, get the occasional person looking for his parents. They weren’t going to find them. His mom and dad were spending the next twenty years in federal prison for drug trafficking, child endangerment, and a variety of other related charges. Either some of their customers hadn’t gotten the news of their incarceration, or they were hoping their son had taken over the family business. “Probably another junkie hoping my parents could hook them up.”

“They should know by now not to mess with Brixton Douglas,” Sam teased. “Well, we better unload before our ice cream melts.”

“Okay. See you later.” Brix dug his house key from the zippered pocket of his shorts and let himself in. The place was quiet except for the sound of his central air conditioner, which had been running since early morning. It was supposed to be a scorcher—nearing one hundred degrees. Nothing unusual for Colorado in the summer, but hot, nonetheless. It was one of the reasons Brixton always ran early. In dry heat like this along with the altitude, a person could get sick all too easily if he didn’t stay properly hydrated and cool.

He jogged up the stairs to his bedroom, stripped, and immediately turned on the shower. He desperately needed to wash away all the sweat and the layer of grit that had accumulated on his body from running dirt trails. Plus, he still had the lingering smell of restaurant kitchen on his skin, having opted for exercise instead of bathing when he got home.

Typically the way he smelled when he left Pearl's was comforting to him. It was a strange combination of grilled meat, grease from the fryer, and flour, since he spent most of his days covered in it. Not only did he make desserts fresh every day, but he also baked the restaurant's baguettes, which according to customers, were the perfect combination of crisp crust and tight but tender crumb. One of the reasons he had worked until the wee hours of the morning was so he could prep dough and pastries for the next two days. Carmen, his assistant, did well when he was gone, but he liked to give her a leg up. Especially when she had to do Sunday brunch, like today.

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the water massage from his showerhead. Even on hotter days like this, Brix would crank the water as high as it could go. He loved the feel of scalding water on his skin and the way it prickled once the cooler air hit it. Living alone definitely had its benefits. He could wander the house in nothing but his boxer briefs whenever he wanted. That's exactly what he intended to do until he had to get ready to go next door for dinner.

Brixton tidied his room and grabbed his laundry basket, which was overflowing with all of his chef gear. Bandanas, hats, aprons, jackets, and pants got dirty fast working with food in a hot kitchen, so he did a lot of laundry. Thank goodness the days of paying two dollars per load were over. He hated communal laundry rooms. How ridiculous was it to think that you put your clothes into a washing machine that had just held someone else's dirty laundry with who-knows-what on it and that adding a little detergent would get your things sufficiently clean? Did those places ever sanitize their machines? Or did they assume since they were *washing* machines that they were automatically clean? Regardless, owning his own place offered him the opportunity to buy a brand new washer and dryer. With the exception of his sister, and Zeke, when his washer was broken, no stranger's laundry germs had ever touched his.

Once he got the first load started, he headed to the kitchen. His was much smaller than he was used to at the Pearl, but it was smartly designed with lots of counter space and top-of-the-line appliances. He had spared no expense in that room. He didn't have much money after buying the townhouse, but what he did have, he put into his kitchen. Every other room in the place was very basic; he

even had some furniture left from his parent's house. Not much didn't get sold or confiscated, but he took what he could, including the antique bedroom set that had belonged to his mom's parents when they first got married. That was furniture he was proud to have, and it was perfect for Pami's room, which was now his guest room.

Opening the refrigerator, Brixton grabbed the ingredients he needed for his after-workout smoothie. Out came the yogurt, strawberries, and spinach. Add a banana and some honey, and that was his go-to power drink. He loved it. Remembering he offered to bring dessert to Tracy and Sam's, he popped the fridge back open to see if he had everything on hand to make a nice blackberry custard. No blackberries, but he did have mangos. Mango custard it was then.

Brixton whipped up his smoothie, and turning the TV on, he sat at his breakfast bar to catch the morning news. There were really bad wildfires on the West Coast where they'd been in a serious drought. When Pami called last night, she mentioned Southern California. Who knew if she was actually there or had been recently? Wherever she was, Brixton hoped she was staying on her meds and seriously reconsidering her marriage plan. But Pami would do what she wanted and never look back. In some ways Brix envied her. He couldn't take risks like that. He was the one left to handle the aftermath when his parents got arrested. That was the burden he had to bear as the older brother. He had to save the Douglas name.

Von

He finished suturing his second head wound of the day, made sure the other two skateboarders' injuries were taken care of, and left for the hospital's cafeteria to grab another cup of coffee and a scone. Von had been in since midnight, and what he expected to be a slow Monday was turning out to be quite the opposite. It didn't help that there had been a bit of a turf war at the skateboard park that morning, resulting in several severe gashes and broken bones. *Damn kids*. Normally he really enjoyed children, but this group today got on his last nerve. They were so disrespectful. He might be old-fashioned, but didn't anyone teach kids any more how to mind their manners?

"That'll be four twenty-four, Dr. Hartmann." Meg, the very sweet and very smitten young cashier smiled at him and blushed.

"Thanks, Meg. Keep the change," he said as he left her with a five-dollar bill. Attracting women had never been a problem for Von. It was attracting

men—at least good ones—that was more difficult than it should be for someone with his intelligence and looks. Not that Peter wasn't a nice guy; well, okay, maybe “nice” wasn't the right word for him. He was fun. When he wasn't drunk or acting like a jealous freak.

After their hike yesterday, his sister, Ava, and cousin, Zeke, had basically held an impromptu boyfriend intervention. Neither one of them was particularly fond of Peter; they felt pretty strongly that he was only dating Von so he could lay claim to the hot new doctor in town. Von knew the guy wasn't *the one*, but it had been pretty steamy when they first hooked up. He should have just left it at that; should have tossed Peter's number into the trash. But Von had felt guilty, and here they were, two months later.

He had to end it. Soon.

Seeing Peter with Brixton, Zeke's friend, yesterday only strengthened Von's resolve. Peter saw every attractive man as a threat. He got bitchy and clingy when he was insecure, and Von couldn't stand that. He was an independent, self-assured man; he needed his partner to be the same. As a doctor working constantly, the last thing he wanted was a needy boyfriend.

He imagined Brixton to be the exact opposite of Peter. Tall, built, and scruffy, the guy was a stark contrast to Peter's petite, wiry, waxed body. Von thought Zeke's friend was hot, though he made sure not to let Peter know lest he be subjected to yet another jealous tantrum.

Paging through his cell phone, he saw several texts from Peter and one from his sister. He dialed right away.

“Hey there,” Ava said when she picked up on the first ring.

“Wow. Did you even let it ring? Were you waiting for me to call?”

“Sure, Von, because I have nothing better to do than sit around and wait for my brother to call me back. I just said nope, can't do my homework, or cleaning, or working out until my brother calls me back.” Her words dripped with sarcasm.

“Okay, I get it. My sister waits for no one.”

“Ah, big brother, if there was anyone I'd be willing to wait for, it'd be you. And maybe that sexy chef guy we met with Zeke yesterday.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah about me waiting or about sexy chef guy?”

“Um, waiting, of course.”

She clicked her tongue and sighed. “Oh dear brother, I knew you thought he was hot. You kept staring and smiling at him. No wonder Peter turned green.”

He huffed. “Peter gets jealous of a fly if it lands on me for too long.”

“At least you’re aware of that. I was afraid you might be blind to his little hissy fits.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Good. So, what do you say we take Zeke out for a nice meal at the Pearl?”

“Subtle, Sis. Is this so you can spy on Brixton for you or for me?”

She laughed heartily. “Me, of course. I think if he played for your team, Zeke would have tried to set the two of you up by now.”

“You’re right. He’s not really your type, though.”

“He’s a man, he’s hot, and he makes desserts for a living. What about that is not my type?”

“Funny. You usually go for the long-haired rocker boys with lots of tattoos. And piercings. And closer to your age.”

“Yeah, but I’m willing to make an exception.”

“Okay. Well, I’m off at four, so do you want to pick up Zeke and meet me there? I’ll shower and go right from the hospital.”

“Sounds great! Um,” she paused, and he knew what was coming.

“I know what you’re going to ask, and no, I’m not inviting Peter. I’m ending things with him anyway. He’s crazy in bed but way too needy.”

Ava groaned. “Please—TMI.”

“Ha, ha. You’re the one always nosing into my love life, so that’s what you get.”

“Fine. We’ll see you around five.”

“Sounds great. Oh, you should probably ask Zeke to make sure Brixton’s working today. You’d hate to get all gorgeous if he’s not even going to be there, right?”

“No worries. Zeke said he’s a workaholic and at the restaurant every day.”

“Well, you seem to have this all worked out. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, bye.” She hung up right away, and Von imagined she was probably in her closet already looking for something to wear.

He took a final drink of his coffee and thought about how he was going to tell Peter. Just then, his phone chimed, and he was looking at a third text from him.

Are you avoiding me?

Seriously. He was a physician in an emergency room. Did Peter think he could take a break any old time just to assuage his boyfriend’s possessiveness? Assure him that he hadn’t met anyone new in the ten hours he’d been at work? No way. He was done with that.

Von thought about responding that he’d call as soon as he got back to his office, but he figured that would only make things worse. Peter would just have to wait.

He tossed his garbage and practically jogged down the east wing where the ER doctors shared office space. He hoped he’d have the place to himself so he could get this over with.

He took a deep breath and tapped Peter’s name in his list of favorites.

“Well, ’bout time you called.” If Von hadn’t already been one hundred percent sure he wanted to break up with Peter, that bitchy comment would have sealed the deal.

“Peter, look, you’re a great guy, but we’re just not right for each other. I think we should end things.” He laid it all right out there. No sense in putting it off any longer.

“You’re kidding, right?” Peter screeched so loudly that Von had to pull the phone away from his ear.

“No, I’m not. It’s not working. I’m at the hospital all the time, and you’re looking for someone stable and permanent.”

“And what are you looking for, Von?”

“I’m not sure. But I know it’s not this. I work in a busy ER, and that’s my first priority right now along with my family. I don’t have time for a relationship.” That was a lie. Von wanted to find the perfect partner, get married, and grow old together, just like his parents would have done had they still been alive. He craved it. Except this perfect partner would have to be okay with him working seventy hours a week and when he wasn’t working, being on call. It was a lot to ask.

Peter grunted and called him on it. “Sure, Von. Whatever. Is this about the hunky, chef man-candy from yesterday?”

“God, Peter, no, it has nothing to do with him. Plus, he’s straight and my sister is after him. This is a prime example of why we don’t work. I don’t do jealousy well.”

“Fine. Ava, huh? She’s going to get her heart broken because that guy was vibing on you.”

“Peter,” he replied sternly. “Not going to happen. Anyway, this has nothing to do with anyone else. You’re a good guy, and you’re gorgeous, so you’ll find the right one soon. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, I am pretty gorgeous,” Peter teased, lightening their heavy conversation.

Von breathed a sigh of relief when he heard Peter joke with him. “And great in the sack, but you know that,” Von whispered even though he had the office to himself.

“Yeah.” But the teasing was gone. “If you have a change of heart, Von, you know where to find me. You’re a catch, and I’m really sorry this didn’t work for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I better let you go back to work.”

“Yeah. So, I’ll probably see you around.”

“Maybe,” he said softly. “Bye, Von.”

Von set the phone on his desk and ran his fingers through his hair. He kept it a little longer in the front to show off his natural waves, but it also came in handy when he was stressed or nervous. Ava told him she could always tell when he found someone to be attractive because he’d blush and card his fingers through the long hair on top. She was right. He also did it when he had a difficult decision to make. Not that breaking up with Peter was all that difficult. The guy just seemed a little heartbroken. Von felt bad for hurting him.

“Break over, Hartmann?” Dr. Nick Fruzetti, the other new doc on staff, came into their shared office and plopped down on the chair in front of the desk. He called everyone by their last name, like they were playing college football and not running a busy ER.

“Yep. I was just finishing up a call.”

“Yeah, about that... you did the right thing.”

“Excuse me? Were you eavesdropping?” Von narrowed his eyes at the man in the white coat across from him. Von had never hid his sexuality, but he also had never talked about it openly with anyone, including Nick. How could he possibly know if Von had done the right thing?

“Now before you go off on me, just hear me out. I know you haven’t talked to me about your relationship—which you can, by the way. I’m cool with everything. I’ve got gay friends, straight friends, bi friends, trans, poly, and whatever-goes friends. I’ll never judge. But you haven’t really made it a big secret that you were unhappy, with all the complaining you did about him under your breath.”

Von blanched. “I did that?”

“Yeah, but it’s nothing to worry about. Most of us do it. I just heard a few too many times you saying something about the guy needing to stop calling you, and get a life. To me that doesn’t sound like the healthiest of relationships.”

Von laughed and shook his head.

“Dr. Hartmann and Dr. Fruzzetti?” C.J., the supervising nurse on duty, paged them in the office.

“Yes?” they both responded.

“Need us back?” Nick asked.

“I do. We have two accident victims coming in, one with a head injury and the other with a compound fracture to the left leg.”

“We’ll be right there, C.J. Thanks,” Von responded and turned to his colleague. “You’re right. I was not in a good place with Peter, and it’s better for everyone that I broke things off.”

“Dating a doctor is hard, but there’s someone out there for you who will be supportive of the crazy life we lead.”

“Well, if you managed to find someone, then any of us should be able to, right?” Von elbowed his fellow doctor as they left the office for the ER.

“That’s right. Kate is a saint,” Nick joked right back. “I mean it though; if you need to talk, consider me a friend. I’m even more fun if you buy me a drink.”

“So I’ve heard.” Nick had a reputation for being a very playful drinker. Anytime there was an invite for happy hour, he was there.

They reached the nurse’s station just as the first ambulance pulled in. Two paramedics jumped out of the van and lowered the stretcher out of the back. This accident had not been kind to its participants. The woman was covered in blood and had a stabilizing brace on her neck and back.

As the EMTs started reciting the woman’s vitals, Von, Nick, and two nurses pulled the stretcher into a room. The second victim was surely not far behind.

“You got her, and I’ll get the next?” Von questioned Nick as he tore off his gloves and grabbed a fresh pair.

“You got it.”

“Thanks, Nick, for everything.”

The other doctor just nodded and resumed his examination.

As Von rushed to meet the next ambulance, which had just arrived, he glanced at the clock in the hallway: twelve fifteen. It was going to be a busy afternoon, and he had a feeling he’d get caught there late and have to miss dinner. Oh well. Probably best if he didn’t have to watch his sister flirt with the hot pastry chef anyway.

“Sorry, Sis, I’ll try to make it in time for dessert.”

“It’s okay.” She sounded far less enthusiastic than she had earlier. “Not sure we’ll get dessert.”

“What? That’s sacrilege! What happened to the sexy baker who was going to bring you and Zeke your very own dessert platter?”

“Hrmph. Turns out he’s not working today.” That totally explained his sister’s sudden shift in mood.

“Oh, too bad, Ava.” He was trying to sound more sincere than he felt.

“You could at least try to sound genuine,” she said. He could imagine the look on her face as she talked to him—sullen and pouty, the lines forming on her forehead giving her the appearance of a woman much older than her twenty-one years.

His sister was a bit spoiled. Their parents had indulged her as a young child, and then when they had passed two years ago, Von picked up right where they had left off. He would always dote on her.

She had been the only one in the car accident to survive. It had been a casual glance over their shoulders to watch Ava's antics in the backseat of Dad's Mini Cooper, but that glance was just long enough for Dad to miss the light turning red and the oncoming truck barreling at them. Von had worked in emergency rooms long enough to know the damage that head-on collisions typically caused. The equation of big truck plus little car made the outcome of his parents' accident even more sinister. How his nineteen-year-old sister survived, he'd never understand. He chose to focus on the fact that she did survive, and not how she did it. It was as close to a miracle as Von had ever seen. So, he'd overindulge her as much as he liked and cared little for what others thought of his coddling. She was all he had anymore.

"I can still be there before you leave, I think."

"Just go home when you're done, big brother. Sounds like you've had a hard day. We'll reschedule later this week."

"Perfect. And Ava, make sure next time you verify that the guy's actually going to be there, okay?"

"Shut up, Von. I'm hanging up now."

"Bye."

Though dinner had sounded fun, going home with takeout Thai food sounded even better to him after his long day. He wasn't in the mood to be social. He'd put on some sweats, grab a beer, and catch up on episodes of *Scandal*.

Brixton

He was out the door and halfway to Chautauqua Park by seven. Having opted for strength training at the gym yesterday instead of his usual run, he was eager to reach that high he always felt when his breathing steadied, and he could run without thinking. After spending much of his two days off worrying about his sister and how he was going to get his boss on board with the new chocolate he brought in, he needed to put his body on autopilot and clear his mind.

By the time he was about two-thirds of the way into his run, he had come up with a solution for his problem at work. A pretty good one too, if he didn't say so himself. He would make the same dessert with the two different chocolates and let the staff and customers decide which they liked better. Brixton knew his

dairy-free chocolate was just as good as the brand he had been using, and he also knew there were a lot of people who had dairy restrictions. Boulder was a haven for transient folks, know-it-all college students, and trust-fund kids. To better accommodate such eclectic requests, the Pearl featured vegan, gluten-free and sugar-free items on their menu. To Brixton, it seemed like a no-brainer to embrace dairy-free too.

He'd propose his idea as soon as he got in to work.

Too bad he couldn't have come up with an equally satisfying way to resolve his issues with his sister. Truthfully, he wasn't sure that would ever happen as far as Pami was concerned.

The sun was particularly bright, so Brixton wore his wraparound sunglasses that were especially dark. He would say that was the reason he totally missed the array of bags and boxes sitting on his front porch when he arrived home from his run. As he hastily pulled the glasses from his face, they fell onto the steps leading to his front door, but he didn't bother to pick them up. He had to figure out what the hell had been left on his front porch while he'd been gone.

Two large garbage bags were placed in front, a covered paper box sat to the left of the bags, and a larger box, completely open at the top, sat behind. It wasn't until he heard a noise that sounded suspiciously like a puppy's cry that he took a closer look. A pink blanket sat on top of whatever was in there.

Did someone think this was funny? Tracy and Samantha maybe? Thinking he needed a dog to keep him company? He was fucking fine on his own; thanks, but no thanks.

Brixton shoved the bags aside and lifted the corner of the blanket gently, careful not to startle whatever lurked underneath. His heart was pounding so loudly that it was the only sound he heard echoing inside his head. What could be in there?

When he first laid eyes on the completely still bundle under the blanket, he fell to the porch with a heavy thud. "Fuck. Shit. Fuck."

Peering inside one more time, he confirmed that what he had hoped was a figment of his imagination was in fact as real as he was.

Sleeping soundly was a baby, placed carefully inside the box—surrounded by blankets and a stuffed teddy bear—a note folded and tucked in the toy's fuzzy, brown arms.

As a professional chef, Brixton was trained to always have a steady hand, especially when wielding sharp knives and hot pans. But no matter how much

discipline and strength he could muster in that moment, he could not keep his hands from trembling. His breathing stuttered, and he tried to keep the piece of paper from rustling as he pulled it from the bear's embrace.

Dear Brixton,

If you're reading this note, then you've already met your niece, Lilly May. This is actually what I had called to tell you on Saturday, but when I heard your voice, how worried you sounded, I couldn't do it. I wanted to tell you that I had gotten pregnant, and that I'd had her three months ago somewhere in the middle of Montana. I wanted to tell you that she's a great baby, sweet and smiley. And I wanted to tell you that I was a mess and wasn't feeling safe taking care of her. But I didn't. I'm sorry.

By now you probably have your cell phone out and are dialing my number, but you won't be able to reach me because I've had it changed. I don't want to be found, Brixton. And I don't want this baby.

If you're cursing at me, calling me selfish, then you would be right. I know what I am, big brother, and that's why I've come to you.

The two bags have Lilly's clothes, blankets, and diapers in them. The box has bottles and toys and a copy of her birth certificate. It's not much, but it's the best I could do.

Please take good care of her. I know you will—you took such good care of me after Mom and Dad left. I hope someday you will be able to forgive me for abandoning this little girl, but I know in my heart that she'll have a much better life with you.

With love,

Pami

The entire note was in Pami's flowery handwriting, so Brixton had no doubt that it was from his sister. But shit, Pami! What the hell had she done? How come she didn't tell him she was pregnant? She could have asked for help. But instead, she chose to keep this huge secret to herself. She was his sister, yes, but in all their years together, he had never understood why she did the things she did. Leave a three-month-old baby on his front porch? In a box in the middle of summer?

What the hell was he going to do with a three-month-old baby? Granted, he had taken care of Pami since she was eight, but she could feed herself and dress herself and walk and talk. Not this little one. He wasn't a baby expert, but he knew that Lilly May would require round-the-clock attention. How was he supposed to do that? He was at work more than he was at home. He was no more qualified to take care of a baby than his sister.

Well, not true. He would have never dropped a newborn on someone's front porch and just left.

"Brix, honey, uh, what's going on? Why do you have boxes and bags all over your front porch?"

He lifted his head from where it had sunk into his hands. He squinted at his neighbor as she walked slowly toward him. Brixton glanced at his full front porch one more time to make sure he hadn't just awoken from a bad dream.

"I don't know. I don't know what the hell she was thinking," he murmured over and over and shook his head.

Tracy was at his side with her hand on his shoulder before he could muster another word. "Who didn't know? Pami? Did she leave all this for you?"

Still in a daze, Brixton went from shaking his head side to side to nodding up and down without breaking the rhythm.

"Okay, so Pami left all of this. What is it?" She leaned over him to open one of the garbage bags. Spotting a stack of disposable diapers, her eyes opened wide, and she immediately dug into the other bag. Baby blankets, onesies, and more diapers filled the second bag. "Fuck, Brixton." It was all Tracy could manage as she lifted the blanket from the top of the box to discover a still sleeping baby girl bundled inside. "Fuck."

"That's what I said," Brixton slurred like he was drunk. His head was spinning, and he felt sick to his stomach.

"I'm going to get Sam. Stay here and watch the baby, okay?" Meeting his steely glance, she raised her eyebrows and repeated, "Okay?"

"Yeah." With that, she scurried down his front steps and jogged next door. He could actually hear Tracy yell for her partner before the door from their garage to the kitchen slammed closed. Hopefully, Samantha would know what to do because clearly neither he nor Tracy had a clue.

Brix shifted his unfocused gaze back to the baby in the box. His heart was still racing, but the nauseous feeling had at least subsided for now. Good thing. He'd probably wake her if he threw up all over her.

He watched as her lips started to move, and she opened her mouth, displaying the tiniest pink tongue moving against toothless gums. She was suckling, that much he knew. But was she hungry? Couldn't his sister have at least told him when the baby had eaten last? Spying the pacifier clipped to her shirt, he grabbed it and fed it to her, praying to God that would hold her for now. He would surely lose it if this baby started crying before Sam and Tracy got back. Thankfully, her petite mouth wrapped around and sucked on the pacifier, or bo-bo, as his mom used to call it when Pami was a baby.

Bo-bo? What the fuck? Where had Mom gotten that? He'd heard of calling it a paci or Binky or Nuk, but a bo-bo? The ridiculousness of the whole situation reminded him just how messed up his family truly was. His drug-dealing parents were in prison, and his sister, whom he had tried to raise the best he could, flitted off with God-knows-who to God-knows-where after dumping her brand new baby on his front porch. Brixton was too overwhelmed to be angry. He was just plain numb.

"Trace, you have your phone, right?" He heard Samantha as the couple made their way over to his yard.

"Yep. Who do you want me to call?"

"No one yet. But we don't know how long this little girl has been sitting out in that box, so I want us to be prepared if she's overheating."

Without Sam needing to ask, Brixton moved from the top step so she could take a look. She pulled the blankets back from the sleeping infant and felt her forehead. "She's hot, but she doesn't seem feverish. Let's take her inside and check her out."

Samantha paused, perhaps waiting for him to pick up the baby or at least get out his keys, but he wasn't able to do either.

"I have my spare." Tracy dangled her set of keys in front of her, and Sam reached into the box for the baby.

"Good." Sam stepped aside so her partner could unlock Brixton's front door. When she got it open, he felt a *whoosh* of cold air rush out of his house as she held the door open for them to enter.

"Brixton?" Tracy's voice was raised as if she'd been calling him for a while. "Come on," she demanded as he jolted from his stupor.

Once inside, Samantha did all the directing, and he and Tracy did all her bidding. Thermometer. Cold wash cloth. Bottles. And formula. Fresh diaper and change of clothes.

When Tracy pulled the tiny yellow-striped hat from the baby's head, she revealed a dusting of dark hair on her slightly misshapen head. "She has your hair." Tracy smiled and gestured to Brixton's closely cropped style.

For the first time since finding this unexpected package on his front step, he smiled. "Lilly May," he replied softly.

"Huh?" Tracy and Sam asked at the same time.

He pointed to the box where he had left Pami's letter and cleared his throat. "Her name is Lilly May."

As if she had heard him calling her, Lilly May blinked open her eyes, gurgled at him, and yawned. Her chubby arms started flapping as she continued to watch him.

"Well, Miss Lilly May, you seem to like this big guy here. This is your Uncle Brixton, but we like to call him Brix. You know, like 'ton of bricks'? He might look intimidating, but take it from me, he's a real softie," Samantha cooed at the bundle in her arms and moved to hand her to Brixton.

"No. I-I don't know what to do with a baby."

"Shit, yes you do. You took care of your sister all her life!" Sam's tone was incredulous.

"She was eight, Sam. When Mom and Dad went away, Pami was already in grade school. Mom did all the feeding and changing of diapers when Pami was a baby."

"Surely you helped her?" Tracy chimed in. "I remember what you've told me about your parents; that you ended up watching Pami a lot of the time. I know you had to grow up fast even before their arrest."

Brixton nodded in agreement and looked at Sam warily. "It's been a long time. What if I don't remember?"

His neighbors both smiled at him. "You will. You have natural nurturing instincts, Brixton, so as soon as she's in your arms, it'll come right back to you," Sam said and set Lilly May against his chest.

He held her tightly, not wanting to drop her. She was so light! No more than ten pounds, he was sure. "I wonder how big she was when she was born."

"You said the birth certificate is somewhere in here, right?" Tracy started hunting through the boxes and bags. "Found it." She waved an envelope in her hands. "Lilly May Douglas, born on March ninth at one forty-five in the morning at Great Falls Hospital in Great Falls, Montana. Six pounds even and

twenty inches long. If she gains an ounce a day as most newborns do, she should be around eleven, twelve pounds by now.”

“How do you know so much about babies?” Sam looked quizzically at her partner. She was the therapist and had a good deal of medical knowledge, but Tracy was an only child who hadn’t even babysat when she was a teenager.

Tracy gave her partner a meaningful glance. “I’ve been studying up.” The two stared at each other, exchanging shy smiles.

He may have been out of it, but he still understood what was going on without them having to say it out loud. “You two finally going to have kids?”

Sam nodded first. “We’ve just started looking into it. Not sure if we’ll do IVF or adopt.”

“Yep, but we’re not getting any younger. And I’d love to have a little boy.” Tracy grinned giddily.

“Not a girl, huh?” Brixton spoke without thinking. “Otherwise you could have Lilly May.”

“Don’t even.” Sam met his eyes with a pointed stare. Her lips pursed together, and he could hear the irritated tapping of her foot on his ceramic tile floor.

“No worries, babe, he doesn’t mean it. Right?” Tracy glared at him. “Whether you raise her or Pami comes back to get her, she’s your family. You take care of your own.”

“What if taking care of my own isn’t what’s best for Lilly?” Brixton barely had time to let it sink in that his sister had a baby, so any decision he made about keeping her or giving her up would be incredibly rash at that point. Both options scared the shit out of him, and he knew his neighbors would be fantastic parents. But they were right. He needed to take time to think about everything before giving Pami’s daughter away.

“Listen, we’re here for you. We both have flexible schedules, and I have some time off I have to use before I lose it. So, we’ll help you with her until you figure everything out.”

Brixton felt like he was going to cry. “You don’t have to do that.” His voice cracked with emotion.

His neighbors stood side by side in solidarity. Tracy reached over to lightly caress Lilly May’s head. “We want to. This will be good practice.”

Ten hours later, Brixton held an unhappy baby in his arms, walking and bouncing her in an attempt to calm her down. But she wasn't soothed. Her face was beet red, and she quickly confirmed that she had inherited her mother's voice—loud and strong.

He had the phone up to his ear, trying to balance it on his shoulder while continuing to rock Lilly through her screams. "I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time hearing you. She won't stop crying."

"Is she colicky? Does she have regular tummy troubles? Has she had a bowel movement today?" The nurse from the ER was asking him like he should know all of this stuff.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. Should he tell her that this little baby had been dropped on his doorstep earlier that day? That her mom had abandoned her and expected him to care for her? That he felt completely helpless and wanted to scream right along with Lilly May? "I'm, ah, watching her for my sister who is away. This is my first time."

Apparently that was enough information for the nurse. "It's okay, sir. I'd suggest you bring her in then. We'll evaluate her and make sure nothing is wrong. My guess is that she has an upset stomach, but without the baby's history, I couldn't say without examining her first."

"Okay. I'll bring her in right away. Thank you." And he hung up before the woman could say any more.

Trying one more time to pop the pacifier into Lilly's mouth, he breathed a huge sigh of relief when she quieted momentarily. It gave him just enough time to get her into the new car seat Sam and Tracy had insisted on buying for him earlier in the day. Thank God for them.

You never know when you might need to get her somewhere fast.

Tracy may not have parenting experience, but she was smart when it came to making sure he had what he needed for Lilly. The couple's trip to the superstore resulted in a carload of baby gadgets, extra onesies, disposable wipes, a baby monitor, a car seat, portable crib, and Diaper Genie.

When he reached for his wallet to pay them, they balked and said they'd need to buy this stuff eventually anyway. So, he was to consider the gear a loan until their baby came along. Once more he expressed his gratitude, but they only scoffed and said, "That's what friends are for."

He thanked God for the second time that day.

Along with Brixton's aversion to relationships was his apathy for organized religion. Long ago had he figured out that in fact God was *not* listening to his prayers, and if he did hear them, clearly his desperate pleas were being ignored.

God only gives you what you can handle.

Bullshit. How much could a young boy take?

Growing up, he lived in a meth house run by his parents. When they got busted, and the life he knew was ripped from him, he had to find an apartment, had to work multiple jobs, had to provide full-time care for his eight-year-old bipolar sister, and had to manage all the legal requirements and penalties his parents incurred as a result of their crimes. The worst was child endangerment. Brixton had to work his ass off to keep Pami out of the foster care system. Protective services wanted to take her but having just turned eighteen got him over the biggest hurdle—he was legal and was able to provide for her. His application for guardianship was eventually approved.

I've had so much more than I can handle. And now this.

If he wasn't convinced before that there was no God, finding his sister's abandoned newborn baby on his front porch would have done it. Tracy and Samantha's presence in his life made him reconsider his atheistic beliefs for only a second before remembering once again all the shit he'd been through. No kind God would have brought Lilly May to his doorstep when he had finally achieved some level of personal achievement after taking care of his sister and incarcerated parents for the last twelve years.

Getting Lilly May's car seat secured in his car took far more time than he had. Sam had suggested practicing, but he had brushed off her suggestion when he realized that he had taken up their entire day with his drama. They had a life of their own. He was a handy guy. He could figure a simple car seat out.

"Dammit to hell!" He shouted into the backseat. His outburst startled Lilly, and the pacifier came popping out of her mouth. Within seconds she was crying again, wailing even louder than before.

Brixton closed his eyes momentarily and focused on the mountains. It was his happy place. If he could get back to the mindset he had when he had run the trails early in the morning, maybe he could stop shaking long enough to get Lilly May secure enough for him to drive her to the ER. Exhaling deeply from his nose, he blew out heavy air and refocused on the task at hand. This time, the car seat settled into place, and the seat belt easily reached around it. He clicked Lilly May in and got himself buckled in the front.

By the time he got to the hospital, which was less than five miles from his house, he thought he might have to be admitted along with his niece. His ears ached, his mouth was sore from clenching his teeth, and he was on the verge of a meltdown worthy of a psych evaluation, if not lockdown. The guy at the front desk took pity on him, as well as others in the lobby, and immediately directed him to a quiet room, and shut the door. He was left with Lilly and a bunch of paperwork, most of which he had no clue how to complete.

Name, check. Date of birth, check. Symptoms, check.

The rest of the four pages of requested information he had to leave blank. Insurance card? He was pretty damn sure Pami didn't have any coverage for her. He'd just have to pay out of pocket. Could he authorize the hospital to treat her? He really didn't have another choice. If he didn't, who would?

He was scribbling his signature on the final page when the door to the room opened. A tall man wearing a white coat had to duck slightly to get comfortably into the room. Seeing Brixton, a smile split his face.

"Hey, Brixton, didn't expect to see you here."

Perhaps if Brixton had any brain cells left that weren't totally fried, he may have recognized the good doctor who seemed to know him.

"Uh, hi. Have we met before?"

The doctor chuckled only briefly. "I met you on the trail a couple of days ago. I'm Zeke's cousin, Von."

"Right. Thanks. I'm a bit frazzled at this point, so please accept my apologies for not recognizing you. This little girl has me stressed out."

Von reached to take the clipboard full of unfinished paperwork from him. He was thankful in that moment that the guy wasn't a total stranger. Maybe explaining the situation would be easier, knowing he was related to Zeke.

"So, this is Lilly May. She's about three months old now, right?"

"Um, yes. Born on March ninth." That much he knew.

"How long has she been crying?"

"Hours. I've tried feeding her, changing her, rubbing her back, burping her, and rocking her. I just don't know what to do anymore."

"Tell me about her. Has she cried like this before? Does she have any allergies you know of?"

He sat there in silence. He had no idea.

Von

Von didn't think the question he asked was all that difficult, but the look on Brixton's face told him otherwise.

"Okay, her paperwork is barely filled out, and you look like a deer caught in headlights. What's the deal?"

Brixton dropped his gaze to his hands, which were fidgeting in his lap. He looked extremely uncomfortable. Von needed to get the truth out of him if he was going to be of any help to this baby.

"Is she yours, Brixton? You don't have to be embarrassed about it."

"No, she's not my kid!" He shouted loudly into the small room. He looked at Von like the idea that he'd ever father a child was preposterous. "Sorry. She's my sister's baby."

"Pami, right?"

"Yep. My one and only sibling. Pami dropped her off this morning, uh, and wants me to watch her for a while." Von watched Brixton dart his eyes back to the crying newborn.

"Okay. As long as you can authorize Lilly's treatment, I'm fine with it." *For now.* He could dig deeper after he figured out what was wrong with her.

"I can," Brixton replied softly. "I don't know how long she's going to be with me. My sister's having a hard time."

"Understood. Now let's get this little girl checked out, shall we?"

Von had talked to his cousin enough to know that Pami was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at a young age. He had heard stories of her impulsivity and knew she didn't always take care of herself as well as she should. Zeke also told him that Brixton had to step in as her guardian for some reason. Just like he had to do with Ava. And now Brixton was having to step in for Pami's daughter too. He could almost feel the added weight of this new burden resting on Brixton's shoulders.

When Von felt he had figured out the source of Lilly's discomfort, he excused himself from the room. He went straight to the cooler and grabbed one of the cold washcloths they kept in there for situations like this.

As soon as he set the cool cloth against Lilly May's gums, her cries sputtered to a stop.

“You know, I was able to get her to suck on her pacifier for a little while too, but that was only temporary. She was screaming again within five minutes.”

Von smiled understandingly. He imagined that Brixton had to be feeling beyond overwhelmed at that point. Though he wouldn't know for sure unless he asked, he suspected that Lilly May's visit or at least her resulting stay was not something Brixton had planned. If that were the case, that would explain a lot about how little he seemed to actually know about his niece.

“I think this is the remedy that little Lilly has been looking for,” Von said as he slid the stool from Lilly May back over to the desk. “She's teething. The cold soothes her gums, numbs them essentially. I can't make any guarantees, but it seems like this is just what she needed.”

“I don't know much about kids, but isn't three months a little early to get teeth?”

“Generally, I tell people that teething can start as early as four months and as late as one year. This little girl appears to be an overachiever, but it's not that unusual. I've even seen babies born with teeth. Now *that's* early and certainly creates some obvious challenges should the mother choose to breastfeed!”

A flash of horror crossed Brixton's face before he allowed himself to smile. “Ouch.”

“I would think so.”

“Does that mean there's nothing seriously wrong with her?”

“I'll continue with my examination to make sure, but this appears to be the issue. Thankfully, there are over-the-counter products that have a high rate of success for teething pain, along with this cold cloth trick. There are gels that can be applied to the gums that will have a similar effect to the frozen washcloth. Ultimately, it's your decision.”

Brixton didn't answer right away. Von watched the chef as he held Lilly May against his chest, now happily soothed and making cute, squeaky, slurping sounds. He looked completely spent. “Thank you,” Brixton said softly with his eyes still on his niece. “I wasn't really ready for this. I still don't know what I'm doing, but at least I feel better about her being healthy and all.”

“Didn't Pami talk you through all of this before she left?” Von asked.

Brixton shook his head. “She, ah, left pretty quickly. Pami wasn't feeling well.”

“Pami’s bipolar, right? Do you know if she’s on her meds?”

When Brixton looked at him with surprise, he explained. “Zeke and I are close. He used to talk to me all the time about Pami. He never wanted her to feel pitied, but he was also concerned about her safety. I think he felt like he was getting solid medical advice by calling me, even though at the time I was still in med school.” He smiled at Brixton kindly.

“Zeke was the best thing that ever happened to Pami. He was so much more patient with her than I was. I know they were only high school sweethearts, but I had kind of hoped he’d be in her life long-term. Then Pami decided she needed to see the world. She skipped out on her college scholarship and left. I only hear from her every once in a while. I haven’t seen her in over two years.”

“Until today.”

“What?” Brixton’s eyebrows scrunched, and he frowned.

“It must have been nice to see her today after all that time.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. And she surprised me with Lilly May. That’s my sister for you.”

Something about Brixton’s story wasn’t completely adding up, and it was in that moment that Von decided he needed to befriend the man. His intention was only to help him with Lilly May, because he had a feeling the guy could really use it, but he inwardly rolled his eyes, thinking about what his sister was going to say when she found out. He didn’t care. If he could apply his pediatric expertise to help Brixton over the hump, then he was going to do it. He knew that Brixton was a good man. Zeke had always spoken very highly of him, and his cousin was an excellent judge of character.

“Tell you what, I’m stopping to see Zeke tonight after my shift is over. He lives near you, right?” Von knew Brixton lived just a couple doors down.

“Yeah. Why?” Brixton tilted his head in question. For the first time since he got to the hospital, he was sitting still and looking rather content. The beard on Brixton’s face was heavier than the other day when they had first met, and Von thought the extra scruff gave him an even tougher appearance than his already solid, intimidating frame. He was extremely attractive, though; he would not argue that with his sister. Brixton’s features were sharp, but his blue eyes softened his hard exterior. They were pale and pure and framed by long, dark lashes. His hair was dusty blond, clipped close and shaved in the back. Von imagined that cut was a necessity for someone who spent most of his days in a

sweltering restaurant kitchen. Everything about Brixton seemed bristly and rough—except for those eyes. They were kind of throwing Von off guard.

“I’d like to stop by and check on Lilly May.” *And her exhausted uncle.*

Brixton objected firmly. “That’s far beyond your job description and not necessary.”

Von stood from his stool and moved to the chair next to Brixton. Lilly May had been calm for some time, and Von noticed her eyes fluttering closed, fighting that last step into sleep. “You’re right; it’s neither. I want to as a friend. I know Zeke says you’re very independent, but I think in this case, it would be smart of you to accept the complementary services being offered by an accomplished member of the medical profession.” He grinned at the guy lightheartedly. Brixton still didn’t relent. “Let me help you. At least in the beginning until you get to know her better and establish a routine. No strings. Just maybe an occasional homemade dessert for my trouble?”

Finally after too much silence for Von’s liking, Brixton chuckled. “You make a good case, Doc. This has clearly demonstrated how much help I do need, and for once, I’m not going to be too proud to accept it. Especially from an—what were your exact words—‘accomplished member of the medical profession.’” Brixton’s eyes sparkled with mischief, and his transformation took Von’s breath away.

Von wondered if he was going to be able to maintain his official role, there only to help with Lilly May’s care, or if he was at risk of liking this guy too much—this *straight* guy? He couldn’t think about that right now. He needed to discharge this little girl and make a desperate plea to Zeke to let him come to his house after work.

“Great. I’m off at eleven. Wait, is that too late for you? I didn’t even think about it. I’m used to keeping bizarre hours, working here in the ER.”

“Not too late at all. I’m a chef, remember? I keep some pretty strange hours myself. Typically I don’t even get home from the Pearl until after two in the morning. Then I’m back there by noon; earlier if it’s Sunday.”

“What’s so special about Sunday?”

“Sunday brunch. Patrons have come to expect a decent selection of pasties on their buffet,” Brixton said with pride in his voice. “I don’t disappoint.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” What Von wouldn’t do for one of those pastries right now. He wanted to try everything on Brixton’s menu. “Well, it’s a good thing I accept gratitude in the form of pastries.”

Brixton grinned. “Good thing.”

Von was so close to Brixton he could smell his slightly musky odor. He inhaled deeply, letting it fill his nostrils and perk up his cock. Add that little hint of cinnamon and vanilla from handling sweets all day, and the man was downright lickable.

“So can we?”

“Can you what?” *Lick me too? Sure! I thought you’d never ask.*

“Go home. I asked if we were done and could go back home. I’d like to get her into her crib, so she doesn’t get too used to falling asleep in my arms.”

“Oh, sure! Sorry. You two can be on your way. If you stop at the front desk, they’ll give you your receipt and my list of additional recommendations for teething discomfort.”

Von silently chastised himself for crossing the line with this guy. He would have to employ significant self-control when he visited Brixton later that night. Then after he left, maybe Von would go home, have a drink, and watch some porn. He needed this guy out of his system. Nothing that two perfect, adult male specimens fucking on screen couldn’t cure.

“Thanks again, Von.” Brixton still had a smile on his face, and it made Von a bit nervous that maybe he wasn’t disguising his feelings as well as he had thought. Or maybe Brixton noticed the solid mound forming in the front of Von’s trousers. Either way, he needed to get a grip.

“You’re welcome. I have your number on the form, so I’ll text you when I’m on my way. I don’t want to knock and disturb Lilly.”

“Right. Hopefully she’ll still be sleeping.”

“I think she’s worn herself out crying. I expect she’ll stay down for a while. You may even be able to get some rest.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Brixton had settled Lilly May back into her car seat and headed out of the room. Von followed closely behind until Brixton was safely back at the front desk.

“Take care, Brixton. See you later.” Von kept his plans to drop by discreet. It wasn’t against the rules for him to see patients outside of the hospital, but he didn’t want to encourage any more staff gossip. They had already been talking about him and Peter.

Von waved as Brixton folded the paperwork into his pocket and walked out of the hospital. He was as nice to look at from behind as he was from the front. Von cursed himself and resumed completing the notes in Lilly May's file. From the lack of empty chairs he observed in the waiting room, he imagined that he'd have several more patients to see before he left for the day. Hopefully he'd be able to pull his shit together during that time so he didn't make an ass out of himself when he got to Brixton's.

Hopefully.

Brixton

The sound of silence in his jeep as he drove home was beautiful. There was no way he was taking any chances and turning on the radio. He was even being careful not to breathe too loudly for fear of waking Lilly May up.

Teething. He was so glad that was all. *God dammit, Pami!* She had to know that her own daughter was getting her teeth in. Right?

At this point in his life, he took nothing for granted—especially when it came to his family. He had proven that time and time again without fail. More than a dozen years of Brixton taking care of his sister on his own, and he'd do it all over again if he had to. Now with Lilly May tucked into the back seat of his SUV, it was looking like he would be.

It was a miracle—or it would be if he believed in that kind of stuff—that Von hadn't pried any further into the circumstances of Lilly May's arrival. He had no clue how much he should tell him or anyone. Tracy and Sam already knew. But they were two of an infinitesimal selection of people he actually trusted.

Instinct told him that Von might eventually end up on that list too. Something about the guy made Brixton feel at ease; his concerns about Lilly were valid, and he genuinely cared about her well-being. Even Brixton, who never relied on others for anything, accepted his generous offer of help. The bottom line was he liked the way he felt around Von and wanted to spend more time with him.

Von may even know what might happen should he decide to report his sister missing. How would that impact Lilly? Would child protection try to take her away from him? He remembered how hard he had to fight for his sister all those years ago. Was he up for another round of that? Perhaps his past

experience with social services would work in his favor. Then again, perhaps Pami would show up tomorrow wanting Lilly May back. He honestly didn't know what he wished for more.

In the span of a day, Brix had come to care about this little girl. He clearly saw her resemblance to Pami. Already he could recognize the telltale dimples developing in her chubby cheeks. His sister's smile was infectious, and it always made him feel good. Of all of Pami's traits for Lilly May to inherit, her dimpled grin was one of the best. Brixton missed those days of easy laughter between the two siblings. Now on the rare occasion that they did talk, neither did much laughing. He'd spend the time asking if Pami was okay, and she'd spend the time insisting she was.

Shit! I bet she had to go off some of her meds while she was pregnant.

The thought just came to him. Another question to add to his list for Von. He imagined with Pami that postpartum depression was particularly hard, especially if she hadn't had mood stabilizing drugs for nine months. His growing fears about his sister were making him nauseous. Maybe she wasn't really okay. Maybe she didn't want to be found for another reason; maybe her plans included ending her life. It wouldn't be the first time she had been suicidal.

Pami's teenage years were not kind to her. Her growing, changing body wreaked havoc on the effectiveness of her medication, and she fell into major depression for the first time when she was only fourteen. He couldn't begin to imagine how, as a kid, when you are supposed to be carefree and unburdened, to have to deal with the heaviness of a mental illness you don't even understand? An illness that makes you feel without worth, without hope and that life would be better if you were gone?

Brixton had cried himself to sleep many nights during that time of their lives. To not only hear his sister share her feelings of despair but to tell him, in great detail, how she planned to end her life? He was devastated. He wanted desperately to make everything better for her, but he couldn't. Pami had to be the one to get there on her own. She had to want to accept her fate in life and move toward a place of healing. At least that's what her therapist always used to say. And Pami had done it. She came back from the edge to live the life of a typical teenager. She tried his patience, pushed his limits, and made him prouder than he'd ever been.

After missing fifty-six days of her freshman year of high school, Pami worked her ass off to win an essay contest that eventually led to a partial college scholarship. And she graduated with honors.

Brixton was terrified she might be feeling the same way she did back when she was fourteen. He was scared she had been off her meds for too long and she was making impulsive decisions. Obviously, she had at least made one by leaving her baby on his front porch.

“Please Pami, I love you and want to see you. I’m so worried. It doesn’t matter what’s happened... just please come home.” He whispered into the quiet car, his eyes burning as he fought back tears. He couldn’t let himself fall apart. He had to be strong for all of them but especially for Lilly May.

His niece was still sleeping soundly when he pulled into the driveway. It was almost as if she knew he couldn’t handle anything more today. He was mentally and physically exhausted. If Lilly started screaming again, he might be tempted to run from the house and never come back. But that didn’t happen, and Brixton was dozing softly when his text message alert vibrated in his pocket.

Von was on his way.

He got up, splashed some water on his face and read the message.

Little girl still sleeping?

Yep.

Great! I’ll be there in 10. Do u need anything?

Sure, a full-time nanny, a case of beer and could he possibly swing by and grab his sister while he was at it? Oh, and he’d really like parents who weren’t spending the rest of their lives in a federal prison.

No. I’m fine, thanks.

K. C u soon.

By the time Von arrived, Brixton had turned lights on in the house and was watching the sports channel.

He met the doctor at the door. “Hi there.”

“Hey.” Von stepped into his house carrying two grocery bags. “I know you said you didn’t need anything, but I stopped at the store anyway. I picked up some Children’s Tylenol you can give Lilly if the pain gets bad again and a couple teething chews. Pop them in the freezer and they’re ready whenever you need one.”

“Those two items required separate bags?” Brixton eyed the large sacks Von was still holding. They looked like they were filled to the top with food.

He saw tortilla chips, Oreos, a loaf of bread, and at least one pound of coffee beans. And that was just what he could see in the first bag.

Von blushed. “No. But I figured you wouldn’t have much time in the next few days to do any shopping, so I picked a few staples up for you. Where’s the kitchen?”

Brixton shook his head and led him through his living and dining rooms into the kitchen.

Von whistled. “Nice! I love how you really maximized your space. Like the quartz countertops and utensil wall. This is a true chef’s kitchen.”

Brixton beamed. He loved what he had done to it, but not everyone appreciated the little space-saving details and professional appliances he had painstakingly chosen. He liked the guy even more now. And though he hated to admit it, he was happy Von had stopped at the store for him. He was used to having leftovers from the restaurant, so having not worked in three days left his cupboards and fridge noticeably bare. “You really shouldn’t have bought all of this stuff.”

“Don’t try and tell me you don’t need it. Zeke says you always eat at the restaurant. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that you’d need a few things. Plus, I’m happy to do it for you.”

Von smiled at him and Brixton’s words caught in his throat. Damn, the man had a great smile. He had changed from his scrubs and was wearing a casual T-shirt and shorts, showing off a well-defined body. Von wasn’t bulked up like Brixton, but it was obvious that he took care of himself. Brixton hadn’t really noticed that before now. And why should he? He wasn’t usually in the habit of ogling other men.

As Von unloaded the groceries, putting perishables in the refrigerator and everything else in the pantry, Brixton chatted with him easily. Brix was a self-proclaimed loner and preferred to be by himself, but hanging out with Von felt good. Easy. Relaxing. He might even like to do it again.

Brixton laughed out loud and let Von think he was laughing at something he had said. Von didn’t need to know that Brix suddenly realized that he was approaching man-crush territory, and that’s why he was chuckling. He’d keep that to himself. But Brixton had to admit, it didn’t get much better than a smart doctor who wasn’t just thoughtful but cut and fine-looking too. Brixton had never dated men before, but the good doctor might be able to persuade him to give it a try.

“So how is your cousin?”

“Oh, he’s good.”

“I should really stop and see Zeke more often. I miss him hanging around,” Brixton admitted.

“He’s a good kid. I’m proud of him. He didn’t always have it easy, especially after my parents died. His mom got so angry at the world. She was my dad’s only sibling, and she took his death really hard.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Von. Did this happen recently?”

“Two years and four months they’ve been gone.” Von leaned against Brixton’s island and crossed his arms.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I wasn’t trying to pry.”

“I didn’t think you were.” Von slid his hands into his pockets. “It took me a long time, but I’m at peace with their deaths. My sister, who was the lone survivor of the crash, still won’t really talk about it. Neither will Aunt Jo, Zeke’s mom. But Ava and I are much closer now. She’s all I have left, so I’m very protective of her. I imagine you understand that.”

Brixton thought Von seemed pretty well-informed. It made him wonder how much Von knew about why his parents weren’t in the picture anymore. Even though Zeke knew the truth, Pami never talked about it. She preferred to tell people that her parents had “gone away for health reasons,” which was kind of true. Certainly they suffered some bad side effects from cooking meth in the garage all day long, but that alone wasn’t what caused them to go away. Everyone around Boulder knew that, but they were more afraid of Pami falling off the wagon than making her deal with the truth. For that, Brixton was grateful. It’s not as if Pami couldn’t cope with stress, but after all the work she did to take care of herself after her last hospitalization, Brixton knew that if anything had the potential to obliterate that progress, the constant reminder of her parent’s guilty verdict would.

“Yes, I do. Our parents were taken away from us far too early in life, that’s for sure. Pami was only eight when Mom and Dad were arrested.”

Von flinched. “Arrested?”

“Hmph. I wondered just how much Zeke had told you. Sounds like he hit the basic highlights of our parents being gone and me having to look after my sister but missed the big details, like the fact that they were running meth

houses and will probably not live long enough to walk free.” Brixton knew he was being terribly candid with Von, but he felt that was the best way to get it out there and move on. Nobody ever wanted to talk more about it after that.

“Must have been so hard on you—raising Pami and bearing the responsibility of your parents’ crimes. I’m familiar with the general population’s penchant for spreading gossip. You had to work extra hard to shield your sister from all of that, didn’t you?”

He was shocked at Von’s keen insight. That was the piece Brixton still struggled with—the obligation he felt to atone for his parents’ wrongdoing. All he could do was nod. No one had ever understood that about him until now.

His parents had damaged the community and harmed good people in their quest for greed, and Brixton would spend the rest of his life making up for that. He couldn’t let his family’s story end with their arrest. He was determined to leave a legacy of redemption and honor.

It was even more important with Lilly May carrying on the Douglas name.

Wahhhh. Sniff, sniff. Waaaaah!

“Guess who’s up...” Brixton didn’t need to listen to the monitor to know that she was revving up fast and would be into a full-blown wail if he didn’t get there fast.

“Here.” Von reached into his freezer and pulled out one of the teething rings. “You’ll need this.”

“Thanks.” Brixton grabbed it and headed down the hall. He scooped his niece into his arms and set the ring on her bottom gums as she cried. Just like before, she quieted in less than a minute.

As Brixton looked at the clock on the wall, he realized that not only did she need a diaper change, but it was also time for her to eat again. He made quick work of her diaper, praising himself for putting the damn thing on the right way this time, and carried her back out to the kitchen. He hoped he had remembered to wash out her bottles.

“Here you go.” In his right hand, Von held a perfectly warmed bottle, and in his left he held a towel.

Was he dreaming, or was this guy for real?

“How did you know?”

“I’ve been around babies my whole life. Plus, the last year I was in Chicago, my best friends had twins. Dave travelled a lot, so I helped Manny whenever I could. Let’s go into the living room so you can sit and be comfortable.”

Brixton followed Von to the swivel recliner. It was one of the few pieces of furniture he was able to salvage from his parents’ house, and it was his personal favorite. “Did you want to feed her?”

Von immediately grinned. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Brixton shook his head.

“Then I’d love to. Can I sit in this chair? It looks like the most comfortable one in the room.”

“Go right ahead. It’s my favorite too.” They shared a smile. “Here, you take Lilly and get settled, and then I’ll hand you the bottle.”

Brixton watched with unabashed admiration as Von got Lilly May into the perfect position for him to hold her comfortably and for her to eat easily. He was in awe of his new friend.

They talked about the restaurant while Von fed her, and soon she was full and once again sleeping. Brixton started to get up from the couch, but Von stopped him. “I got her.”

He was blown away by Von’s kindness. He was beginning to see what others found so appealing about having a partner.

“She barely moved when I put her down.”

“You have a nice touch.”

“Aw shucks. I bet you say that to all the boys.” Von was teasing, but that didn’t stop his words from making Brixton’s heart beat a little faster. Sensing the awkwardness, Von quickly changed the subject. “I should go. I’m sure you want to get some sleep.”

“No,” Brix said louder than he intended. “I-I’d like you to stay a little longer, but if it’s too late for you, definitely head home. It must be at least one a.m. by now.”

“One ten to be exact.” Von took a deep breath, and Brixton wondered what the doctor was thinking. Probably that this guy with the baby was a pathetic mess and was never going to let him go now. “I’m not tired, so I don’t mind staying. I usually have to take melatonin to fall asleep. My hours are too inconsistent for me to ever develop a regular bedtime.”

“Great. I’m a little hungry. Are you? I think I missed dinner.” For a man whose life revolved around food, he hadn’t thought about anything but baby formula for the last twelve hours. No wonder his stomach was growling.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Brixton and Von worked side by side assembling their sandwiches. “You want tomato?” He sliced a few for himself and waited.

“You bet. One of the reasons I bought it.”

“Pami hates it. Says it makes her sandwich soggy.”

“That’s part of what I like, man!”

Hanging out with Von was just easy, and it was a good thing because he had reached his “difficult quota” a long time ago. For the first time in his life, Brixton was grateful to have a friend. A bromance made in heaven, right?

What if Von got the wrong idea?

But what exactly was the wrong idea?

Brix considered himself asexual, mostly because it was rare that he found anyone of the same or opposite sex to be attractive. In the unusual event that he did, those people had been women. Was it so crazy that he might be attracted to Von?

In his sleep-deprived daze, he rationalized that these feelings had to do with Von helping him with Lilly May. He was her doctor. He had stopped to check in on her. Von rescued him in a way, and he was confusing gratitude for something more. Brix must stop, or he was going to lose his only friend.

“What’s on your mind?”

If he only knew! “Did you let Peter know you were coming here?”

Von grunted, “Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. It seems like what people do in relationships. You know, call each other, let him know what you’re up to... that kind of stuff.” He shrugged, because in reality, Brixton wasn’t sure what happened in typical relationships. He hadn’t ever had one.

“Two things: first of all, we broke up. Second, that’s the main reason we did. Texting all the time, checking in, always needing to know where I am every second isn’t my kind of relationship. I want an equal partnership based on trust.”

Brixton grabbed plates for their sandwiches and sat down on the stool at the end of the island. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Von took the stool next to his. "Thanks, but I'm not. Peter and I wanted two very different things out of our relationship. Ending it was long overdue. Ask Zeke or Ava; they'd give you an earful about what they thought of Peter." He flashed Brixton that brilliant smile once more before taking a bite.

"Well then, I'm not sorry either," Brixton amended teasingly. "Bout time you kicked that man to the curb!"

Von started laughing so hard Brixton was afraid he might choke on his turkey club. "Thanks for the support. For the record, you don't ever have to say anything like that to me again."

"I was playing the part of your best friend. Couldn't you tell?"

"What?"

"Isn't every gay man supposed to have a girl best friend he can check out guys with and then bitch about when he breaks up with you?"

"Sure. In the movies, and maybe all those chic-lit books you've been reading." Von bumped him in the shoulder. "No, man, that's you spewing back the stereotypes about gay men society has been force-feeding you all these years. If it's easier for you to comprehend, then I suppose I act more like you—the typical straight guy."

"You think I'm straight?" The shock on Von's face was worth every bit of willpower Brixton had to exercise in order to say that without cracking a smile.

This time Von did start coughing so hard that Brixton thought he might actually have to do the Heimlich on him. "You're not?" Von asked when he finally caught his breath.

"Gotcha!" Brixton waggled his eyebrows and grinned. "In all seriousness, I don't like to identify myself in one particular way. I've always dated women, but I'm an open guy. Truth is, I don't do relationships at all."

"Well, after Peter, I can understand where you're coming from."

"That bad?"

"He was pretty clingy. Plus he got jealous of every person I ever talked to. It got old quick."

Interesting. Von had broken things off with Peter. Once again, Brixton was having a hard time wrapping his head around the reason the couple's breakup seemed to make him happy. He blamed it on his lack of sleep. Brixton yawned.

“You’re tired. You look like you could fall asleep at any minute,” Von observed.

“I think I could sleep right here.”

“I’m going to head out. Thanks for letting me hang out with you and Lilly tonight.”

“Thanks for everything—the help with Lilly, the groceries, taking my mind off this whole fucked-up situation.”

“Anytime, and I mean that. You have my number now. Don’t be afraid to use it.”

The two walked silently to Brixton’s front door, and shared a clumsy half handshake, half hug. “Yeah, thanks,” he fidgeted from one foot to the other. “See ya.”

“Not if I see you first,” Von said as he shut the door behind him.

Brixton watched him take off in a nice Acura SUV and wondered what in the hell had come over him. He didn’t want to think any more about how he was feeling or what it meant, so he just stripped down to his boxers, checked on Lilly May one more time, and went to bed.

Von

“I’m sorry. Did you just say that the hot chef has a kid?” Ava’s fork hung in midair.

“Not exactly.” Von took another sip of coffee.

“How can you ‘not exactly’ have a kid?”

Von set his cup down. He kind of liked watching his sister squirm, so he took a bite of his omelet before answering. “The baby is his sister, Pami’s.”

“That explains a lot.” She was a staunch Zeke supporter and didn’t take it well when Pami left after graduation. Ava and their cousin were close in age, so they were not just related, but best friends too.

“Ava,” he gently scolded, “give the girl a break. She’s struggled a lot.”

“I know, big brother, but so has everybody else, really. I bet if I asked anyone in this coffee shop if they’d struggled at some point in their life, I’d hear yes nine times out of ten,” his sister said with a frown.

“Uhem,” Von cleared his throat. “We’re not having a conversation about Pami.”

“You’re right, sorry. We’re talking about you going over to the guy’s house late last night. Did he happen to mention me, by any chance?”

Far from it, Sis. “No, Ava, he didn’t.”

“That’s because he doesn’t know me yet. Unless you think your gorgeous gay self has a chance with the chef-turned-daddy.”

“Funny you should say that. I swear he was flirting with me last night. He told me that even though he had been with women until this point that he was open. But he was severely stressed out and exhausted, so I can’t be sure if he was joking or not. Or maybe he was delirious.” Von didn’t think so, but at the same time, he couldn’t be sure. He had truly only spent part of one day with the guy.

“Well, my advice to you, big bro, is to take it easy. Unless you want to scare him away.”

“He doesn’t seem like the type to spook easy.”

“Maybe. You can take my advice or leave it. Just remember that he’s taking care of his sister’s baby, and he’s a workaholic pastry chef. Is there room in his life to try a gay relationship for the first time?”

Ava pushed her empty plate away and leaned back in her chair. Was she speaking out of sisterly care or jealousy? He couldn’t be sure. Regardless, she did have a point. Brixton was dealing with a hell of a lot, and he just didn’t have time for a relationship with anyone—even a friendly doctor who helped him out with his niece.

“You ready to go?” He took the last gulp of his coffee and left money on the table for a tip.

“I am. I’ve got a lot of work to do to finish this summer class with an A.”

“Is this your biology class?”

“Yes. The professor doesn’t seem to like me much.”

“Probably because you challenged him on the first day.” He shot his sister a pointed look.

“I can’t help it if a teacher with an advanced degree is not up to date on the latest advancements in female fertility.”

Von held the door open for his sister, and they made their way out into the mountain air. He had grown accustomed to the dryness and constant sunshine of this high-altitude city. It was beautiful country.

After the accident, Von began looking for job opportunities near Boulder so he could be closer to Ava. He hated the idea of leaving Chicago where he had a great position at a world-renowned hospital and an established group of friends. Plus, Chicago's gay community was thriving, and he loved living near Lake Michigan.

It wasn't a hard decision in the end. He would do anything for his sister, and she needed him. Less than a year later, and he was settled into a nice condo with a mountain view and within walking distance to his sister's place.

"It's probably not his specialty, Ava."

"So what? Then don't mention that as a highlight of your course and ask if anyone had questions if you're not prepared with an educated answer."

She had a point. He hoped that her professor had more integrity than to let that impact her grade, but he had spent too much time in higher education to deny its plausibility.

As they neared her apartment, Ava got unusually quiet. "Do you ever think about Mom and Dad?"

Von reached across the sidewalk to where she was walking near the curb and pulled her to his side. "All the time."

"Me too."

Brother and sister walked arm in arm down the last block to her place. "I miss them, Ava. It's normal to think about them a lot. It's only been a little over two years since they died."

"I just, I don't know, can't think about them without hating myself. I was totally goofing off, being weird when they both turned around. That's the last thing I remember."

"The crash is not your fault, no matter how much you disagree. You can't keep blaming yourself, or you're going to avoid thinking about them so much you'll stop remembering them."

Ava nodded and gave him a tentative smile. "Thanks, Von. You're the best brother."

“You’re welcome. You’re not too bad yourself.” He embraced her before she hopped up the few stairs to the building’s front door.

“Love you.”

“I love you too, Sis.” He resumed walking in the same direction toward his place.

“Von!” Ava yelled at him from the open window of her apartment. He turned and smiled.

“What?”

“Take it easy on the pastry chef, okay? You’ll get your dessert sampler platter when he’s ready.”

Von chuckled, thinking it was one of the oddest analogies he had ever heard, but he understood that his sister meant well. He wasn’t going to go out looking for dessert; he’d wait for it to come to him.

Okay, so his analogy sucked too.

Brixton

“Are we going to the park today? It’s gorgeous out,” he asked when Von picked up on the first ring.

“We can do that. I don’t go in until ten tonight.”

“Great. After seeing Lilly May on the swing the other day, I can’t wait to get her back there.”

“I’ll grab some salads from the co-op near my condo and meet you at Chautauqua in ten. Sound good?”

“Perfect. See you soon.”

Von

“You’re seriously going to take her hiking with you?” He looked at Brixton like he had sprouted a second head.

“Yes. I have the Baby Bjorn all ready. It’s not as sunny today, so it’s a great day to get her out into the fresh air.”

“Okay, I’m game. Just don’t expect me to carry her if you get tired.”

Brixton smirked. “Have you seen me lately? Do I look like the kind of guy who would get tired from carrying a mere fifteen pounds? You might, Doc, but not me.”

Von chuckled. “Fine. I’ll at least make sure we have sunscreen and a hat for her. Don’t want her bald little head to get burnt.”

“Hey, she’s not so bald anymore.” Brixton tenderly grazed Lilly May’s head with his fingertips.

“She barely has hair beyond the few strands you tried to put into a bow, Brix. It’s about time you faced the fact that this little girl is destined to be bald for at least another year.”

“It’s okay Lilly, don’t listen to him,” he mumbled to his niece. “We’ll show him when your hair is long and luscious in just a couple months, right?”

“Yeah. Good luck with that. Better plan on keeping her in pink for a while, so people don’t go thinking she’s a boy.”

“Prick. Just go grab the sunscreen. And a couple bottles of water.”

Von smiled and kissed Lilly May on her fuzzy head. “You got it.”

Brixton

“You off tonight?” He called Von early on Monday morning. He had the day off and was in the mood for pizza, beer, and some sci-fi.

“Ah, my shift’s supposed to end at seven. Did you have something in mind?”

“Yes! My place. Lilly May and I will provide the pizza and beer if you bring a couple movies.” Von could hear Brixton’s niece cooing in the background. She was making so many noises now, and they weren’t howls of pain anymore. She was still teething, but Brixton had found a couple remedies that worked well for her. She was a happy baby for the most part. One that was putting every single thing she could get her hands on into her mouth.

“You two are on. *Alien* tonight, or are you more in the mood for some *Mission Impossible*?”

“Both. That’s my girl, you can get it. Good job!”

“Did you just call me girl?” Von teased, knowing full well that he was talking to Lilly.

“Ha ha. Lilly just pulled herself over to one of the stuffed toys that was sitting about a foot away from her. But if you want, I can certainly call you girl too.”

“Shut up, shithead. I’ll be there around seven thirty unless you hear otherwise.”

Brixton laughed heartily. “Sounds good. See you later, *guurrll...*”

Von

“So when was the last time you went out on a date?” They were out in Brixton’s backyard digging up a dead bush.

“It’s been forever. Plus, I don’t date.” Brixton leaned forward and pulled up the shrub on the first try.

“Ooh! You are so tough, Mr. Pastry Chef. You look pretty sexy with those purple gardening gloves on.” Von laughed as the sweat dripped from Brixton’s forehead.

“They’re royal blue, you asshole. I like the color.”

“They look purple to me.”

“Whatever.” Brixton swiped a glove across his face, leaving a line of dirt from his jawline to his ear. “You going to just stand there and watch, or are you actually going to help?”

“I’m having such a good time watching you, but I will help if you really need it.”

“Clearly, or I wouldn’t have asked you.”

“Fine.” Von sauntered up to him and stood with his face a few inches from Brixton’s. Working outside for the last hour had really enhanced Brixton’s smell, and Von found himself inhaling deeply. He loved the smell of a hardworking man.

Brixton’s gaze met his. Von reached up, and without glancing away, gently brushed the dirt from Brixton’s cheek. “Your face was dirty,” he whispered.

“Thanks,” Brixton replied and licked his lips. Von wondered if they would taste as salty as his skin. He’d like a taste.

“Sure. Someone’s gotta keep you cleaned up.”

Brixton smacked Von's arm and stepped back to grab the shovel. "C'mon, grab that bag of soil before I start to believe that primping is the only thing you're strong enough to do."

Brixton

"To us!" he declared loudly, slamming his beer down on the bar.

Von laughed and caught Brixton's glass right before it tipped over. "Okay, to us. Again. You know that's about the tenth toast you've made 'to us'?"

"Nah." Brixton swayed in Von's direction. He had lost count of his beer consumption when he hit eight. "I like you a lot, man."

"I like you too, Brixton. Now, finish that beer and let me take you home."

"Ooohhh, you want to go home with me?" Brixton attempted to wink, but he couldn't coordinate the muscles in his face enough to shut only one eye.

"I said I want to take you home, not home with me. There's a difference. You're giving your drunk ass too much credit." Von rolled his eyes at him.

"But I'm cute! You've said so yourself. And I happen to think you're cute too." He realized that he should probably stop talking, but after so much to drink, he found that rational voice in his head very easy to ignore.

"Aw, thanks, big guy." Even in his drunken state, he could tell Von was messing with him.

"What would you do if I kissed you?" Brixton just couldn't help himself.

Von shrugged. "I'd kiss you back."

Brix knocked what was left of his beer over. "Whoa." He tried mopping the suds up with the one napkin he found. "You would?"

Von motioned to the bartender to bring him a towel, and he quickly cleaned up Brixton's mess. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Von

"Damn, man, you look hot!" He jabbed his friend in the ribs when he showed up in his suit and tie. Von either saw Brixton in his chef's jacket or in a T-shirt and shorts. But he had gotten himself all dressed up for his family court hearing.

“Don’t I? Lilly May and I make a good pair, don’t we?” Brixton picked the little girl up out of her car seat so he could show Von her pretty red-and-white flowered dress. Von was impressed. Brixton had even worn a tie with red in it to match.

“You ready for this?” He looked his friend over and brushed some lint from his coat sleeve.

“I am. I still can’t believe that Pami hasn’t even called to check up on her, but what can I do? Lilly needs a guardian, and I need temporary custody if I’m going to get insurance for her.”

“She’s a lucky little girl.” Von smiled when Lilly May reached out to grab his thumb.

“I’m the lucky one.” Brixton got unusually sentimental. “I love this little girl like she’s my own.” His blue eyes shone with unshed tears. “Now she’ll always have a home with me.”

Von brushed away the wetness in his own eyes and put his arm around Brixton’s shoulders. “You’re a great uncle, Brix.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you think she’ll call you daddy?” Von teased, trying to lighten the serious mood.

“I don’t want her to. Pami will always be her mommy, and I’ll always be her uncle.”

“Even if your sister never comes back?”

“Especially then. Someone’s got to tell her all about her mom. She has to know that no matter where we all are, we’ll always love her.” Brixton looked up when the court clerk called his name. “Looks like we’re on!”

“I admire you, man. You are doing your family proud.” Von grabbed Lilly’s car seat and followed Brixton into the large room.

“Hey, I have you to thank for some of that. You’ve helped me so much.” They exchanged a look that Von could only describe as tender. This man and Lilly May had come to mean so much to him.

“My pleasure,” he replied, his eyes still locked on Brixton’s. “Whatever I can do.”

“Well, remember that when the judge asks you to testify on my behalf.”

“Shit. That was part of the deal?” Von waggled his eyebrows as they took seats close to the front.

“You bet it was! Please speak well of me, and don’t mention the time I got drunk and tried to kiss you.”

“Darn, that was going to be in my opening statement.”

“Von...” Brixton glared at him.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

“You fucking better,” Brixton whispered under his breath and shot Von a winning smile. “In all seriousness—thanks, man. Really, I mean it.”

“Of course. I’ll always be there for you.”

Their moment was interrupted by the start of the proceedings. Von was so proud to be there for his friend, and he knew in that moment that he loved little Lilly and her uncle too.

“Brixton Douglas and Lilly May Douglas, please come see the clerk to present your identification...”

Brixton

“So, is Lilly May with Tracy today?” his assistant, Carmen, asked. They were stacking layers of dough for croissants. Brixton had come in extra early to help make the pastries for brunch.

“She is. I can’t believe that it’s been two months already since she arrived. She changes so much every day, I swear. Did I tell you she’s got her top teeth coming in now?”

“No! Is she drooling a lot?” Carmen had three kids of her own, so Brixton often grilled her for parenting advice. Between her and Von, he was turning out to be an excellent parent, although he wasn’t really sure if he could technically call himself that.

Brixton had yet to hear from Pami since the day she left Lilly May. He had tried her cell, but true to her word, her line was disconnected. He had even asked Carmen’s brother, a city cop, to do a little digging without Brixton filing an actual missing person’s report. Still nothing.

Brix had no choice but to go on with life, assuming his sister wasn’t coming back. With Von’s help, he had painted the guest room and turned it into Lilly’s

bedroom. It still had the antique bed from his grandparents, but now it also had Lilly May's crib, dresser, and changing table in it. He had added Lilly May to his insurance, after being granted temporary custody. She was a healthy five month old whose hair was starting to grow in blonde and curly. And Brixton was totally enamored with the little girl.

After that strange night with Von, the very first day he had Lilly, they had seen each other regularly as their schedules allowed. Von had become a great friend—his best friend, really, and he didn't dwell on it when his heart raced at the thought of seeing him, and his body tingled when they hugged. Brix figured it had more to do with him finally having a friend than anything.

Between Tracy, Samantha, Von, and Zeke's mom, Jo, he had child care for Lilly May whenever he worked. He had severely cut back his hours, relying on Carmen a lot more, which she appreciated greatly. She had been begging him for more responsibility, but he had been reticent to relinquish control. Now, Carmen was working full time and taking the lead on the Pearl's Sunday brunch pastry menu.

"You should go home," she told him as they finished up the last sheet pan of scones. "I've got this under control. Spend time with that cute baby and your man friend."

Brixton rolled his eyes and poked Carmen. "Shush, woman."

"I don't know why you don't like it when I say that. He's a man, and he's your friend, right?"

He continued to glare at her.

"And he happens to be completely gaga over your little girl."

"Yeah," chimed Rosa, the sous chef. "He's a doctor and gorgeous. I don't know why you're not tapping that."

"Geez! You two are horrible. I'm almost offended," Brixton teased them.

"Are not," Rosa added quickly. "You two would be hot together."

"Okay—enough! Von and I are friends. We've got a good thing going, and I don't want to ruin it. Plus, I don't do relationships."

"Who said anything about a relationship?" Carmen rejoined their conversation. "One of these times when you're hanging out, just lean over and kiss him. You'll find out quickly if the gay thing works for you, and if he feels the same."

Brixton was about to respond when his phone chimed. He washed his hands and checked messages. He used to go an entire shift without looking at his cell. Now with Lilly May under his care, he paid attention to every noise that came from it. His life had certainly changed in a really short time.

U working?

He smiled at the simple message Von had sent. His ears must have been burning.

Yep. U?

We r slow, so I'm going home. U busy later?

Brixton thought about Carmen encouraging him to leave. Maybe he should take the afternoon off. It was a beautiful day in mid-August, and the aspens were just starting to turn golden. They would likely see some snow fly within the next month. It was part of what he loved most about this area of the Rocky Mountains. It could snow one day and then be sunny and fifty degrees by the next.

Actually, I'm taking off early. Want 2 meet now?

Von's response was immediate.

Sure! UR place in an hour?

How about UR place? We could get lunch at the café.

What about Lilly May?

She's with Tracy. Is it OK if it's just u & me?

Sounds good. C u soon.

Brixton took a deep breath before stuffing his phone back into his pocket. Maybe spending the day alone with Von was just what he needed.

He knew that he felt this tremendous debt of gratitude to Von for all the guidance he'd given him with Lilly. And he was so good with her. Von did this silly buzzing thing with his tongue that made her giggle out loud. It was one of those uninhibited belly laughs that made you laugh just from hearing her. It was adorable. He could see why men sometimes fell for their kids' nanny. There was something special about seeing another person have such a strong connection with your child. And that's how he thought of Lilly May—as his.

So he'd spend today with his best friend, Von. Not his daughter's doctor, Von, or her caregiver, Von, or the guy who stayed with him through the night

when Lilly May got the stomach flu and would not stop vomiting. His friend. And then he could prove to himself once and for all that his feelings were nothing but platonic.

“You seem really happy. Don’t tell me you’ve met someone?” He teased Von as they walked through the co-op near Von’s condo. The place carried a special reserve Sumatra coffee that he absolutely loved. Von usually brought him some, but he wanted to go himself since they were close to the store. He grabbed the last two one-pound bags from the shelf. “One for me, one for you?”

“Sure, that’d be great.” But Brixton noticed a drastic change in Von’s demeanor all of a sudden.

“You okay?”

“Yep. Why?”

“Because you didn’t answer my question. I was just teasing you. I thought maybe you were getting some, and that contributed to your good mood.” Brixton smiled at Von, hoping for one in return.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but no, not getting some. Can we change the subject now?” Von sped past him and then stopped suddenly at the deli counter.

Brixton caught up to him and stood right by his side. “They have your favorite orzo salad, I see, otherwise I think you would have run right out the door.”

Von turned and gave him a weak smile. “Maybe.”

“You going to tell me what’s going on?”

“I suppose I should.”

Brixton was a bit puzzled by that. “You should?”

“Yes. But let’s wait until we get back to my place, okay?”

“Okay. I’m going to go pick up some apples. The kind I use in my dessert galette are on sale. I’ll meet you at the registers?”

“Yep.”

Brixton wandered off toward the produce section feeling anxious. He wasn’t sure what Von needed to tell him, but he already didn’t like the sound of it.

They went through the line without speaking, save a brief “thank you” to the cashier after he paid for their groceries. They spoke very little beyond basic

small talk on the short jaunt back to Von's house, and by the time Von finally unlocked his front door, Brixton was dying of curiosity. He hated feeling tense around Von. One of the reasons he spent so much time with him was because he was easy to get along with. But this uncharacteristic silence between them was unbearable.

Brixton lightly grabbed Von's arm as he moved to walk past him. "I can't take it. Please tell me what's going on with you."

"Can I at least throw my pasta into the fridge?"

"Sure, of course. Sorry." Brixton felt stupid for being so tense. "I'll sit down, and we can talk after you put groceries away."

"Thanks."

Brixton made himself comfortable on Von's couch, crossing his leg over his knee and lying back against the plush pillows. He listened as his friend opened and shut his refrigerator and a few cupboards before joining him back in the living room.

"Your beans and apples are on my counter; make sure you don't forget them when you leave." Brixton thought Von's voice sounded flat. There didn't seem to be much life in him ever since Brix asked if he had met someone.

"Thanks. So..."

Von looked him straight in the eyes. The blue of his irises was deep, several shades darker than usual. "I have met someone."

Brixton opened his mouth to speak. "Let me finish please." Von cut him off. "The reason I got uptight when you asked is because that *someone* I've met is you, and I'm pissed that you don't feel the same way about me."

Whoa. Brixton felt like he could have been knocked over with a feather, and his heart hammered in his chest. "I care about you a lot, Von."

"You don't have to say any more. I've heard it before. 'I like you but only as a friend.'" Von made little quotation marks with his fingers. His ordinarily strong voice sounded resigned and more than a bit sarcastic.

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Then what? 'It's me, not you'?" The quotation marks came out again.

"Will you just shut up and listen for a change?"

Von cocked his head and smiled. "Sure."

Brixton was in uncharted waters now. He hadn't ever experienced having feelings for someone other than a woman. But that's sure what it felt like with Von. The hard part was that Brix didn't want to do anything rash until he knew for sure. He would never forgive himself if he hurt Von in any way. "I feel like there might actually be something between us too."

Von didn't disguise his amazement.

"I don't know how to define it. I've never felt anything remotely like this for any other man. And honestly, I don't entirely understand what's going on. You are my friend—my best friend—and I haven't ever really had one of those either. I couldn't stand it if I hurt you."

Von squeezed Brixton's hand briefly, which was restless in his lap. "I know. I feel very connected to you. Although I suppose this isn't anything new for me." Von offered him a comforting smile.

"Exactly. You know firsthand I'm not a relationship kind of guy. But I have to admit I've actually thought about what it might be like with you."

"You have?"

Brixton nodded without hesitation. "I can't believe I'm actually saying this stuff out loud."

"Neither can I," Von said on a sigh. "And truthfully, I'm not sure what to say to you. Do I tell you how incredible it is to hear that for fear of overwhelming you, or do I play it cool, and encourage you to take your time to figure your feelings out?"

"You always do that."

"What?"

"Tell me you're not sure what to say but then proceed to say a whole lot."

"I don't shy away from situations, no matter how difficult they may seem. Part of my medical training, I'm sure. Act first and without hesitation, or you might lose a life."

Brixton admired Von's ability to tackle issues head-on. He had spent his life in careful avoidance. Don't talk about all the people who keep coming to the house; don't mention their new car; don't ever go into the garage; don't tell Pami he was going to visit Mom and Dad that afternoon; don't let anyone know that he actually hadn't seen his sister the day she dropped off Lilly May; and most importantly, don't tell your best friend that you had been thinking about what it would be like to kiss him.

“You are the exact opposite. When you don’t know what to say, you say absolutely nothing.”

Brixton sensed a bit of frustration in Von’s comment. Lack of communication was the number one complaint from Brixton’s exes, so it wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before. “That’s who I am, Von. I don’t come from a family who talked things out. We kept secrets.”

“I know. I’m grateful you shared what you did. And even though it’ll be nearly impossible, I’m leaving the next move up to you. I’m ready, but that’s not enough.”

“Thank you.” Brixton felt an odd sense of disappointment. This is what he wanted, right? Time to sort things out? “Well, we’ve had enough drama for today, so I’m going to take off.”

“Okay.” Von stood and disappeared for a few minutes, returning with Brix’s groceries packed in a reusable bag. “Can’t forget these.”

“No way!” He joked, but the conversation still felt a bit awkward. He knew their relationship would go back to normal once they both had a little time to think.

But it didn’t.

Von

“It’s been eleven days, Manny, and I’ve heard nothing from him.”

The voice on the other end chuckled. “Well, good to hear from you too.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m a bit uptight.” Von let his full weight rest against his car. He had come outside during a break to enjoy the beautiful fall weather, but he couldn’t concentrate for shit.

“Not you!” Manny didn’t hide his sarcasm. “Honey, you told him the next move was his to make. You realize that means he could decide not to make one at all?”

“Fuck. I know that. Why do you think I’m so freaked out? Ugh!” Von yelled into the phone.

“Ow.”

“Sorry. Can you still hear?”

Manny laughed. “My kids are toddlers; I’m used to noise at a high volume. It’s when things get quiet that I worry the most.”

“How are those adorable children of yours?”

“They’re incredible.” Von smiled at the unabashed pride in his friend’s voice. “They’re already doing this crazy twin thing.”

“And they’re talking?”

“Yes. Well, Nadine is mostly. She tends to speak for them both. She can’t say his name, though, so she calls him ‘Oh-be’. It’s so cute. She’ll tell me that Oh-be wants more milk or has to go potty. You don’t think he’s mute, do you?”

“That’s an antiquated term, Manny. Anyway, this is pretty typical twin behavior, don’t worry. You’ve heard Norbert vocalize before, so I suspect he may just be the quieter of the two.”

Von missed his friends and the twins a lot. It was probably one of the reasons he took to Lilly May so quickly. He had been so used to being around Nadine and Norbert all the time that he felt immediately comfortable.

After chatting a bit longer about the twins, they talked about Manny’s husband, Dave, taking a different position that would require only half the travel he was doing now. Dave loved his job teaching and lecturing around the world, but he was missing out on a lot of the twins’ firsts.

“I can’t wait for that!” Manny sounded excited. “Right now I have to translate. He’s just not around enough to understand Nadine’s gibberish.”

“That will change soon. Be patient. He’s been traveling since you two met—are you sure you’re not going to kill each other when he’s home every day?”

Manny laughed. “Good question. Maybe I’ll have to go back to work again.”

“Getting restless as a kept house-husband?” Von teased.

“Nah. I love my life. I get to do what a lot of other families only ever dream of.”

“Yeah, you guys are pretty amazing.”

Dr. Fruzzetti’s car zipped into the parking lot and careened into the space right next to his. He jumped onto the grass near his SUV’s hitch to avoid getting bumped. “I have to go. Thanks for listening. Give the twins and your husband a kiss for me.”

“I will. And Von, just give him time. You’re fabulous, and he’d be lucky to have you. It’ll work out as it’s supposed to.” His friend said good-bye and hung up.

“Hartmann! How’s it going?” Nick’s car door pushed open with a rush. “Ready for a busy Thursday in the ER? I see several intoxicated college students in our future.”

“Bring it on.” They headed into the hospital together talking about the Rockies game. Von liked baseball, but he preferred going to games in person. Nick and his wife had gone yesterday and had awesome seats right behind the dugout.

“What’s up, Hartmann? You’re distracted today.”

He had hoped the other doctor wouldn’t notice. “I just have a few things on my mind.”

“Man problems?”

Von laughed at his friend’s attempt to be supportive. “Maybe.”

Nick smacked him on the arm. “You know I’m here if you need to talk.”

“I do. Thanks, Nick. See you in a little bit.”

Von chuckled again at his friend. Hearing him say “man problems” was a riot, but he gave Nick credit for being cool about everything. He might just end up talking to him about it later. Maybe it would help to get a straight guy’s perspective; he might have a bit more insight about what Brixton was going through.

Von stuffed a hand in the pocket of his jacket and picked up his next patient’s file. Then he stopped for a second. Should he be worried that he still thought of Brixton as straight?

The night lived up to Nick’s prediction and much more. Thursday nights were as much of a party night as Friday and Saturday nowadays, and with school only recently started up again, students were making up for missed time. Seven that night. One even came in with a couple of police officers. He had been charged with public intoxication but had passed out in the back seat of their car.

At about three in the morning, the consistent flow of incoming injuries finally stopped. Von was going to take a break and grab some coffee from the cafeteria when he heard a child’s wail.

Coming through the main sliding doors of the hospital was a man carrying a young girl in his arms. Von met him right outside the ER. The guy looked as terrified as his kid.

“What happened here?”

“Oh, thank God. Chelly fell from the top bunk. I think she might have broken her arm.”

The little girl sniffled and buried her face into the man’s chest. “Don’t worry, honey, we’ll get you taken care of.” Von spoke directly to her, and then guided the two of them into the triage area. “Get her registered, and then I’ll take her back and check her out myself.”

“Thank you so much. Dr...”

“Hartmann.”

“I’m Louis—Chelsea’s dad.” Despite his daughter clinging to him, he reached out a hand to Von.

“Nice to meet you. I’ll be right back.”

Von let Sally, his nurse, know that he’d take Chelsea and her dad when they were ready, and he hurried to the cafeteria for that cup of coffee.

Seeing the little girl and her dad reminded him of Brixton. Almost two weeks had passed without a word from him. He was pretty sure what the distance meant.

Brixton couldn’t do it.

He should have known better than to fall for a straight man.

After several X-rays, he had Chelsea’s arm wrapped and in a sling. She had fractured it right near the elbow when she fell. They’d have to wait for the swelling to go down before they got it into a cast.

Her dad chuckled when he heard light snores coming from the table where Chelsea was lying. “I didn’t think she’d ever fall asleep.”

Von looked at him and smiled. “She did really well through the X-rays.” He had been able to coax her from her dad, so they could get some pictures of her arm.

“She’s a really good kid. She’s a little lonely, though. Her... my... I just went through a breakup, and it hasn’t been easy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Ben’s daughter was only with us part time, but Chelly got really close to her. They are only a year apart. It didn’t go well when we ended things, and he

moved out.” Louis glanced at his daughter and gave Von a rueful smile. “You have any children?”

This was typically more personal than he liked to get with patients, but Louis seemed nice, and Von thought he was pretty cute too. He had a soft spot for redheads, and the guy had thick red hair that his daughter had clearly inherited. Hers was in a tangled mess around her face right now, but Von imagined it hung in pretty ringlets when it was brushed.

“I don’t have kids of my own, but I see a lot of my friends’ children.”

“I’m sure you see lots of them come through the ER too.”

“I do. And I specialized in pediatric oncology when I was in school, so I get pulled in on a number of consults outside the ER as well.” He wasn’t entirely sure why he was telling Louis all of this, other than the simple fact that he missed friendly, adult conversation. God, did he miss Brixton. “So, were you and Ben together long?”

“A couple of years. I know this sounds cliché, but we met at a gay dads’ support group.”

“Not at all. My best friend attends one in Chicago. They have twins, and his husband travels a lot.” Von finished logging his diagnosis and recommendation into her file on the laptop, so her dad could make an appointment the next day to continue treatment with her regular physician. “Well, good luck to you, Louis. Have Chelsea keep her arm in the sling until she’s able to see her regular doctor. Here’s my card if you have any questions.”

“Dr. Hartmann, forgive me if I’m being too forward, but would you like to go out for dinner sometime?” The redheaded dad smiled at him, and he blushed. Von thought it was sweet.

“Um, sure. That would be nice. Text me, and we’ll set a date.” Though he wasn’t ready to give up on Brixton yet, he thought a dinner date would probably be good for him. He had been a hermit for the last couple of weeks, and he really needed a night out.

Louis grinned and shook Von’s hand enthusiastically. “Thank you so much. Chelly would thank you too if she were awake.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll talk to you soon then.”

“Yes you will, Dr. Hartmann.”

Von smiled and watched as Louis gently lifted his daughter to his shoulder. “You can call me Von.”

Brixton

“I haven’t seen Von around here at all lately. Is there something you want to tell me?” Sam had just put Lilly May down for her afternoon nap when he got home.

“That’s quite the greeting, Sam.” He kissed her cheek and threw his dirty chef gear into the laundry room.

“Trace and I were talking about it last night. For a while there we thought something might actually happen between the two of you. You know, *happen*.”

Brixton plopped down next to her on the couch. “Honestly, I thought that too.”

Samantha gasped and covered her mouth. “Brixton Douglas! Do tell. When did all of this come about? Tracy is going to be so mad. I bet her you two might be crossing the friend line.”

“Don’t collect your money yet.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound promising.”

“Well, you know how I feel about relationships or even just the idea of dating. I don’t do it. So you can imagine my surprise when Von told me he had feelings for me.”

“Oh. Wow. I can’t say that I’m at all shocked. And what did you say?” She looked scared to hear his response.

“I told him I thought I might be feeling something for him too. That was almost a month ago.” He looked away from her and focused on the television. *Ellen* was on.

“And do you?”

“Yes. Well, I thought I did. Now I think maybe I confused my gratitude for all his help with Lilly May for something more.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “So, you’ve blown him off because you think you might be confused? Let me ask you this: would you say you feel the same way about me and Tracy and Jo?”

“No,” he answered without hesitation. “Why?”

“Just trying to give you some perspective. If you were confusing gratitude for deeper feelings, I’m thinking you’d be having those deeper feelings for the other people who have helped with Lilly May too.”

He nodded slowly. She could be right. He never thought about it like that.

“Well dear, I’m going to leave you. Lilly was just fed, changed, and should sleep for at least a couple of hours. She didn’t nap at all this morning, and she was up early.”

“Thanks, Sam. You and Tracy are lifesavers. I don’t know what I’d do without you both.”

“You bet. You and Lilly May are family.” She grabbed her purse and opened the front door. “Now you better not go and fall in love with either of us. We’re both taken.”

“Fuck you,” Brixton replied as she winked and shut the door behind her.

He must have dozed off. He thought he heard loud banging at the front door, but when he opened his eyes, the place was quiet. *Must have been a dream.*

Knock, knock, knock! “Brixton! Open the door!”

He couldn’t believe his ears. He jumped from the sofa and almost yanked the front door from its hinges. “Is that really you?”

His sister stood on his front porch, looking thin and dirty. She attempted a smile but broke down crying instead.

“Pami, are you okay? What’s wrong?” Brixton pulled her into a fierce hug. It was a warm fall day outside, but she was shivering in his arms.

“I’m—oh—kay,” she managed between sobs.

“Come in, and sit down. Let me get you some water.” He rushed her inside and got her settled in the recliner before going to the kitchen for a glass.

She drank almost the entire glass in one gulp. “Thanks. I—guess—I—was—thirsty.” Her breathing was still uneven even though she had pretty much stopped crying.

“So, you’re okay? I’ve been searching for you. I was so worried, and I thought the worst.”

“I was pretty bad. I was released from my treatment program yesterday.” His sister looked so different. Her long blonde hair was cut short and tucked behind her ears. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her cheekbones were sunken in.

“Treatment program?”

“It’s a long story, but I’ll give you the abbreviated version.” Pami took a huge breath. “I went off my meds when I was pregnant and went on the wrong ones, ah, when I wasn’t anymore.”

“You mean after you had Lilly May.”

“Mm hmm.” Pami’s eyes darted around the room. It was as if hearing Lilly May’s name suddenly reminded her that she had left her daughter here almost three months ago.

“She’s sleeping.”

“Oh.” Pami started chewing on a fingernail.

Brixton waited to see if she’d actually say something instead of grunting at him. He looked at her expectantly. “Don’t you want to hear about her?”

“Who?”

“Lilly May. Or did you forget in the last three months who she was?” Brix was getting pissed off.

“Of course not,” her voice shook. “I want to know everything about her, but I need you to know something first,” she said softly, her eyes downcast.

“What?”

“I’ve come to get her. I’m taking her with me.”

Brixton stood frozen in place, staring at the shell of a person his sister had become. There was no way she could ever think about taking care of that little girl. It was obvious she couldn’t even take care of herself. “The hell you are.”

Von

His phone vibrated for the fourth time in about two minutes. He wasn’t on call so he hadn’t checked his messages, but from the back-to-back vibrations in his pocket, it was obvious someone was desperate to try to reach him.

“Excuse me, Louis. I need to check my messages.” Von backed his chair from the restaurant table and went outside the front door.

Five missed calls and four text messages. The last one was marked URGENT all in caps.

Brixton.

Von hadn't heard from him in almost a month.

He was torn between being angry and worried. He had sent text after text to Brix when two weeks had passed, and he had heard nothing from the guy. Von had told him to make the next move. But Brixton never did. Then he didn't even text back to say he was okay when all Von wanted to hear was that he and Lilly May were fine. Nothing. Not a single word.

Now he was staring at his phone's screen, which was blanketed with missed notifications from Brixton.

Could u please call me?

I know I've blown you off, but I'd really like it if you'd call me.

I'm so sorry. Please call.

I need you. It's Lilly May.

He didn't even hesitate to dial Brixton's number.

"Thanks for calling, Von."

"Hello, Brixton. I just got all your messages. What's wrong with Lilly?"

"Pami is taking her away." Von had never heard such complete vulnerability in Brixton's voice before. He sounded devastated.

"What? When did Pami get back?" Von only knew Pami from what Zeke and Brixton had told him, and so far, she had not endeared herself to him at all. He thought she was selfish and ungrateful, and from the sound of her surprise visit today, she was living up to his opinion.

"I got home after work and took a nap while Lilly was sleeping. I woke up to all this banging on my door, and it was Pami. At first I was so glad to see her, even though she looks horrible and gaunt, but then she dropped the bomb on me."

"What exactly did she say?"

"She said that she was only here to get Lilly May, and that she was taking her." Brixton's voice cracked, and he broke away from the phone with a sob.

"Are you at home?"

Von heard him blow his nose and take a couple deep breaths. “Yes.”

“Pami hasn’t taken Lilly has she?”

“Not yet. She said she was coming back with the police... that I couldn’t keep her when she wasn’t my baby.”

“I’m on my way over. Maybe you want to get Lilly May in a safe place, like with Tracy and Sam or Jo? Pami can’t steal her away if she can’t find her.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t want to keep her from her daughter.”

“Brixton, she left her daughter on your front porch! I’m thinking she doesn’t deserve to have a daughter.”

Brixton gasped. “How long have you known?”

“I think I knew from that first day when you came into the ER. Something seemed off when you knew little to nothing about your niece, who you were supposedly just *watching* for your sister. But I got the truth out of Tracy. I wish you would have trusted me enough to tell me.” Now was really not the time to hash things out, but Von at least wanted Brixton to know that he was aware of the real reason Lilly was with him.

“I’m sorry. I thought maybe as her doctor you’d be obligated to call the police. I couldn’t take that chance.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have, but the point is moot now. I’ve got to make my apologies to someone, and then I’ll be over. Give me ten minutes, and don’t do anything rash.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Von ended the phone call and hustled back inside the restaurant. He should have known something like this would happen the first time he was on a date in months.

Louis looked at him sadly, as if sensing he was going to leave. “An emergency at work?”

“Not at work, but an emergency, nonetheless. I’m sorry to have to cancel.” Von observed Louis as he carefully wiped his mouth with the napkin in his lap. He stood and took Von’s hand.

“It’s okay. Perhaps we can try this again sometime?” Louis was sweet and attractive and so very attentive, but there was no spark. In fact, Von had sat through dinner wondering if spending more time with Louis would change that. Can you develop a spark?

Not in his experience. It was either there, or not there. And their lack of chemistry was unmistakable.

“Louis, you are a wonderful person, and I am happy you asked me out. But I’m afraid I just don’t feel a strong connection with you. So, I think it best if we accept it for what it is, and maybe we can be friends.” Von squeezed Louis’s hand once and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. Please tell Chelsea I’d be happy to sign her cast if you want to stop by the ER sometime.”

“Sure, Von. Thank you. I wish you the best of luck with him.”

“You do?” Had Von been that obviously distracted? He knew he hadn’t mentioned Brixton to Louis.

“I see it in your eyes. You have someone else on your mind, and I’m thinking he’s the one with the emergency. So, go on. I’ve got the check.”

“Thanks, Louis. You’re a great guy.” Von smiled genuinely.

“You are too. I hope everything is okay. Good luck to you both.” Louis sat back down in his chair and took a sip of some wine. Von watched him for just a second before taking off from the restaurant. He truly hoped Louis would find someone who appreciated him, but he wasn’t that guy.

He was still completely hung up on Brixton. And he was going to see him for the first time in twenty-three days—not that he was counting.

Brixton

As soon as he saw Von get out of his car, he was out the door. Without warning, he grabbed Von by the arm and pulled him into a desperate embrace. “You said you’d come, but I still wasn’t sure until now.”

“I promised I’d always be here for you and Lilly, and I am a man of my word.”

Brixton released a heavy sigh when Von wrapped his arms tightly around Brix’s back.

“Thank you,” he whispered close to Von’s ear. “You are so good to me, and I’m such an asshole.”

“Don’t do this now, okay? We need to figure out what to do when Pami comes back. Is Lilly May next door?”

Brixton backed away from Von and walked to the front door. “She is. Tracy and Sam are freaked out too, so they’ve turned off all the lights in the house. They’re such great friends. Even if they do get arrested for conspiring to help me kidnap Lilly May...”

“It won’t come to that, I guarantee it. You are Lilly’s guardian, so we just need to have all that paperwork ready for the police when they show up with your sister. It’s all locked in the safe, right?” Von knew every inch of Brixton’s house like his own. He had spent so much time there over the first two months.

“Yep. You remember the combination?”

“I do,” Von replied and smiled.

The code was Von’s birthday; the guy better remember.

“I’ll be back. Why don’t you go make us some coffee? I think we might be here for a while.”

Brixton made his way to the kitchen, put some of the beans he had bought with Von the last day he saw him into the grinder, and turned the machine on. The grating of the coffee beans against the blade provided the background noise he needed to cover the sound of his soft cries. He loved his sister so much, but he knew that if she left with Lilly May there was a good chance he’d never see either of them again. He couldn’t let that happen. Lilly was his responsibility, and he would take whatever drastic measures were necessary to protect that little girl.

“C’mere.” Brixton felt Von’s touch on his shoulder before he heard his voice. He let Von pull him into his arms, and he let go of all the tension and fear he had been holding in forever.

“What if I lose her?”

“You’re not going to.” He sunk further into Von as his body grew weaker with each staggered breath.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Aren’t I always?” Von’s voice had a hint of humor in it.

Brixton pulled his head back just enough to look his friend in the eyes. “Yeah. I should have called.”

Von pressed Brixton’s head back against him and ran gentle fingers through his closely cropped hair. “And I shouldn’t have come on so strong.”

“No, I’m glad you did.”

“Ha! You wanted me to be miserable without my best friend?” Von asked.

“No. I got scared. In my mind, I had us already broken up and hating each other. I wasn’t sure I wanted to take that risk.”

“Wow! So you saw us together and then breaking up?”

“I did.”

“So, how was the sex?”

“Von! I’m trying to be serious here,” he mumbled into Von’s damp shirt. “You’re an ass.”

“Yes, I am. But you love me.”

Brixton pushed himself out so he was able to look at Von. “You’re right. I do.”

Von’s blue eyes popped open wide. “You do?”

Brixton could only nod his head. He hadn’t intended to confess that to Von tonight, but now that he had said it, he felt better. He did love Von, and though he didn’t know how it would all play out, he was willing to take a chance. Because let’s face it, Brixton had lost far too many people in his life already, and he wasn’t willing to add Von to that list.

The two held each other until the coffee maker beeped, signifying it was ready. Without needing to say a word, Von grabbed two mugs from the cupboard, and Brixton filled them. Taking their steaming brew into the living room, they sat side by side on the couch, waiting for Pami’s arrival.

Von

His neck was killing him. As he blinked his eyes open, he felt the heaviness of another body resting on his. Brixton. They must have fallen asleep last night. Did that mean that Pami never showed up?

“What time is it?” Brixton mumbled and rubbed the back of his neck. They must have been tangled up pretty good.

Von grabbed his phone from the table. “It’s six thirty.”

“I wonder when we fell asleep. The last time I looked at the clock, it was just past midnight.”

“That means Pami never showed up last night.” He was stating the obvious but needed to say it aloud and let it sink in.

“I hope she’s okay.”

“Seriously? Your sister comes back after three months, having abandoned her newborn baby in a box on your front porch, threatens to take Lilly May and leave, and you are concerned with how she’s doing? You are a far better man than I am, Brixton Douglas.”

“I know Pami’s not right, Von. She’s not on the right meds, she’s not taking care of herself, and she looked so... lost. I should have insisted she stay here after graduation. I can’t help but think that all of this is partly my fault.”

“Do not blame yourself! You did the best you could with the cards you were dealt.”

Brixton’s features clouded, and he shook his head. “If you think about it though, I was basically the card dealer.”

He didn’t understand what Brixton was implying. “What? You are not to blame for your parents’ irresponsible and illegal behavior!”

“No,” Brix said in a small voice, “but I was the one who had them arrested.”

Holy shit! He didn’t expect to hear that. “Are you telling me that you were the one to call the police?”

He nodded, his eyes still unfocused. “The anonymous tip they received was not so anonymous after all. It was their own son who turned them in.”

“You were only doing what was right, Brix.” Von sat up and put his hand on Brixton’s leg. “Hey, look at me, please.”

Slowly, Brixton turned toward him. “I had to, Von. They were so messed up, and I could see Pami struggling, and I didn’t know what else to do. I hate them for what they did to our family.”

He was blown away by Brixton’s admission. But when he really thought about it, he should have expected it. Brixton would sacrifice anything for his family. And he knew the only way to save them all, to end the horrible cycle his parents had started, to get them the help they needed, was to turn them in.

Von loved him even more for that.

He took Brixton’s hands in his. “You are an amazing man. I don’t know if you’re out of the woods yet, but I’m willing to stick by you, regardless of how

long it takes. And I won't pressure you any more about *us*. That's not important now; Lilly May is, and we need to make sure all the right safeguards are in place in case Pami does come back."

For the first time in twenty-four days, Von saw Brixton smile. "I'm going to disagree with you. You are important to me; *we* are important. I'm tired of being scared. I'm ready to give us a try."

Von followed Brixton's gaze as he moved toward him, and their noses brushed. He let his eyes fall shut, and his senses exploded at the softest touch from Brixton's lips. Time moved in slow motion; Brixton's hand found his neck and fingers snaked up into his hair. His stomach turned summersaults when Brixton opened his mouth just enough for the tips of their tongues to meet. Von melted into Brixton's touch, and he gasped when Brixton pulled away with a soft nip to his bottom lip.

As they separated, a sharp ray of bright orange peeked through the window, blinding him momentarily. "Looks like the sun is up with us."

"It's a new day."

"And a new start for us."

Brixton grinned. "You think the girls are up next door? I'd really like to see Lilly May."

"Who cares? Wake them up!"

"Let's go!" And they both got up, stretched, and headed for the door.

"Wait, Brixton, you know that I meant what I said about being here for you and Lilly. Regardless of what happens between you and me."

"I know. I love my sister, and part of me does hope that she comes back, because I feel like that's the only way she's going to get the help she needs. But for now, what matters most is that innocent little girl is safe, and that I do everything in my power to keep her that way."

Von nodded and bent to give Brixton one more kiss. When their lips parted, Brixton grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door. "C'mon! We have a house full of girls to wake up!"

*Epilogue**Brixton*

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Lilly May... happy birthday to you!”

The petite blonde in the booster seat giggled as everyone encouraged her to blow out her candles. It was Lilly May’s fourth birthday. The theme of the party was princesses and trucks, because she just couldn’t decide, and Brixton didn’t feel like making her choose.

“Sweetpea, did you make a wish?” Von asked lovingly.

“Unca Von, did you just call me number one?” Lilly May looked at him incredulously.

He couldn’t contain his laughter.

“Um, I don’t understand what you’re saying honey.” Von stood beside her and pushed back a stray blonde curl that had fallen from her pigtails.

Brixton caught his breath. “Dear, she thinks you said *pee*, p-e-e, instead of *pea*, p-e-a.”

Von grinned at him and then focused his attention back to Lilly May. “Uncle Von called you sweetpea, which is a flower. It smells really, really sweet; just like you!” He tickled her belly and nuzzled her neck while she squealed with delight.

“How’s the birthday girl?” Pami walked into the dining room with her hands full of presents.

“Pami-wami!” Lilly jumped down from her chair and ran to his sister.

“You look so beautiful, Lilly May!” Pami, looking healthy and happy, put her bags on the floor and scooped the little girl up and kissed her cheek.

“All dose for me?”

“They’re all for you. It’s not every day that you turn three years old, right?” Pami watched Lilly with a twinkle in her eye as the birthday girl stuck her lip out and frowned.

“I’m fou-ah, not free.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Pami set her down and walked around the table to where Brixton and Von were standing. “Hi, big brother.”

He hugged her tightly. "I'm so glad you could come."

"Me too," she whispered and reached out for Von.

"And my brother's husband, how are you?"

Von embraced her and placed a sweet kiss on her cheek. "How are you feeling? Everything still going well?"

"I'm feeling great."

They had not seen Pami the night she promised to take Lilly May, nor had they seen her the next day, or the next, or two full years after.

Brixton had filed a missing person's report after one year, but the authorities were never able to locate her. He guessed she kept moving around enough so she'd never be found.

When he got a call from a hospital in Cheyenne, Wyoming, saying they had an unidentified woman there whom they thought might be his sister, he took off without hesitation to make the two-hour drive across the border.

The sight of Pami in restraints and drugged to the point of numbness made him rejoice and cry at the same time. He had never been so happy to see his sister, but even though her body was there, she was barely recognizable. He sat at her bedside for two days until she was weaned off the lithium enough to open her eyes and have a short conversation. The following week, Brixton had her transferred to a hospital in Denver. It was a place that Von recommended for psychiatric care and was known for their holistic and humane approach to mental illness.

Pami was discharged a month later and moved to Denver so she could continue in their outpatient program. She had been without a major manic or depressive episode in over a year.

Two months after Pami's release, Von and Brixton got married at the Bluebell shelter, where they first met hiking all those years ago. They had a particularly adorable towheaded child as their flower girl.

A month after that, Brix and Von legally adopted Lilly May, with Pami's blessing.

True to his word, Lilly May called them both uncle, and at his sister's request, Lilly May called her Pami. There was no mommy or daddy. There was

just a big Douglas-Hartmann family who loved that little girl more than anything in the world. And that's what mattered most.

The End

Author Bio

J.R., or Jen as friends call her, has always been an avid reader, oftentimes reading five to six books a week. When she was a kid, she found a huge box of old paperbacks for sale at a neighbor's garage sale. She offered the woman a quarter for the entire haul, and then went home and locked herself in her bedroom so her younger brother couldn't interrupt her while she read. This fueled her love for romantic fiction and inspired her to try her hand at writing. In 2013 Jen started writing fan-fiction, and then began creating her own original stories in 2014. Currently, her favorite genre to read and write is contemporary gay romance.

J.R. Barten was born and raised in Iowa and now resides in the Twin Cities of Minnesota with two rescue dogs and her partner (now wife) of sixteen years.

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