

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

DOCTOR'S PUPPY LOVE

Shayla Mist

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

DOCTOR'S PUPPY LOVE

By Shayla Mist

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A beautiful monochrome photo featuring a handsome man, his head lying on his lover's naked back, savoring the moment with his eyes closed. Maybe he's dreaming of how perfect their life is.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Our jobs are stressful and heartbreaking, but coming home to him makes everything better. He makes me smile even when I'm angry at the whole world and being with him makes me stronger.

Of course, the first time we worked together he called me an arrogant heartless bastard. Mind you, I had just referred to him as "the spineless wonder from the Land of Too Naive to Survive". It wasn't like I realized he was listening.

It took a long time of working together before we starting to respect each other, and longer still before I realized he was the center of my world. It took a lot of sarcasm (him) and name-calling (me) before we got to that point.

Perhaps you could tell the story of how we got from there to here.

Sincerely,

J.

No BDSM or power games, please, but snarky banter a plus.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: medical personnel, men with pets, blow job/fellatio, enemies to lovers, anxiety disorder

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DOCTOR'S PUPPY LOVE

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CHAPTER ONE

Colt

The sky looked particularly cloudy today, but I was still itching for a smoke. So much so that I didn't care if I'd get soaked. I was willing to risk the chance. There were ten more cigarettes left in my pack. *If I have two before and after work, then maybe one during a break if it's a slow day, God please make it a slow day, one when I get home, one before breakfast tomorrow...* My pack looked like it would last for at least one more day. I'd sworn I'd quit after I was done with it. *Maybe there's a chance I could make it last one more day.* That wouldn't be very tough with my job. I didn't have much time to leisurely smoke cig after cig like normal people did. In the ER one couldn't even take a proper piss if the urge came. *What the hell was I thinking when I applied for the job?* Oh, right, saving lives and all that baloney. And my stupid pride in being an ER doctor. *Man, was I naïve...*

I stepped out of the locker room, the pack of smokes locked in my fist. I made my way through the long corridors that led to the main entrance, mentally cursing the architect who thought it would be a smart idea not to plan a back entrance for personnel. I mean, seriously, everyone has that! I could always take the ambulance entrance, but that would mean I would choke on the smoke right when I needed to relax the most. The farther away I was from those cursed machines, the better.

With a sigh, I checked my watch. It had taken five whole minutes to get to the hospital's front entrance, slaloming through ill people and exhausted nurses. I had five minutes to finish a smoke in record time, then approximately five more to get back to the locker room and change into my fugly puke-green scrubs, then straight to Hell for the next twelve hours. *Don't you just love it?* Almost half an hour lost for a freaking cigarette. *That's why you need to quit,*

moron. Umm, not a very appealing thought. Maybe I could just quit smoking before and after work. That's cheating. I already know that. Stupid conscience. Won't leave me alone, will you?

It was freezing outside. I tended to forget in between the warmth of my home and the comfort of my car. It seemed like God wanted to remind me again how completely unhealthy and senseless smoking was. *All right, Big Guy, I get it. The day after tomorrow. I'll quit smoking. It's a promise.*

I shuddered and stuck out the collar of my jacket in a useless attempt to protect my ears from the prickling wind. Small drops of rain started drizzling softly as I headed for the farthest corner of the building, away from the frantic crowd near the door. Somehow, I had that niggling sensation that I was missing something. With a frown, I checked in my jeans' pocket. *Meh, as long as I got my smokes, who cares?* I took the pack out and extracted one. Lighting it was a bit of a challenge, but eventually I managed. I was gonna be *so* late for my shift. *Guess Jess can last a couple more minutes. I covered for her two nights ago.* That's what coworkers did for each other. Damn, I was gonna miss Cassidy. That girl had a dirty mouth on her. And I was a sucker for dirty mouths.

Now I remembered. Today the new guy was coming. The one who'd take Cassidy's place. I was sure I was gonna hate him, yeah, just because he was taking Cass's place. People could call me childish, but she was my best friend and the best nurse any doctor could ask for. I was going to hate every single minute the new guy would remind me she wasn't gonna be there anymore.

I Skyped with her the day before yesterday, though. She was like "Mwahaha! Fresh meat's coming, Colt! What's not to love?" her eyes sparkling like those of an eagle targeting its prey. She was like that, good old Cass: always searching for a target to bully. I'd learned from the best.

My cigarette was almost done. Ah, what was it about cigarettes? There was something about them...

"Umm... excuse me."

I turned my head in the direction of the voice and found myself face to face with a scrawny emo kid, all dressed in black, black eyeliner and a—yes, you guessed it—*black* scarf around his neck, covering his mouth. The only color that I could see on him was the gray of his eyes from underneath long black mascara-covered eyelashes. *Hmmm... pretty cute.* If he didn't look so... punk-rockish. *Snob.* That was my consciousness again. Not that I cared.

“What's up, kid?” I asked, taking one last intake of nicotine-filled smoke, before stubbing my cig to the ground.

The kid looked at my foot stepping on the cigarette butt, then back up at my face.

“This is a hospital,” he muttered, cold gray eyes appraising me with surprising arrogance.

“And?” I retorted with a raised eyebrow.

“And you're smoking.”

“And?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “Never mind.” He squeezed in between me and the wall, probably to avoid getting soaked by the rain, though, to be honest, I thought emo kids loved it.

I shrugged and followed him. Not because I cared, but because I needed to get inside as well. The kid looked at the walls, confused, not an abnormal thing in this godforsaken hospital.

“There's a map behind you to your left,” I told him, pointing to my own left at the map hanging on the wall, next to the entrance door.

Despite the noise, he heard me, turned around, gave me a hostile once-over and walked back to look at the map.

I grinned and started walking down my usual corridors. In just five minutes time, the emo boy would be a forgotten memory.

I found my way to the locker room and put on my scrubs, then went to the nurses' station, where I was promptly scolded by Jessica, whose shift I was taking over, for being late again.

“You and your damned cigarettes. One of these days I’ll shove them down your throat,” she threatened with a pointed finger my way before disappearing through the doors.

I rolled my eyes and walked over to Evita, the petite Hispanic nurse in charge of the triage. “All right then, any urgent cases?”

“Doctor Newman already took care of them. You go wait in your sanctuary and I’ll call you as soon as someone comes.”

“Thanks, Ev. Oh, we have fresh meat today.” *Indeed, Cass, what’s there not to love?*

I sprinted to the Trauma section before Evita had the chance to answer—she would have scolded me anyway—and almost bumped into Joe, better known as Doctor Palmer. Joe and I were pretty good friends. That’s mostly because we both had charming personalities. I meant that.

“Late again.”

“Sorry, doc, what can I do to help?”

“You could quit smoking.”

I let out a suffering groan. “You too, Brutus?”

“Take these samples to the lab, if you’re so bored,” he said with a smirk, handing me two syringes with blood. “And send someone to settle our patient into a bed.” He pointed at the consultation bed behind him where a homeless man sat with eyes bloodshot and a lost look.

“That one’s a regular. It’s his fifth visit this month. That I know of.”

Joe shrugged. “Guess some don’t realize when they have to *quit*,” he grinned with a pointed look my way. *Did I mention charming personality? I take it back.*

“All right, doc. Less chat, more work.”

It didn’t take long to take the blood samples for testing and settle our addict into a comfortable bed. He had a moment of awareness when he tried to

strangle me and then landed a mean punch straight at my eye leaving me with a nice shiner. However, I managed to calm him down and he fell into a trance again.

On my way to the staff room, though, I was welcomed by a familiar figure coming my way. Emo kid. What the hell was he doing there?

“You again?” Huh. He didn’t seem very pleased to see me. I wondered why. I hadn’t had the chance to be properly rude to him before. “Nice shiner.”

“What are you looking for, kid? Did you get lost?” I asked rolling my eyes, refusing to let my fingers trace the painful purple spot underneath my eye, despite that they were itching to move.

“You’re a physician?” he exclaimed, giving me another once-over. For the first time I actually saw an expression on his face. Pure shock.

“Trust me, it’s been five years, and I still can’t believe it either. I must have been high when I made my career choice.”

His lips now uncovered by that unappealing black scarf twitched at the corners. Pretty sexy lips if I did say so myself. *What the hell are you thinking? Robbing the cradle?*

“Well? What can I do to help?”

“Actually, I’m looking for the locker room.”

“Locker room.”

The kid nodded and raised an eyebrow at me, as if I were an idiot who didn’t understand English. Well, at the moment, I didn’t.

“Locker room,” I repeated.

“To change,” he retorted, his tone patronizing. He lifted a bag I hadn’t noticed before and rolled the plastic down, exposing the insides: a pair of scrubs.

“No way. Fresh Meat?”

“I can’t believe it’s really you,” I said while I opened the door to our locker room. “Are you even legal yet? Wait, you’d have to be, right?”

“Right.”

“Not very chatty, huh?”

Fresh Meat/Emo Kid—I really needed a nickname for this one—took off his jacket. Underneath: a black pullover. Huh. I hadn’t expected that.

“Do you mind?” he asked with a pointed look. Aww, he was shy too.

“No, really, how old are you again?”

“None of your business.”

“Fine, then, kid. I’ll leave you to get changed.”

I exited and walked back to the nurses’ station. My eye was in bad need of an icepack. Hmm, so Emo Kid wasn’t really a kid, after all. He was definitely legal. *And definitely cute.* Oh, come on, I didn’t just think that.

Oh, I loved this! For the first time in my life, I actually understood why my sadistic best friend Cass felt so much satisfaction in bullying people.

I was evil. I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself. It felt so good to have someone to give orders to and revel in their misery. I could afford slacking off a lot more now because Cass, even though she was a nurse, never had any qualms in ordering me around. These days, I could enjoy watching the new kid cleaning up vomit, helping old geezers sit on toilets and wiping their asses. Helping doctors perform rectal exams and either get accused by said patients of raping them or get a piece of paper with their phone number on it and a dirty proposition. Ah, I needed this. It was better than a marathon of comedy shows. *I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, Cass, thank you so much for leaving.*

Ugh, this thought brought me down to earth. I couldn’t believe I had thought I was grateful for Cass leaving! No. That was blasphemy. Although, I should have been, since she had left to be with the man she loved, which I still

insisted was crazy, I couldn't help feeling lonely and bitter. No one would replace Cass. So, of course, it was pure blasphemy being happy she was gone.

Still, it did feel good to have this new kid around, I couldn't deny that.

Speaking of the devil. "Kid," I yelled and grabbed his arm right as he was passing by me, trying his best to go unnoticed. Newbie was written all over his forehead. It was that period we'd all been through at some point in our lives when we felt uncomfortable as hell in our own skin. Everything was new. Everything was overwhelming. And the fact that he didn't have his usual black attire to help him feel secure probably didn't help either. He looked like a rabbit about to bolt. And it roused the most sadistic instincts inside me. I wanted to make him squirm. To scare him. To possess all his thoughts.

"For the last time. I have a name." And I loved how he got defensive and put on a brave mask even though his eyes and his shaky hands spoke volumes about how he really felt.

"Yes, pup. And I happen not to care."

He huffed. That incredible porcelain white skin of his turned a furious shade of red, but he said nothing, choosing instead to stare me down with a fiery gaze.

"Do me a favor and help the nice eighty-year-old grandpa in the examination room put on his gown and collect a sample of urine. And then I need an EKG on the patient in the observation unit."

"Anything else, sir?" he retorted crossing his arms. Funny, it was only a week since he had started working here and I already couldn't understand how I'd been living without him. Going to work had actually started to feel fun.

"Nothing else, for now. I'll think about it, though."

"Whatever," he mumbled under his breath as he moved away at a snail pace.

"Well, hurry then. We can't have the poor guy have a heart attack because you didn't administer the test in time," I called after him. I couldn't help myself from grinning.

Face red, hands fisted, Emo Kid, whose name was actually Nico—yes, in fact, I knew his name—stomped his foot, threw me a murderous look and turned his back on me, marching away without saying a word. Adorable.

“You are such an evil shit.”

“Oh, come on, you have no sense of humor,” I protested, as Joe appeared out of nowhere behind me.

“What do you have against the poor kid? He’s new, he’s from out of town, he doesn’t know anyone here. Cut him some slack.”

I rolled my eyes at Joe and let out an exasperated sigh. “That kid is the spineless wonder from the Land of Too Naïve to Survive. I’m just teaching him how the real world works.”

“I’d rather be a spineless naïve *kid* than an arrogant heartless bastard like you.”

I turned back around to find the kid looking at me with a venomous glare. I didn’t have time to open my mouth in time before he spun around and ran away.

“Ouch,” Joe supplied helpfully, patting me on the back.

I shrugged him off and walked toward the staff room. It was okay, that kid needed someone to give him a tougher guidance. Yet, why did I suddenly *feel* like a heartless bastard?

CHAPTER TWO

Nico

Saint Marie's Hospital wasn't as grand as its name promised. On the contrary, it was a small town hospital with very few funds and even fewer doctors. Still, I had wanted to come here. It might have been a means to escape from my agoraphobia; it might have been my cowardice at fault for not having bigger dreams and aspirations. Or it might have simply been my compulsive need for a fresh start. Whatever the reason, it had brought me here, to the town of Highwyn with the estimated population of twenty-five thousand souls to which I'd added mine.

I had hoped to live unnoticed by all and still bring joy to people by working in the ER. Pretty small town, few difficult emergency cases and less chances for me to get on anyone's nerves.

Didn't expect anyone to get on my nerves though. Yet, Colt Anderson had managed. I hated him. I hated him so much it had almost crossed my mind to make a voodoo doll with his face and burn it into ashes. How could someone like him work as a doctor? Doctors were supposed to be kind, to care for people, to sacrifice their very own souls for the sake of others. That was the whole point in choosing this kind of job.

Still, someone like Colt effin' Anderson was a *physician*.

Hands trembling, I took refuge in the break room and took a couple of deep breaths. My anxiety attacks were starting again all because of that bastard.

I tried to calm down and took out my cell. It had been a whole week since I started this job and I barely had time to call home twice. My parents didn't give a shit whether I lived or died, but Nonna must have been worried sick. A whole freaking week and it already felt like a century.

I speed-dialed her number and waited for her soothing voice to calm down the furious drumming of my heart.

“Nico, I was starting to get worried.” Her voice. Gentle. The voice that told me stories when I was little, the voice that told me everything was going to be okay even when I felt the earth slipping from underneath my feet. I knew it would instantly make me feel better. And it did. My breathing almost instantly returned to normal.

“*Ciao, Nonna,*” I answered in a calm voice.

“*Ciao, amore.* How are you? Are you on your break now?”

“Mhm, sorta. I finished helping some people out and managed to take a breather,” I replied after a long exhale. God, it felt good hearing her voice. “How’s everything going?”

“Oh, you know how it is. The usual. I think Tommy is sick. He didn’t want to eat at all this morning. I made an appointment with the vet for this evening.”

That was so like her. She always cared for that stinky old cat more than she cared about herself.

“What about you? Are you taking your pills, Nonna?”

“Yes, *caro mio.* Stop worrying so much.” She chuckled. “Tell me about you. Do you like the work? Are you helping people like you wanted to? How are you getting along with your workmates?”

I suppressed a groan at the reminder. “Everything is going great, Nonna. Seriously, they’re all very nice.” *With one exception.*

“Oh, I’m so happy you’re finally doing what you wanted.”

The door behind me creaked open followed by a loud screech and my tormentor’s head peeked in.

“Pup.”

Oh gaawwd! “Nonna, *devo andare.* I need to get going, I’ll call you tomorrow morning.”

“That’s my boy. Go save some lives. Don’t worry about me, dear.”

“All right, Nonna. Take care.”

“You too.”

“Stop slacking off. There’s another rectal exam waiting for you and all the other nurses are busy,” Colt Anderson said, with an outrageously bright smile on his face as if he was giving me a compliment. *Nonna, you never taught me how to deal with guys like him.*

He turned around and left, closing the break room’s door behind.

If only his ass didn’t look so good in those horrific green scrubs.

Why were the villains always handsome guys?

The whole week passed in a blur. It was hard getting used to the ER, but the feeling of accomplishment this job gave was like no other I’d experienced. Having people come to you in critical states and then seeing them walk out on their own, or at least getting them through the critical state and stabilizing their condition. Knowing I’d saved a life or two or three, even whole families. This feeling was amazing. It made me feel like my life was worth living even if I was nothing special on my own.

It wasn’t until the second week that I experienced the ugly side of the ER. We got a call from the EMT that a kid was injured in a traffic accident. As the attending doctor, it was up to Anderson to take charge. Me and four other nurses got everything ready before the ambulance’s arrival. My stomach was in knots. I was fresh out of school and had never seen any kid hurt badly before. I was just praying for it not to be as bad as it sounded, though judging by the whole chaos spreading throughout the ER at the news, it seemed like something they rarely dealt with themselves.

We walked out and waited impatiently for the ambulance to arrive, but it took almost twenty minutes for them to get there. Anderson was the first to run toward the ambulance as the EMT opened the doors wide. The injured boy was far bloodier than I’d expected. There was blood *everywhere*.

I heard a nurse vomit behind the ambulance door and I barely resisted the urge to follow her example. The only thing keeping me sane was the thought that we had to help this boy as soon as possible. If there were any chances for him to survive this.

I approached on trembling legs to offer my assistance, followed swiftly by the other nurses. I felt a moment of anger when Anderson pushed me away to look at the injured boy, but then I remembered the guy *was* a physician, after all. I could do nothing but bear with it. Soon, we started wheeling him out of the ambulance and on the way into the hospital, and my mind was focusing on the patient alone. Barely hanging on to life.

“He’s been hit by a car while trying to catch a ride on a side street. Swept five feet in the air,” the EMT called as he helped us carry him.

Fractured pelvis, a broken neck, and who knew what other internal injuries he must have suffered. I couldn’t bear to look. As the EMT recited the whole list of their findings and their suppositions regarding what internal damage must have been inflicted on the poor boy that was lying unconscious on our gurney, I couldn’t help wondering whether he would survive this. It sounded like an impossible feat. But we couldn’t let that happen.

I gave Anderson a long, hopeful gaze, to which he responded with an unreadable expression. Anderson would save him, wouldn’t he? We would all save him. That was the reason we were there.

Yeah. I nodded, a renewed confidence suddenly arising inside me. We would save him.

We brought the patient into the trauma section with the help of the paramedics.

“Hey, buddy, can you hear me?” Anderson called.

“He’s been unconscious the whole ride,” the EMT whispered. “It’s no use calling him.” We managed to bring the gurney inside a room. Anderson shone the flashlight in the boy’s eyes and called him again. Meanwhile, Emma and I connected him to the heart monitor.

“He has no pulse.” Anderson said, his voice showing no inflection, and started CPR. After about thirty compressions, he breathed in his mouth and reassumed the compressions.

“Still no pulse. Defibrillator,” he ordered.

I quickly handed him the equipment and stepped away.

“Doctor, is he going to be okay?!”

I turned around to find a woman trying desperately to get inside despite the paramedics’ efforts to stop her. Obviously the kid’s mother. I shuddered.

“Ma’am, please step away. The doctor can’t treat him like this. He needs room to work.”

“Please! Tell me he won’t die!”

“Take her out of here,” Anderson called, not sparing us a glance while he helped Emma cut the boy’s T-shirt off.

Eventually they got her out, but we could clearly hear her screams behind the closed doors.

“Three hundred joules!” The machine beeped in a high pitch. Anderson placed the paddles on the boy’s chest.

“Step aside.” I took a few steps behind at Anderson’s call and focused to keep my breathing under control because of the damn panic attack that was threatening to overtake me any second. “Clear,” he called. The body convulsed under the massive shock.

I watched the heart monitor in numbed silence, silently begging for a miracle. I wondered how old he was. Twelve? Fourteen? My own breathing was becoming erratic. I hoped to God I wouldn’t faint.

“Resume CPR.”

Emma did it this time. I couldn’t find the willpower to move. She pushed the chest repeatedly. I kept thinking it was too late. I felt it in my heart.

“Nico! Wake up!”

I flinched at the call of my name and raised my gaze from the boy’s pale chest to find Anderson looking at me with a stern expression. Funny, I didn’t think he even knew my name. How amazing the human brain was. When in critical situations, the funniest things could cross your mind.

“I said to give him an amp of epi. Move!”

I trotted to the IV on autopilot and injected the fluid.

“Charge to three hundred and sixty joules,” Anderson called to Emma. Even his voice betrayed the same hopelessness and exhaustion I felt.

He placed the paddles again. “Clear!”

No signs of life.

“Resume CPR. Come on, kid. Come on!” Anderson cried as he pushed the lifeless chest. I couldn't watch anymore. My vision was blurring, but I didn't faint. My body stood frozen in place. It felt like some invisible masochistic force inside me kept me there and made me watch.

“We've lost him,” Anderson whispered.

“You can't just let him die!” I found my voice to speak. “We're the ER.”

“We're humans, kid. Nothing more,” he said, his look oozing authority. An authority I couldn't accept.

“But we can't. We need to save him. He's just a boy,” I screamed.

I knew my voice was shaking. My face was wet with tears. Em patted me on the shoulder and sighed.

“He arrived here too late. It took the ambulance thirty minutes to get to the hospital. His heart was already too weak.”

“Time of death: 10:45 AM,” Anderson said, as he looked down at his watch.

“I'll bag him. Em,” I cried, running to the bed where the body lay. “Bicarb and atropine.”

The nurse looked, dumfounded, at Anderson and me. “For God's sake, just do what I said!”

Anderson shook his head. “That's enough, Nico. There's nothing we can do for him.”

“Em!” She turned her eyes away. I looked at all the other nurses who either turned their heads away to avoid my eyes, or looked at me with a sort of resigned pity.

Eventually, I looked at Anderson. "Please."

Anderson's face was unsympathetic. He reached for the boy and took out the air mask.

"I'll go talk to his mom," he said and walked out.

We were left looking at the body, until Emma moved over to cover it with a sheet.

"Let's go change," she whispered, talking me by the elbow and nudging me away.

I let her walk me out, my head still turned to the bed where a life had just ended minutes ago.

My panic attacks felt stupid then.

I made my way toward the locker room, walking like a zombie. The whole waiting room was packed with patients, but I couldn't hear any of the usual noises.

As I opened the door, I saw Anderson being slapped and hit by the boy's mom who was crying loudly. Standing beside her was a man with a stony face and a lost look. The boy's father, most likely. The woman kept hitting Anderson's chest and he stood there and took all the hits without a word. He looked just as lost as we all felt.

I slowly walked inside the locker room, took off my clothes and changed into a clean pair of scrubs. The others had the boy's blood all over them. It occurred to me I didn't even know his name. A few seconds later Anderson appeared in the doorway, closed the door behind him and started taking off his own clothes, making no effort to acknowledge my presence.

"What was his name?" I whispered, looking back at the bloodied scrubs.

"Adam. He was thirteen. He was planning to run away." Anderson huffed, shaking his head.

We fell silent as he put on his clothes and I laced my own sneakers slowly.

“Let’s get out of here.” His voice, coming out of nowhere, made me jump, startled.

“What?”

“I said. Let’s. Get. Out of here.” he repeated, punctuating the words, as if talking with a little child.

“But... We’re on duty. We can’t leave.”

“We both need some air. We’ll take a short break. They can page us if something’s up.”

I shrugged and let him lead me out of the room. He put his arm around my shoulders and we walked down the corridors. I would have been puzzled by his sudden change of demeanor had it not been for what happened earlier. We walked until we reached the corner of the building where I met him first.

I couldn’t find words to express how horrible I felt.

“It’s so unfair,” I eventually whispered.

“Yup. It is.”

I looked at Anderson as he fished out a cigarette from a brand new pack and lit it with a cheap plastic lighter.

“How can you be so calm all the time?”

Anderson gave me a sad smile. “There’s nothing you can do. No one can do anything.”

“How can you think like that? You’re a doctor for fuck’s sake. It’s your job to do *something!*”

He took a drag of smoke and let it out with an audible sigh. “You’re being naïve, kid.”

“Well I’d rather be a kid than a heartless bastard like you!”

He smiled sadly, not even flinching at my words. “You mentioned that before, pup.” It only served to infuriate me more. I clenched my fist, ready to jump at him and give him another shiner over the old one. Never mind he was twice my size.

“I was like that too when I came here. Thinking I’d save lives and become some kind of hero.” His words stopped me in my track. “But we’re nothing, kid. Nothing compared to the universe. We can’t change anything.”

“Yes, we can! This is where you’re wrong. We save people’s lives every day!”

He threw the cigarette butt down and stomped on it. He gave me a sad smile. “Fate saves them, not us. But go ahead and believe what you want, if that makes you feel better.” And with that, he walked away.

“Bastard!” I called, even though he was far away enough not to hear.

Maybe I was naïve. So what? Better than someone like him.

It was my first time entering a gay bar since I’d moved here and started working as an ER nurse. As far as I knew, it was the only gay bar in town. It looked much posher than I had expected. Had I been in a better mood I’d have taken more time to appreciate the view of the hot hunks dancing in the ring, but all I cared about at the moment was getting thoroughly and properly wasted.

The rest of the day had been uneventful, all the more reason for my mind to keep displaying the image of the dead kid in an endless loop.

I had an unexplainable urge to scrub my skin raw, the sense of dirtiness overpowering all of my other senses. But I especially wanted to forget. I approached the bar with determined steps and ordered a shot of Jack Daniels, not gracing the barman with even a glance.

“There you go, cutie,” he whispered when he placed my glass down on the counter, his face dangerously close to mine. I looked at the shelf behind him. “Tough day at work?”

“You have no idea.”

“Oh, poor baby. Want me to make it better?”

I finally looked at him with a hard stare. He was hot. I didn’t care.

“Well, maybe some other time?” he pouted, getting the message.

I didn't think so, but I said nothing, opting instead to swallow my drink in one go.

“Give me another. And make it a double.”

“Honey, are you sure you can take it? You look pretty frail. Are you even legal?” He said the last bit in whisper, his eyes widening doubtfully.

This again. You would think I was used to it by now. Bouncers and barmen always double-checked my ID and people, in general, were doubtful of my abilities because I was stuck looking like an underdeveloped teenager. No wonder guys like Colt bullied me. If I had a body like his, I would have looked down at people like myself too.

“Just give me the fucking drink,” I said, staring the barman down.

“Ouch, what a dirty mouth you have. What's your name, cutie?”

“Look, I just saw a teenager die today, so I don't feel like talking shit. Just give me my fucking whiskey and leave me alone.”

Oh, man. The way he looked at me. I shouldn't have said anything. What was wrong with me, sharing things all of a sudden? If there was anyone I shared things with that was my grandma, and I couldn't possibly tell her such a sad story. Yet, here I was spilling my guts out to the barman.

“I'm so sorry, baby. Wanna talk about it?”

“You can't take no for an answer, can you?” The words were taken right out of my mouth, by none other than Colt Anderson. I would have recognized that voice anywhere.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hi, kid,” he said with a grin. How he could grin after a day like that was beyond me, even for someone like Anderson. And especially after the way our conversation had ended earlier in the day. Yet, he seemed not to care, as if this was an ordinary day and I was just an ordinary coworker he happened to meet in a bar. I didn't have the energy to even be angry at him anymore.

“What are you doing here?” I repeated slowly.

“Followed your taxi. I knew you’d probably do something stupid after a day like this.”

“What may I get you, gorgeous?” The barman appeared out of nowhere and brought me my glass of Jack, his eyes thankfully fixed on Anderson’s face and completely ignoring me.

“Just plain water, I’m driving,” he said turning his attention to the slutty barman. Did I see wrong or did Anderson just wink at him?

“So now you’re stalking me too?” I asked, once the other guy was out of earshot.

Anderson smiled, but the amusement didn’t seem to reach his eyes. “After I saw my first death, the first thing I did was enter whichever bar was closest. I drank for three days in a row.”

“Bullshit,” I said, though, as if proving him right, I downed the second glass, wincing as the cool liquid burned my throat.

“In my defense, I had a patient die on my first day,” he retorted, shrugging.

“No way. That sucks.”

“Yea. It does.”

We fell silent. When he put it like that, I should have felt lucky.

“How do you get over this? This... this feeling?” I asked pointing at my chest as if all the answers were there.

Anderson huffed with a sideways smile. “You don’t, pup. It’s always there. Once you see someone die, you’re never the same again.”

I looked down at my glass, throat suddenly feeling dry, but to my disappointment, I found it completely empty. When had that happened? Luckily, the barman came soon with Anderson’s water and I asked for a refill.

“Hey, slow it down, you’re gonna get sick,” Anderson pointed out, putting his heavy hand on my forearm.

“So you know this cutie, Colt?” The barman gave me a leering glance, licking his lower lip. I rolled my eyes at his attempt of being sexy. Oh, so they knew each other. I wondered in what circumstances they had met.

“You look like a whore doing that,” I said.

The barman's eyes widened, and Anderson's lips twitched.

“You do,” Anderson agreed. “And leave the kid alone, Alex. At least for today. I promise I'll hook you two up some other time. You do know this is a gay bar, right, pup?” he asked, turning back to me. I nodded.

“Promise?” The barman, Alex, recovered quickly and snickered.

“Hey, stop talking about me as if I'm not here.”

“Shut up and drink,” Anderson said.

“I would, if someone cared to refill it,” I retorted with a pointed look Alex's way.

“Oh, sorry sweetie, you're so pretty I forget about everything when you're around.”

“Ugh. Disgusting.” Anderson's words made me grin. Somehow, the barman's flirting wasn't as annoying as long as there was someone next to me making fun of the guy and lighting up the atmosphere. Hmmm... I guess Anderson was just like that by nature. Maybe he didn't mean to bully me. It was just his personality.

Alex came back with my drink. Our fingers touched when he put the glass down. When I looked up I met his fiery gaze. He licked his lip again. This guy was hilarious.

“That's enough, Alex.”

“Heh,” Alex said, stressing the vowel. He turned back to Anderson and gave him an unreadable look. “I've never seen you so protective of anyone before.”

“Alex.”

“Fine, I’m leaving you two lovebirds alone. Holler when you need something.”

I couldn’t contain my curiosity any longer. “I didn’t know you were gay.”

“What makes you think I am?”

I made a hand gesture pointing around the club, taking in the view of male bodies humping against each other, and then raised my eyebrow at Alex, who was serving some new guy a beer. “It looks pretty obvious to me.”

“Can’t a straight guy have gay friends?” Anderson retorted with a shrug.

“Oh.”

I felt like an idiot now. I lowered my gaze and noticed with satisfaction that there was still plenty of whiskey in my glass. I took a mouthful again. Oops, my head was getting dizzy. That was what I deserved for not drinking a drop of alcohol for the past six years. Jesus, had it really been that long since I last gone out for a drink?

“Maybe you should have some water,” Anderson offered, but I slapped his hand away when he tried to hand me his bottle.

“I’m okay,” I said a little bit too loud. I hated when people treated me like a child. I was a man, dammit, even if I didn’t quite look like one. But I still had my pride.

“You won’t be able to get home on two legs, if you’re drunk after only three glasses.”

I shrugged. “I’ll get a taxi.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, uncapping his water and taking a drink. I couldn’t help but notice the way his Adam’s apple moved. I’ve always found that sensual. He had a sexy throat.

“I’m hitting the john. Stay where you are,” he said, patting me on the back.

With effort, I unglued my gaze from his throat and managed to meet his eyes. “Since when do I have to listen to you?” I slurred. Shit, when had I gotten this drunk?

“Ever since you met me, pup. Now stay put.”

“Geez, what a jackass.”

I finished my drink and signaled Alex for a beer. He gave me one with a worried glance. I flipped him the bird and brought the bottle to my lips. I didn't care anymore. I had even lost track of the reason why I had started drinking to begin with. Oh, right, because I'd seen a kid die today. How could anyone forget that? It came rushing through my head like a torrent—every single image of that kid's torn-apart body. Pale dead skin. His mother's tears. His father's lost gaze. Watching helplessly as he gave his last breath and the heart monitor flat-lined before our eyes. I couldn't do anything to stop it. Anderson had been right all along. Yet, he'd been the one who fought the hardest to save that kid. All the while, I had just stood there and watched.

My head was beginning to feel light. I put my beer down, still a quarter full. Then I suddenly felt someone's hand on my thigh. I turned in that direction, expecting to find a cheeky Colt Anderson, waiting for the best moment to bully me again. Instead, I found the face of a stranger staring at me with lecherous eyes. He opened his mouth and spoke, but because of the loud music I couldn't hear any of it.

“What?”

The guy grinned and moved closer, his hand encircling my waist and a fat finger caressing the skin above my jean's hem. Ew. He was coming on to me. *That* was all I needed at the moment.

“You look bored. Maybe I could entertain you,” he whispered in my ear, the hairs of his beard scratching my cheek.

“I don't think so,” I mumbled.

“Hey, leave the boy alone. Can't you see he's not interested?”

Alex. Slutty Alex had come to my rescue? Wow. I mouthed a thanks his way and tried to wiggle away from the pervert's touch. But my strength was leaving me. Vision started getting blurry and when I closed my eyes, I could see billions of colored dots. Man, had this guy slipped something in my beer bottle? I reopened my eyes and tried to get off the bar stool, while Alex and Mr. Pervert were having a heated verbal duel. The pounding in my head and

eardrums was getting insufferable. I needed fresh air ASAP. But as soon as I got off the high stool, my back bumped into a solid chest.

“I told you to take it slow, pup.” Great, just what I needed, him patronizing me yet again. Let’s say I could take it at work, because he was my superior and he clearly had far more experience than me. However, to listen to his shit, in my free time, no way.

“Leave me alone, bastard,” I said, silently cursing myself for not having the strength to actually yell. It had sounded more like a half-hearted attempt at pushing him away, which only made Anderson chuckle. God, even his chuckle was sexy. I envied him so damn much.

All of a sudden, the ground was swept from underneath me. I yelped, unable to stop myself.

“Ready to go home?”

“Hell no.” And this time I yelled.

“Alex, I’m, taking him. Put his drinks on my tab.”

My face was mashed against his chest and because of the position; I couldn’t turn my head around.

“Sure thing, hon. Make sure to bring him again”

“I will.” He chuckled. Again.

“Would you stop talking about me as if I’m not around?”

“Nope.” He grinned, looking down at me. “Just how much did you drink while I was away?”

“Only half a beer. I’m just not used to drinking, okay?” My face felt hot at the admission. No wonder he called me *kid* and *pup* all the time. I was as far from a man as Anderson was from a kid.

“You can put me down now,” I said when we reached the exit. The fresh cold air felt great against my flushed cheeks. Anderson let me down surprisingly gently. I shook my head, inhaled a lungful of air and slapped my face a few times.

In the meantime, Anderson had left me alone and I was assuming, a bit irritated that he hadn't said goodbye, that he had already left, until a Miata parked right in front of me. Anderson's face appeared as soon as the window lowered. He opened the passenger door. I raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Well, hop in already."

I shrugged my shoulders and reluctantly got in. I didn't own a car anyway. A free ride was always welcomed. "Thanks," I mumbled, to which Anderson chuckled again.

"Why do you keep laughing at me?" I snapped.

"Cause you're funny?" he replied, grinning.

"Was that a question?"

"I don't know, kitten, do you consider yourself funny?"

"No! And stop with the name-calling? First, you call me a kid, then pup. Now kitten?"

"Does it bother you?"

"Yes!"

"Good."

"Good."

"The more it bothers you, the funnier you get," he said wiggling his eyebrows.

"What the hell? You're sick."

Anderson shrugged, not looking at all offended. "Maybe. Or maybe you're just really funny."

"Dude, you're sick."

Anderson gave a hearty laugh. "Fine, I'm sick. I'm a sick bastard," he said.

"Really, really sick bastard," I approved.

"And you're in a car with a sick bastard. You might even be sicker than me."

“Oh my God,” I lowered the mirror and looked at myself. “I’m sick.”

“Yes you are. We’re both sick.”

“It’s entirely your fault. You’re contagious.”

By this time, we were both laughing loudly. What the hell was happening with my sanity? This whole conversation felt absurd, yet it had put me in a good mood, a mood I hadn’t felt in years.

“God, look at us.”

“Yeah, I know.” His tone had suddenly gotten serious. I looked at him to find a stony expression on his handsome face.

“What are you thinking of?”

“I don’t know... Life, I suppose.”

“A boy died today, under our very own eyes,” I remembered. As if I could forget.

“We couldn’t help him.”

“I was...” Scared. Hopeless.

“I know.” He sighed and reached over the gearshift and patted my knee awkwardly.

“Your eyes are getting droopy. Try to sleep. I’ll wake you up.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. Silence fell. Nothing besides the sound of the engine, that quickly lulled me to sleep.

“Come on, kid. We’re here.”

I felt Anderson’s hands shaking me awake.

“Here where?” I managed to mumble after finally opening my eyes. There was barely a visible light anywhere, making it hard to discern my surroundings, but one thing was certain: judging by the poor light and the smell of pine trees in the air, we weren’t anywhere near my neighborhood.

“My place. Now get up.”

I groaned and made my limbs obey. They felt like wood after having sat for so long. I shook both my legs and gave a few jumps.

“You really do look like a puppy.” Anderson chuckled beside me as he locked the car.

“Fuck you,” was the only smart retort that came to mind. But I wasn't expecting his reply.

“Not tonight, kid.”

“Huh? I thought you said you were straight.”

“Did I?”

“Yes”

“Well, you heard wrong then.” Anderson gave me a pat on the ass and nudged me forward. “Let's go then, unless you plan on spending the rest of the night in the yard.”

“Maybe *you* should try that.”

He laughed and jingled his keys. As my vision got used to the dark I could clearly see the contour of a gate and a small house in the background, mostly hidden behind a grove of pine trees.

“Wait. Is that the ocean?” I asked, dumbfounded, as the sound of waves hitting the shore became increasingly apparent.

“Yup,” Anderson replied, nodding, and unlocked the iron gate, swinging it open.

“Seriously? You live by the ocean?” I didn't sound excited just then. Not at all. *Great, now he will say I'm like a puppy again.*

“Seriously, pup.” *Hah, I knew it. Darn it.*

Blushing, more, I tried to contain my excitement, looking anywhere but at his face.

An odd sound caught my attention. Heavy breathing. Then a small whine.

“You're kidding me.”

“What?” Anderson, crouched down as he was, peered up at me then back down at his four-legged friend that was lying belly up, licking his master’s hand.

“You got a dog.”

“Correction. I *got* a puppy.”

Uh, he was making fun of me.

“Hey, I’m still a little drunk. I’m allowed to make mistakes,” I protested.

“A little...” Anderson shook his head, but his eyes were twinkling with mischief. God, I hated when people made fun of me.

I looked down as I felt a weight settle on my foot, and found the puppy looking at me with its tongue out. It looked as if it was laughing. So according to him, I was like that?

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” Had I asked that out loud?

“I know what you’re thinking and the answer is yes. You’re totally like this little girl. You’re basically her spitting image, except for the part where she’s a girl and she’s white, whereas you’re mostly black. By the way, do you have anything in your wardrobe that *isn’t* black?”

“Wooaah. Slow down. Firstly, I’m nothing like this... furry, dirty, poo-smelling thing. And secondly, what’s wrong with black? I happen to think it’s very nice and practical.” And it complements my eyes.

“Sure, it is, but you look like a depressed teenager who’s about to commit suicide.”

“No I don’t.”

“Whatever you say.” Anderson dismissed me with that and unlocked his front door, letting the frustratingly excited puppy inside.

“I don’t,” I cried, unable to let the subject go. People didn’t take me seriously as it was. The last thing I wanted was for them to start pitying me as well.

“Uh-hum,” he sing-songed.

“But I don’t. Tell me I don’t.”

“Jesus.” He fed the dog a fistful of dry food that he’d taken out from a bag near the door and looked square at my face afterwards. “You’re not letting this go, are you?”

I shook my head.

“Yes, you do look like a depressed suicidal kid when you’re wearing black.”

Damn.

“Hey, there’s no use in sulking. Want me to go shopping with you tomorrow? You’re free right?”

Tomorrow would be a Saturday. I had my Saturdays free. The question was, did I want to spend my free time with him?

“I hate shopping.”

“Great. That makes two of us. We’re gonna have so much fun!”

“Your notion of fun is pretty twisted.”

“Did you just notice?”

I rolled my eyes and took off my sneakers and jacket. “Where do I sleep?”

CHAPTER THREE

Colt

“Umm, get off, Cindy.”

The wet tongue licking my cheek only got more persistent. Cindy's smelly breath was fanning over my face and her drool was spewing out on my lips. I cringed and grabbed her by the nape of her neck, tearing her away from my face. “All right, all right. Daddy's taking you out. Jeez, you're impossible. You're sleeping outside from now on.”

The puppy yelped excitedly when I got off the bed. I put on my boxers and my robe and walked through the hallway, unlocked the door and let the puppy out. I let her do her business while I hurried inside and thoroughly cleaned my face with soap and cold water.

“Ah! Cindy, Cindy.”

I heard her cute little paws on the parquet and quickly closed the front door, with her promptly tailing me. When I walked back, I saw the door to the guest room half-opened and couldn't help myself from taking a peek.

“Shush,” I said to the puppy who was huffing beside me, wiggling her tail.

The view from the door was aimed right at the bed, where the sleeping form of my cute nurse lay. He was still dressed in the street clothes he'd been wearing last night. The bed was still made beneath him. So thin, he looked almost fragile.

My legs moved on their own accord and gradually led me to the foot of the bed. He was sound asleep, his breathing slow. I walked closer to him and found myself moving away a strand of hair from his forehead to reveal his beautiful face. Yes, he was truly beautiful. A cute, innocent kind of beauty that made me feel old, despite the fact that only three and a half years separated us, according to what I read in his CV.

A generous amount of black kohl outlined his eyes. I grinned at this small proof of rebellion. It only made him look younger, but it truly suited him. His cheeks were a cute shade of pink and his lips puffy from sleep, a shiny ghost

of drool slipping away from the corner of his mouth. Chuckling, I wiped it with my thumb. Nico stirred in his sleep, mumbling something unintelligible.

“Arf!”

The loud barking from Cindy made me flinch and Nico open his eyes.

“Cindy?!” The puppy looked at me, pointy teeth showing in what looked like a perfect imitation of a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Umm. What are you doing here?” I heard a mumble from the direction of the bed.

Nico rose half of his body up and looked around bemused. “Where am I?” he asked, the question followed by a noisy yawn. I resisted the urge to ruffle his hair. It already looked like a bird’s nest.

“Morning, sunshine. It’s only five AM, so you can still sleep. I just walked in to see how you’re feeling.”

“Tired.”

“Poor pup.”

This time, I did give in to the urge and ruffled his hair. He smacked my hand away with the cute kind of groan Cindy made when she was angry, then fell back on the mattress, gazing long at the ceiling.

“I stink,” he finally said.

A laugh escaped from between my pursed lips, no matter how hard I tried to stifle it. “Go take a shower, Stinky. I’ll bring you some of my clothes and put them on the bed, okay?”

The kid’s nod was followed by a muffled yawn.

“Good. I’m making breakfast in the meantime. The kitchen is down the hall right next to the front entrance,” I said, pointing to my right, and left closing the door behind me.

After rummaging through my closet for some shorts and a T-shirt for my guest, I went back to his room and entered without bothering to knock. The sight that welcomed me made me gasp for air. The kid was butt-naked with his

back to me and, damn, what a view! He suddenly didn't look so much like a kid anymore. His body was frail, but way more defined than I had ever expected. He actually had an ass. A nice, round—

“Have you not heard of knocking, Neanderthal?” he asked, turning around and gracing me with a pointed look.

I coughed and tried my mightiest not to stare anywhere near his southern parts. “Sorry. Brought you some clothes.”

“Thanks.” He took the clothes I handed him and looked at me expectantly.

“All right, pup. I'm getting breakfast done, then,” I said after clearing my throat, pointing to the door with my thumb. Damn, I was really losing my charm.

“Well what are you waiting for? It's not gonna magically make itself,” my pup said, crossing his arms. *Do not look down! Don't. Look.*

I looked.

Freakin' hell. My mouth watered.

“How long do you plan on staring, pervert?” he finally snapped. As if it was my fault he stood shamelessly naked in front of me like that.

“Hey, is that a way to treat your benefactor?” I protested, hands raised defensively in front of my body.

Nico only rolled his eyes and tilted his head sideways, frowning at me in an all too superior way. He looked good enough to eat, but it was still too early. We had been through a rough patch ever since we'd started working together. I had pretty much bullied him for fun and then yesterday he'd experienced his first death in the ER. It wouldn't do to complicate things. And giving in to temptation would do just that. I couldn't risk having an affair with a coworker unless it was something I truly wanted. And if I wanted it, I had to at least take it slow.

With a sigh, I took a few steps back until my feet touched the doorway. “Fine, fine, this pervert is going now. Have a nice shower.”

“I will,” I heard him say as I closed the door. As I walked down the hall, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My erection was painfully obvious through the thin robe. Damn, I really was losing my charm.

And here I had thought he was too effeminate for me.

Yet I was sporting a huge hard-on at a mere glimpse of his naked body.

Fuck, I was doomed.

“Ah! Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“Hmm... smells wonderful.”

I huffed and turned around from the fuming pan in the sink to find Nico looking at me with a sarcastic smile.

“Ah... Sorry, kid. I can't cook to save my life.”

Cindy seemed to agree with me, since she barked right away.

“You, outside,” I said pointing to the door. Cindy whined cutely and immediately sat on the floor looking at me with big innocent eyes.

“What breed is she?”

“Golden retriever. You seriously can't tell?”

“My grandma is allergic to dogs, so I never paid much attention to them,” he said, shrugging, and stepped next to me giving the burnt pan a dubious look.

“You lived with your grandma?”

“You could say so. My parents never cared much about me so I was always at Nonna's house.”

“Oh. I'm sorry to hear that.”

Nico suddenly clapped his hands and looked me squarely in the eyes. “Let me show you what a real pancake looks like, old man.”

“Old man?”

He shrugged and began rummaging through my cabinets, extracting a clean pan and setting it on the stove. "Since you insist on calling me a kid, it's only fair."

"Weren't you hung over?"

I shot Anderson a sarcastic look. "I took a pill. Now give me some eggs and flour."

"I have pancake batter."

He rolled his eyes. "Give me a break. Now do what I say. Old. Man."

"I'm still pretty much your boss, you know?"

"Excuse me. Old boss."

"You're impossible."

"Take this scoundrel out. I can't concentrate with her climbing on my legs."

"Now, listen here, kid. No one kicks my puppy out."

"Fine. Then hold her."

Nico took out a bowl and put the flour inside, then took a separate bowl and put the eggs and some milk and started mixing them with swift movements.

"Do you have spring water?"

"Yeah."

He extended his arms expectantly. With a huff I walked with Cindy tightly pressed to my chest, opened the fridge door, took the bottle out and handed it to him. "Anything else I can get you, master?"

"You could make yourself useful and start the coffee machine."

I shook my head and grinned. This kid was shameless outside of work. I kinda liked his spirit.

And his ass. At which I'd looked only a dozen times since he'd entered the room.

“Okay, so you can make incredible mouth-melting, drool-inducing pancakes. What other dangerous talents are you hiding?”

Nico licked his lips after sipping from his mug of coffee and grinned, his cheeks turning a soft shade of pink. What was even more fascinating were the round dimples that appeared in the center of each cheek. Two perfectly symmetric little holes. My fingers itched to reach out and stretch those cute little cheeks. *Calm yourself down, idiot.*

Something was seriously wrong with me. He was cute, damn cute. And I didn't usually like cute. What was disturbing was the fact that he looked so freaking young. I felt like a pedophile. However, I was not a pedophile. Nico was perfectly legal. And gay. Yet I couldn't help feeling guilty.

“Something wrong?”

“Nah.” I shook my head and sipped the last drops of coffee from my cup. My fingers were shaking from the nicotine craving, but I had sworn this time I'd really quit. It had been three days. And I felt like crawling on the floor. “We should go shopping.”

“It's okay. You don't have to go with me. I'm sure you'd rather do something else.”

I smiled questioningly at him and he lowered his eyes to his cup.

“I have no plans today, kid.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes darting up to meet mine.

“What's wrong? You don't wanna be seen around with an old man?”

He gave me a lopsided smile and shrugged. “Fine. Let's go shopping.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Nico

I was nervous. Palms sweating, knees jerking uncontrollably. I couldn't keep myself still. The thought alone of having to go through a crowded mall was enough to leave me out of breath.

Even though the mall was in the opposite part of town from Anderson's house, the road to our destination couldn't have been shorter.

I reluctantly climbed out of his car. My stomach churned in reproach.

"You okay, kid?"

"Never been better," I replied haughtily. Damn, I was *so* not okay. I almost wanted to scream and beg him to take me home, but was too chicken to do it. Or rather too proud. I patted my pocket in search of my eyeliner. In moments like these, a good dose of black was always comforting. Then I realized, to my dismay, that I had put my clothes in Anderson's washing machine and borrowed his. Where the hell had I left my eyeliner? I looked down at myself and moaned. A pair of blue shorts that ended past my knees and a huge khaki T-shirt that almost reached the same length. I looked even more like a kid than usual.

I heard Anderson chuckle and caught him taking in the same sight. "Hey, at least they aren't white," he said and burst into laughter.

I shot him what was supposed to be a deadly glare, but with my eyelinerless eyes I bet my gaze wasn't that impressive.

I hated this. I shouldn't have even let him bring me here. I would end up wearing black anyway. I couldn't feel like myself wearing something else.

"Maybe we should go back," I finally found the courage to say.

"Nonsense. We're not leaving here until you have a new wardrobe."

"I don't have any money," I lied.

He seemed lost in thought for a moment, chewing on his lower lip.

“I’ll buy them for you then. You can give me the money back on Monday.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he grabbed my hand and swiftly dragged me in the direction of the mall. “Don’t worry. We’ll start with darker colors so you can accommodate better to the change.”

I stopped, forcing him to halt and look back at me. “Why are you doing this?”

Anderson grinned. “I thought we’d already established this. It’s because we both have nothing to do today. I’d rather be bored with you than alone.”

He didn’t let go of my hand, but pulled it again, prompting me to move, groaning and moaning all the way.

“Oh right,” he said, stopping and turning to look at me again. “And because your look is that of a suicidal kid.”

This time I whined. I felt pathetic.

“There, there,” Anderson cooed, as if reading my mind, and ruffled my head. “We’ll fix it soon, baby.”

I flinched at the endearment, but Anderson didn’t even seem to register having said it. He grabbed my hand again and started walking, his attention focused on the mall entrance.

I was dizzy with apprehension. Why had he called me that? Was it his usual style or was he mocking me? Or did he... Nah. Anderson would never look at someone whose *look was that of a suicidal kid*. I bet he had much higher standards. Even that was questionable. I still didn’t know whether he was indeed gay or straight. The guy was a complete mystery.

The mall didn’t seem very busy. I sighed with relief. I tried to tug my hand away from Anderson’s hold, but he held it tighter instead. I decided to relax myself and let him guide me.

“So, what do you wanna try first? Jeans or shirts?”

I shrugged. “Whatever you want”

“Shirts it is then. You’ll get tired faster if we start with jeans.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go there,” he pointed at the upper level and dragged me to the escalator. I climbed on apprehensively and looked down. My dizziness was reemerging.

Calm down.

When we reached the upstairs, I let out a long exhale of relief, my legs shaking horribly. Anderson didn’t notice. He practically shoved me inside a store and started browsing through shelves, picking up items and dismissing them one by one, according to who knows what principle. I just crossed my arms and watched him patiently, trying to regain my composure.

“This!” he eventually exclaimed. To my surprise, he took out a plain *brown* button-down shirt with fine gold stripes, only visible in strong light.

I raised a questioning eyebrow. “I reckon I won’t look like a suicidal kid in *brown*.”

Anderson tilted his head backwards and let out a throaty laugh. “Brown suits gray eyes best. Kid, are you really gay? How can you not know this?”

I rolled my eyes. “Prejudicial snob.” It was mumbled but he still heard it, which prompted another laugh. What was so funny about it was beyond me.

“Come on. Go try it on while I look for more.”

“Whatever.”

I dragged my still-shaky feet to the dressing room and took Anderson’s T-shirt off, replacing it with the shirt he had chosen.

“Wow.” My eyes really did pop, to my utmost astonishment. This guy was good.

“Amazing. All you need is a fresh haircut and you’re officially the cutest boy in town.”

“Haven’t you heard of privacy?” I retorted with a pointed look Anderson’s way.

“We see each other half-dressed all the time at work.” He pointed out the obvious, sticking his tongue out at me from behind the half-opened curtain, then stepped completely inside and handed me an armful of clothes. “Try these on next.”

“I thought you said you hated shopping.”

“I do. When I’m not in charge,” he said with a wink and started unbuttoning the brown shirt. I tried to pretend I didn’t register the closeness.

His breath touching my face, his hands feeling my chest. It was *completely* non-sexual and it still should have made me claustrophobic, but instead it made me want him closer in a *completely* sexual way.

I cleared my throat to release the tension that took over my body and melted in Anderson’s arms, letting him take over the dressing and undressing part. He seemed unusually quiet. Had he perhaps noticed my state of mind?

“This one looks good too,” he eventually whispered with a hoarse voice. I looked down at myself, having forgotten whatever he made me wear. My eyes eventually focused on a mint green T-shirt.

“It looks like our scrubs,” I mumbled, scrunching my nose in distaste.

Anderson released a healthy laugh. “Right. Better not.”

“What about this one?”

He pointed at a burgundy T-shirt with black vector flowers on it. It looked a bit girly, but the hint of black made me immediately feel better. I shrugged. “Yeah, that looks more... normal.”

“Good. Let’s put it on then.” He undressed me again and helped me put it on. “This looks more like you, huh?” he said from behind me, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

I nodded. His breath caressing my ear both relaxed me and put me on pins and needles at the same time. It had been a while since I’d last felt attracted to someone. This was such a bad idea. “I think these are enough.”

“All right, kiddo. You may be right. We chose quite a few.”

“Could you stop?!”

Anderson flinched at my demand and so did I, taken by surprise by my own unusually loud voice. “Calling me a kid, I mean,” I said in a milder tone.

“Right, sorry,” Anderson replied ruffling my hair. His smile was kind, his touch gentle. Whatever happened with the tyrant from the ER? That one felt like a forgotten memory.

“Split personality much?”

Anderson didn't hear me. He was already at the counter, paying for the half-dozen shirts he'd chosen for me.

“Ah, hungry yet?”

We had bought two pairs of jeans after I'd tried on about six.

Sweat was pouring down my back and I was feeling more exhausted than if I'd spent a whole night in the ER. But the moment Anderson mentioned food, my stomach rumbled with surprising vigor.

“I have a new-found respect for shopping addicts,” I said with a moan as I sat down in a chair. Anderson laughed and asked what I wanted to eat, then vanished, leaving me alone at our table.

I looked around and found myself mouth agape. I hadn't even noticed how crowded the mall had gotten. Children, old people, teenagers, entire families. There was too-loud music and too much chatter. Yet my anxiety didn't reappear.

My gaze found Anderson's form, so easy to differentiate from all of the rest, and my body involuntarily relaxed. *He* was doing this to me. He was making me feel normal. Maybe Nonna was right when she'd told me a friend can cure any disease. Course, she meant real friends, while Anderson and I were just coworkers.

I sighed.

“There you go kid. Oh, sorry! I mean. Ah, I don’t even know what to call you.”

“Nico would be good.”

“Nico. Sounds good. But don’t hate me if I happen to call you ‘pup’ from time to time. I can’t help myself.”

I rolled my eyes at his antics, but my mouth twitched and I couldn’t help it. He was the one sounding like a kid at the moment. “I suppose I should find an equally embarrassing name for you.”

Anderson pouted, looking innocently at me. “Now that’s not fair. If I call you by your name, you should do that as well.”

“I already do that, *Anderson*.”

“Not that. My first name. It’s really easy. C-O-L-T. You can do it. Repeat after me.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I interrupted, almost choking on the soda because I couldn’t contain my laugh.

He handed me a napkin and I wiped my mouth. Our eyes met above the soda cup and I could swear he moved just an inch closer. I was just about to do the same when his cellphone abruptly pulled us apart.

Anderson—Colt—cleared his throat and picked up, mouthing a *sorry* my way.

“Hey, there, how’s my mistress doing today?”

Mistress. *Ew*. I hoped he hadn’t meant it that way.

Anderson—dammit, Colt—let out a sexy chuckle. I swore it was sexy. He was totally flirting. I felt my face heat.

“Yeah? You really miss me?” he continued. God what was that? This guy had no common sense. And why had he flirted with me, then? *No, it was just your stupid overactive imagination, Nico. Like usual. Why would Colt Anderson have any interest in someone like you?*

“Well, I’m a bit busy right now, actually. Yeah. No. I’m shopping. With someone. No, *seriously*. No, it’s *not* Joe.” He had this stupid grin all over his face. “What are you talking about? I do get along with other people except Joe, you know. In fact—”

I gestured to him that I was going to buy another soda and got up. Hell. I felt like such an idiot. I had no idea when it had happened, but somehow, sometime, unknowingly, I’d started to expect something to develop between us. And here he was flirting with a woman on the phone. *You are such an idiot, Nico. Idiot, idiot, idiot!*

“Excuse me,” someone called, but it seemed so far away I didn’t bother to turn around.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!”

My breathing was getting heavy again. Brown dots danced before my eyes.

I spotted the exit door and ran toward it, not minding the curses that were, now obviously, directed my way.

As fresh air hit my face I finally managed to breathe at a more normal pace.

“Fuck. I hate this.” I screamed. And immediately regretted it after people stopped and looked my way as if I were some kind of psycho.

“Nico. Hey, you all right, pup?”

Not the person I wanted to see now.

I nodded and whispered, “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just... I suffer from anxiety sometimes and... it gets to me when I’m in crowded places.” I avoided his gaze, concentrating on a bright spot in the distance, where the sun shone over a guy’s car, creating an undulating beam.

“Oh, I see. Shit. You should have told me.”

I finally looked at him at the sound of plastic squishing. He had the bags full of clothes raised at his chest level. "Well, we're done here. So, how about we go home?"

I nodded. Colt smiled at me and walked to his car, and I followed closely behind, trying to still my beating heart.

"So, you have a mistress," I said, once we were settled in the car. I inwardly cursed my big mouth and the sarcastic tone I couldn't help from weaving through my words, but the cat was already out of the bag. I couldn't take what I had said back. I waited, heart drumming in my chest.

Colt chuckled and looked at me from the corner of his eye with a lopsided smile. I pretended to study an invisible spot on the glass.

"I let her think she's that. But truth is, I'm the one who owns her."

"Oh." A sudden image of Colt with his chest naked, jeans unzipped and a whip in his hand flashed before my eyes.

"You're blushing. What are you imagining, pervert? It was a joke."

"Nothing," I hurriedly protested. Too quickly, I'm afraid. Colt guessed it too and burst into laughing.

"Sorry to disappoint, pup. I love that woman to pieces, but in a completely platonic way." He shuddered exaggeratedly. "Girl cooties."

"Okay. Stop. I don't get it. What are you playing at? Are you straight or are you gay?"

The car jolted to a stop. Colt shut the engine down and looked at me. "Why? Do you care?"

"Uh. I..."

He had a leering smile on his face as he got closer to me. I couldn't help letting my gaze settle on his lips. A mesmerizing sight.

“I-I mean...” Ah, why was I mumbling so much? “I mean—you first—first imply you’re straight, then—then that you’re gay and then you flirt with a woman on the phone and—and—”

“Flirt?!”

The distance between us grew as Colt moved back from my face. I sighed with relief. His cheeks bloated and small shudders overtook his body while he was trying to refrain himself from laughing. But, in the end, he failed miserably after only a couple of seconds.

“Oh, pup. You’re the funniest little thing I’ve seen.”

“You know, I’m a man too!” I sulked. His derogatory terms were getting too much to handle. As was his constantly laughing at me.

With a frustrated sigh, I opened the car door and tried to get out, but Colt’s hand abruptly caught mine in a tight hold. And his face got closer again, his voice suddenly lower than normal. “Oh, I know, Nico. Believe me. I know.”

I tilted my head away, the atmosphere unexpectedly odd. Why was he playing these games with me? I wanted to cry, and, at the same time, I wanted to give in to him completely.

All of a sudden, his fingers cupped my chin, forcing my head his way. I flinched, but turned to look at him and the intensity of his gaze took me by surprise.

“C-Colt.”

Colt shut me up with a finger on my lips. Then his lips descended on mine, effectively bringing an end to any protest on my part. With a moan, my treacherous body melted into his touch. My mouth opened, lips giving in to his hot, wet, demanding kiss.

“Damn, pup.” Colt stopped, supporting his forehead against mine. His heavy breathing entwined with my own. “You know I’m pretty much your boss at work.”

I nodded, words barely registering.

“And we shouldn’t do this.”

I nodded again.

“Damn, but I want you so much.”

And he kissed me again. And again. His teeth bruising my lower lip. His tongue brushing against my own with a nerve-twisting, butterflies-inducing intensity.

Colt pulled away. “I should take you home.”

I nodded again.

I suddenly felt cold, as if my body physically missed his heat. But I kept on nodding dumbly as Colt started the car and drove away.

All the while wondering what the hell just happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

Colt

Fuck, when had this happened?

When Cass told me that love creeps up on you when you least expected I'd called her crazy. I never understood what she meant and even when she moved to a different city to be with the man she loved, I just kept thinking it wouldn't last. Love was just a chemical reaction. An injection of pheromones. Once its effectiveness was lost, the body would go back to normal and so would the brain.

Now it was happening to me, that same chemical reaction. Of course, it wasn't truly love, if we were to admit love actually existed. But it was something. An attraction, far more powerful than I had ever expected. And much harder to control than I had thought.

I found myself going to work with a little hitch in my steps that hadn't been there before. I found myself humming a song—something I hadn't done in ages. I found myself stroking his eyeliner inside my pocket, as if it was precious treasure. All the while dreaming of the moment we'd meet again and I'd see his deep gray eyes and those pouty lips, so open to my kisses.

“What's wrong with you today? Are you poisoned?”

“Huh?” I turned toward the voice and found Joe looking at me with a dubious stare.

“What? Can't a man enjoy the... weather?”

Joe raised a curious eyebrow. “Spill.”

I shrugged. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Oh, come on, buddy.”

I kept on humming with Joe running behind me trying to pry the secrets out of me. Ah, life was beautiful.

We got out of the parking lot and reached the main hospital entrance, and I immediately saw Nico's familiar figure. He was wearing a black jacket and his usual black scarf. He had his back to me, walking slowly to the door.

"Hey, pup."

He stopped in his tracks and turned around, looking at me wide-eyed.

"What happened to the clothes I bought for you?"

"Clothes?" Joe butted in.

"Yes, Joe, clothes. Private conversation." This guy caught onto things too quickly. I had to be careful around him.

"Hey." I said turning toward Nico.

"What clothes?" Joe asked again.

"I said *private conversation*, Joe." I stared Joe down and eventually he gave in, rolling his eyes.

Muttering "fine, fine" under his breath, he turned and left, leaving us alone.

"Hi," Nico whispered with a slight smile when I looked back at him. Damn, I could swear my heart gave a little skip.

My attention was diverted from his gorgeous gray-blue eyes when his hand reached for the zipper of his jacket. Oh, hell, was he planning on getting undressed right there for me? In plain sight of everyone?

I swallowed hard and moved closer to him, my breathing accelerating.

"I put this on today," he said, revealing the red T-shirt we bought together. Right, stupid thought. Who in their right mind would undress in broad daylight and in public?

I exhaled loudly and nodded. "Next week, we're getting your hair cut." I smiled, ruffling his hair.

Nico smiled shyly in return and nodded.

"You two, lovebirds, do you plan on delaying work long?"

Both Nico and I flinched and turned at Emma's voice. She had her arms crossed, looking at us from behind a pair of round glasses.

"We better get changed then," I said, nudging Nico with my elbow. He nodded, waved weakly at Emma, and walked toward the locker room with me close on his heels. I couldn't help catching Emma's deep gaze following us. I definitely needed to be more careful. Medical personnel were good at spotting what people wanted to hide.

I didn't see Nico for the rest of the day. He was too busy with administering injections and checking wounds, getting people dressed in gowns and cleaning up bed sheets to have any time for me, and I was too busy consulting with all sorts of patients, from sane and nice ones to really insane and not nice ones. But as soon as I got a break, I went to the staff room, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Deep inside I was ashamed of this teenager-like behavior, but I couldn't help myself. It all made a lot more sense now. Why I had felt the need to bully him so much harder than other people. I had wanted him to think only of me. But at this point, I needed to show him I could have a nice side, too, if I wanted to have a chance with him.

We were coworkers. We weren't supposed to date, not even for a no-strings-attached, friends with benefits, kind of relationship. However, Nico was more interesting than any other guy. Some days he seemed sarcastic and confident, other times, he looked vulnerable and innocent. He was water mixed with fire. An equation I wanted to solve. Scratch that, I *had* to solve.

I knew the feeling was mutual. I could see it in his eyes and in the heated kiss we'd shared two days before. But would it be enough to convince him to go out with me?

"You've bullied the new kid for the past two weeks. But suddenly I see you getting along this morning; very well, in fact. You both had *that* kind of smile. Like you shared a dirty secret." Joe stepped up behind me and put a coin in the coffee machine, selecting his beverage.

"Are you done for the day?"

“Are you avoiding the topic?”

My innocent face didn't trick him. Joe grinned at me as he grabbed his coffee out of the beeping machine. He then dragged a chair over and sat on it, stretching his legs over the table in front of him. “Well, you didn't want to spill it this morning. But you better do it now. Do you. In fact. Share. A dirty secret?”

“You're seeing way too much into this, Joe. The kid saw his first patient death last Friday. We just bonded I guess.”

“Just bonded? Didn't look like that to me. Unless by 'bonded' you meant physically sexed each other up.”

I had to laugh at this one. He had no idea how I wanted what he said to be true. But, sadly, it wasn't and I had no problem hiding it. In fact, it was better to clear things up. The last thing I wanted was for Joe to know the nature of my affection for Nico. I could be in a lot of trouble, given his reputation of blackmailer. “Trust me, Joe, that kid and I didn't have sex.”

“Oh, but you want to.”

I tilted my head back and laughed hard. It didn't sound fake, surprisingly so. Cass had taught me a few tricks about being evil and that included a kick-ass evil laugh.

“Seriously, Joe, the last thing I want is to get laid with that guy. I mean, he looks like a freakin' teenager. Totally not my type. Plus, as I said, he's really too naïve and spineless for this job. I prefer my men a bit more daring and a little more... manly, if you know what I mean,” I finished on a sarcastic tone.

I wasn't prepared for the intake of breath I heard behind me. Unease gripped me as I turned around and found myself face to face with a teary, wide-eyed Nico.

“Oops. I think you got your point across,” Joe said, chuckling as Nico spun around and jogged away.

“You knew he was listening.” I pointed an accusing finger at Joe's chest.

“Why are you so angry, Colt? Didn't you say you don't feel absolutely anything for that spineless, naïve boy?”

I sighed and stared him down. Joe met my eyes straight ahead with an evil sarcastic smile. I shook my head and turned in the direction of the exit. Damn, I really needed to choose my so-called friends more wisely in the future.

“Nico.”

“Go away.”

Man, I really needed a cigarette now. I settled with breaking a leaf from the tree above which was starting to lose its blooms and twirling it through my fingers.

I kicked the dirt a few times and eventually sat down beside him on the grass. “The weather's looking good. Spring seems to be finally here.”

“Would you go away, please?” he said with a huff, throwing me a venomous look.

With a sigh, I lay down, putting my hands beneath my head. Good thing we had no patients now. This was my only chance to talk to him and I wasn't going to give it up. I cleared my throat and tried to look in his eyes. But his face was completely averted from me.

“You know I didn't mean any of those things.”

“What things? That I don't look like a real man? That I'm naïve and spineless?” he spat out, giving me an angry stare.

“Yeah. Those things. Well, you do look like a teenager, but that's what makes you so cute.”

Nico huffed, moving his hands helplessly by his side, as if he couldn't find a place to put them. Okay, bad strategy from my part.

“What game are you playing again, Anderson? Aren't you sick of bullying me? You wanted me to think you liked me just to go around and hurt me. Does that make you feel... more manly, *if you know what I mean?*”

Ouch. You deserved that, my consciousness reminded me.

“No. Nico, it’s not like that.” I tried to touch his face, but he pulled away from me. “I just don’t want people to think we’re together, that’s all.”

“Right. By bad-mouthing me, ’cause being with me would be such a disgrace.”

“No, silly. ’Cause being with you might leave us both jobless.”

We fell silent. I kept watching Nico, but he kept on looking forward, not acknowledging my presence.

“I like you, Nico. I like the way you look. And I love that you’re not like average men.”

“Average men...” he huffed.

“Okay, maybe I didn’t put that right.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t look like an average man. I don’t look like a man at all, in fact. I. Look like a suicidal Emo kid.” He smiled sadly and got up.

“Shit, pup, I really—”

“Don’t bother explaining. I get it. That kiss didn’t mean anything to you. And, you know what? It didn’t mean anything to me either.”

His voice was trembling, proof that he was lying through his teeth, but when I reached out to grab him, he pushed me away and turned his back to me.

“We’d better get inside. Oh, right—” He took out something from his pocket and threw it at my chest. It fell on the ground, and when I looked down I realized it was a wad of dollar bills. “That’s what I owed you.”

To hell with it. This time I really needed a smoke.

Okay, so my talk with Nico hadn’t gone so well. Who was I kidding? It was a disaster.

But I didn’t plan on leaving things like they were. However, I had no idea how to fix them. I was so used to having no friends and hiding in my own shell

that I didn't know how to act nice anymore and how to express myself properly. I needed advice. Badly.

With a pained moan, I dialed Cass's number. She was the only person who came to mind.

"Mwahahah. My slave has called to report?"

Despite my bad mood, I couldn't help grin at her uncommon way to say hi. Well, uncommon for anyone but her.

"Please receive my humble respects, my beautiful mistress."

"You know my man is gonna spank your ass red if he hears you."

"We better keep it to ourselves then," I replied jokingly, though I was forcing myself to smile.

"Hey, what's with that tone?"

"What tone?"

"Your voice didn't sound right. Did something happen?" It seemed I didn't have to worry about cutting it short. It only took Cass seconds to guess my foul mood.

"Well... Actually it did."

"Oh. Did someone die again?"

"No. It's not that."

"What? It's personal then? Is this about the cute guy?"

"How do you know?" I asked, shocked.

Cassidy laughed whole-heartedly. "It's not hard to guess, Colt. It's not like you have a very eventful life. And the last time we talked you sounded positively smitten."

"I did not!" I protested weakly.

"You so did. It took very little effort to convince you to spill the beans about your date at the mall, and you talked for almost an hour about the things

you bought, and how cute his sarcasm is, and how adorable his blush is, and how good of a kisser—”

“Okay, fine. Maybe I sounded a bit smitten.”

“Oh my god, you’re so incredibly cute.”

“Mistress, stop your evil mouth from sputtering nonsense or your slave might rebel.”

“No you won’t. I’ll lash you with my magic whip if you only dare to think it. Now, back to your tragic love story. What happened? Did you find out he’s secretly a vampire hunter?”

“Ummm... No. Are you watching that teen show again?”

“No. Yes. Ah, that girl pisses me off. It would have been so much better if the boys got together.”

“They’re brothers.”

“Yes! Which would make it even hotter. Hah. I won. You admitted you watch it.”

“I don’t. *Everyone* knows they’re brothers. All I need to do is eavesdrop on Emma and Evita cooing about the latest episodes.”

“Hmm... I still think you watch it.”

“Okay. Can we please focus! I need to get back to my patients soon.”

“Fine. What do you want me to tell you?”

“Tell me how to make him like me.”

Silence fell from the other line. “Cass, are you still there?”

Eventually I heard a loud sigh. “Let me recover from the shock. One—this is the first time you’ve ever asked for love advice from me. You must really have it bad.” I rolled my eyes. “Two—this is such a deep question, Colt. Sorry but you have to figure it out yourself.”

“What?” I quickly recovered and cleared my throat after the question came out as a pathetic shriek.

“Seriously. It’s way too hard to explain it over the phone. Just remember that crap about being yourself, it’s not really crap. The hard part, in your case, is being yourself and still making someone like you.”

“Hey, you’re my best friend.”

“Um-hum. Which is why I’m being honest. Don’t get me wrong. You’re a nice guy, but before you open up, everyone thinks you’re a jerk.”

I sighed, feeling completely dejected. If even Cass thought that of me, this was a lost battle indeed. The woman had known me for five years. That’s more than I could say for my own parents, who died when I was three.

“Come on. Don’t lose hope. You said you went shopping and had fun together. So maybe he saw the nice side of you that isn’t usually evident at work. Just loosen up. And try not to badmouth your patients and do some rectal exams from time to time.”

I scrunched my nose. “Do I really have to?”

“If you really want this Nico to see the kind, selfless side of you, then yes, definitely.”

“Damn.”

“Hang in there, my faithful slave. Remember who your mistress is. Don’t embarrass me.”

With a lifeless chuckle, I pressed the end button on my cell and looked hopelessly toward the hospital entrance.

Who would have guessed it was so hard to make someone like you?

We were still not talking, more exactly, *he* was the one not talking, for a whole week after that disastrous apology of mine. I was at the end of my patience; Cass’s so-called advice had left me more deflated than ever and more confused than enlightened.

In spite of all of this, the irony was that I knew Nico wanted me. At least I hoped he did, judging by the hundreds of times I caught him looking at me

when he thought the coast was clear. Moreover, he seemed to have all his breaks at the same time I did. Now I remembered from my high school years that was exactly how all the girls acted when they saw the baseball team captain walking down the hall, or when they wanted to chat with a boy they liked. Those were signs of a crush. Or that was how my brain insisted on interpreting them.

The torturous moments were when we had to work together and our eyes would meet at the most inappropriate times—yes, even during rectal exams, which I now performed every time a case came up that required them. He would blush and lower his head quickly or pretend to be coughing or suddenly tell someone something, just to avoid looking at me.

I didn't know how to interpret these moments anymore.

I wanted to talk to him. I needed it, for my sanity. I couldn't care less if that would cause me problems at work.

I had made my decision the morning I arrived at work, seven days after Nico had stopped talking to me. No matter what, I had to apologize to him again and convince him that kiss had meant something to both of us.

I found him in the perfect place, the changing room. As soon as he set eyes on me, Nico made as if to walk out, his gazed determinedly fixed on a spot on the floor.

“Nico, we need to talk.” I grabbed his forearm when he tried to move past me.

“I ha-have work to-to do,” he whispered, stammering.

“It'll only take a second.”

Nico huffed. “I doubt it.”

“Just, please, listen to me.”

“Fine,” He said with a bored tone, finally looking straight at me. “You've got two minutes.”

“Great.” I exhaled and sat down on a bench. Okay, my brain hadn’t developed a scenario to go with this. My imagination had stopped at the part where I begged him to talk to me.

“Well?” Nico tapped his foot on the floor, looking thoroughly impatient. “You were the one who wanted to talk, so hurry up.”

“I…” Hell, why were my palms sweating?

I looked up at him, praying he would understand my silent apology. My mouth opened and closed successively in a failed attempt to find the right words. There was something so wrong with this picture. Where had confident, defiant me gone? The moment my eyes met Nico’s and I saw the hurt and betrayal in them, I understood I had lost my chance before even getting it.

“Dr. Anderson, there’s a pregnant woman in the waiting room that needs immediate assistance.” Emma’s words brought me back to reality.

I lowered my head and sighed in relief that she’d saved me from further embarrassing myself. I didn’t even bother to ask how she found me, but instead I practically ran toward the waiting room. Luckily, the patient was easy to spot thanks to her immensely round belly.

“What about the attending OB/GYN?” I asked Emma as I was running toward the patient, with the nurse behind me.

“She’s performing an emergency C-section.”

I nodded and finally slowed down. “Hello, ma’am, I’m Dr. Colt Anderson,” I said, approaching the woman.

“Doctor!” she cried, looking at me with wide desperate eyes.

Emma, who was right behind me, handed me the woman’s file. “It’s what we managed to gather from her. Her gynecologist is out of town.”

“Mrs. Corrigan, right?” I said after taking a glimpse at her info.

The poor woman was sweating profusely and looking at us with unfocused eyes, but managed to utter a weak yes.

“You’re in your seventh month?”

She nodded.

“Are you having contractions?”

“I did. They’re gone now. Doctor, I think my baby’s dead.”

“Get her on a gurney and give her a gown,” I instructed Emma. “I’ll examine you to make sure you’re okay.” I told the patient squeezing her shoulder. Whatever had made that woman think her baby was dead, was definitely bad news. Problem was, I had never delivered a baby and something was telling me I was going to get my cherry popped today. *Bad choice of words.*

I went to another room to see a patient, just to have an excuse to compose my thoughts. I still couldn’t understand what exactly happened in there with Nico. It felt like I had completely lost all thought and capability of speech. I wondered what Nico thought of me now.

However, there was no time to idle on romantic thoughts. My pregnant patient was lying in bed, waiting for me. And something might have been horribly wrong with her baby.

“Mrs. Corrigan, how about you tell me what’s wrong, while I do a pelvic exam on you, yes?” I asked her, trying to look composed, though inside, I was praying my hardest for her to be insane and imagining all this, so I could send her on her way home and forget I’d ever seen her.

“I can’t feel my baby...” she whispered after a loud intake of breath.

O-kay.

I heard movement behind me and turned to find Nico staring at me from the doorway. “Need any help?”

I nodded, feeling slightly uncomfortable at his presence after the awkward “conversation” we’d had. “I could use a speculum.”

“You mean...” he made a circle with his thumb and index and inserted the index finger from the other hand inside, simulating the ancient penetration motion.

“Yup.”

“Great,” he mumbled under his breath, and I did my best not to chuckle. “Bring me a heart monitor too,” I called after him.

Turning back to my patient, I touched her belly gently, but with enough force so that a healthy person would feel a slight push. “Does it hurt?”

She shook her head confused. “I don’t know. Listen, are there no women doctors?”

I wished there were myself. “I’m afraid not right now. If you think you can wait until tomorrow, Dr. Palmer will be attending patients and you could come see her. However, if it’s not an emergency case, you should consider going to the OB section. Tell me, what did you mean by what you said?”

She was silent for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t know. Something is definitely wrong. I don’t think I can wait. It’s just... It’s a bit embarrassing.”

“Believe me,” I reassured her with a chuckle, patting her knee, “I’ve seen dozens of embarrassing cases, ma’am. It’s a hospital.”

The patient smiled and I felt her relax. Just then, Nico reappeared with a fetal heart monitor and a speculum.

“You do the honors, pup,” I said with a wink, feeling confident again. Oh, hell, if women could go through such hardships with a smile on their faces, how could I pity myself? I would try talking with Nico after work again.

“Huh?” He darted a desperate look my way, a mix between *I can’t believe you’re doing this to me*, and a *you’re dead, bastard*, which made it impossible to stifle my laughter. I let out an odd sound between laughing and choking and quickly turned my back to the patient, pretending to be coughing. This was not the time to give my patient any more reasons to worry.

Yes. Nico and I were going to be okay. Maybe we wouldn’t kiss again, maybe we wouldn’t try dating. That was fine too. But as long as we could look in each other’s eyes and even chaff with each other from time to time, we were going to be just fine.

“Go on,” I said, after I’d calmed down from my supposed coughing fit.

“Could you open your legs, ma’am?” Nico asked, switching fully into professional mode.

The woman put her legs in the stirrups and exhaled heavily. She was just as red-faced as Nico—for he couldn’t help that from showing on his face. Nico moved his hand toward her genitals, then looked back at me with a spiteful glare. I gave him a pointed look in reply. Nico sighed and inserted the speculum with care.

“She’s not fully dilated,” he whispered after a few minutes.

I nodded, thoughtful.

Suddenly, Nico’s eyes shot open, a panicked look on his face. Man, had I scarred the boy irremediably?

“Umm... Colt, I think you should feel this.”

“Um-hum.” I crossed my arms and shot him a sarcastic look. No way was he tricking me.

“I’m not kidding. You should feel this,” he repeated, on a determined tone.

“What?” I approached with a frown.

“That’s what I was trying to say,” the woman said, looking at us with scared eyes. “Is he dead, doctor? Is my baby dead?”

She burst into tears.

“Calm down, we don’t know yet. We need to get that heart monitor.”

“But, I can feel him coming out of me, yet I’m in no pain.”

“Ma’am.” I gently patted her knee and gestured for Nico to comfort her. He obliged, moving to pat her awkwardly on the back. “Let’s see.”

I put on a pair of gloves and coated my right hand with a generous amount of sterile lube. As I moved my hand, seemingly being under perfect control of my emotions, on the inside I was dreading every second my hand got closer to her body. It wasn’t, surprisingly, because of my complete disgust of female genitalia, but because I feared having to tell that woman that inside her there was a little dead human being.

My fingers gently probed her entrance, but what I found was not a tiny hand or foot. It was something just as dreadful.

“Umbilical cord prolapse. We need to get the baby out *now*. Heart monitor.”

Nico moved faster than ever and handed me the object. I placed it on her belly and we all held a collective breath. The monitor beeped showing, to our utmost relief, signs of life, albeit very close to fading away. “Call the nurses’ station. We need to deliver this baby as soon as possible.” *I knew it, dammit.*

Nico took the intercom out and called for the nurses’ station asking for assistance. Meanwhile I reassured the patient. She cried in relief when I told her the baby was alive.

“What do you think? Since you’re not dilated enough, it’s risky to push the baby out. We’ll have to wait for the OB/GYN to come give you—”

“Doctor, bad news. OB isn’t sending anyone. At least not right now.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I had finally given in to my despair, and barely stopped myself from shrieking like a little girl. The patient needed me calm at the moment, but I had never been further away from calm than at that particular moment. The gravity of the situation finally hit me. The baby could be asphyxiating as we spoke.

Nico and I exchanged a long look. It felt like something finally clicked and we could understand each other as if we were sharing the same mind. He nodded at me and I nodded back.

Fuck hospital policies. “We have to deliver this baby ourselves,” I whispered.

“God help us,” Nico whispered, biting his lips.

Turning back to the patient, I took her hand again and squeezed it tightly. “Mrs. Corrigan—”

“Call me Sherry.”

I nodded, with a small smile. “Sherry, I’m gonna cut your belly.”

“Really?” Nico snorted.

“Hey, now, humor is essential in crisis situations. Let’s wheel her out to the operating room. Afterwards, bring me the anesthesiologist and one more nurse.”

“Don’t worry,” I said patting Sherry’s hand, “I won’t let him die.”

Her eyes, filled with tears looked at me with unadulterated faith. If I failed to save this baby... No, I couldn’t think like that. I had to save him no matter what.

Man, I was scared shitless.

“I take it back. You’re not that much of a bastard.”

I couldn’t wait to get under the shower after a day like that. It was the most terrifying experience I’d ever lived through. But also the most gratifying. Especially at the end of the whole ordeal, when I heard that baby cry for the first time in his life while Nico and I both shushed him up, looking down at him with tears in our eyes. I had an epiphany in that moment. It felt like seeing my whole life flash before me in a split second. I remembered the first patient I’d ever saved, Tyler Bronk, who would have died because of a blood clot if it hadn’t been for my early diagnosis. I remembered his smile, that he’d looked at me like I was some kind of hero, and how I realized that was exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life—help people.

Somewhere along the way, I had lost that pure, unadulterated love for human beings. But today, a small four-pound creature had managed to give it back to me.

“She’s giving him our names.”

Getting out of the shower cubicle with a towel around my hips and one resting on my shoulders, I almost tripped over my own feet when I saw Nico appear from behind a locker.

“Geez, pup, way to make an entrance. You almost gave me a heart-attack. What were you saying?”

My eyes rested on his lips, which he wetted slowly with his tongue. I hoped that was desire I saw in his eyes, because I was so ready to show him more if only he gave me a sign.

“I said...” He coughed and his eyes met mine. “I said she’s naming the baby after us.”

I broke out into a grin while staring at him shell-shocked. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. Nicholas Colt Corrigan.”

“That is just... amazing.”

Nico grinned and fidgeted like an excited puppy. “I exchanged numbers with her. She wants to invite us to the baby shower. She’s a single mom, so I offered to help her out with the baby too.”

This kid amazed me. I grinned and ruffled his hair. “Sounds great.”

“I still have to pay you back for forcing me to have a personal close-up experience with a *vagina*, though.”

“Actually that was *me* paying *you* back for intimidating me when I tried to talk to you.” I scrunched my nose in disgust. “Still, meeting a vagina up close and personal is a necessary experience in every boy’s life.”

“Says who?”

I snorted and moved past him to my locker. The moment I opened it, a familiar small object fell to the floor with a click. “Oh, right. I meant to give this back to you.”

“My kohl,” Nico shouted, ecstatic. I couldn’t help a smile form on my lips.

“Listen, Nico. You need to hear me about last week.”

He sighed deeply and balanced back on his heels, looking at me from underneath his lashes. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not. I said some horrible things about you. Even if I didn’t mean them, I still don’t deserve forgiveness. I just wanted to tell you that...” I walked up to him and put my hand on his shoulder, squeezing until he looked

up and his gaze met mine. “You’re doing a great job. You’re a great nurse and a beautiful person, both inside and out. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise, especially bastards like me.”

His eyes shone, his lips twitched as if he was about to say something but didn’t dare or didn’t know what.

“And...”

“And?” he whispered.

If I didn’t tell him now I never would. “And you’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

Nico snorted.

“I mean it.”

Finally, the corners of his mouth lifted upward. “Prove it,” he dared me, locking his gaze with mine.

“With pleasure,” I said grinning. And prove it I did, bringing him flush against me and mashing our lips together in a heated kiss that seemed to last forever.

CHAPTER SIX

Nico

The sky outside was cloudy, as usual, but I was oddly overcome by a strange heat spreading from my solar plexus all the way to my face and down to my toes. It felt like the first date or taking a walk with my first crush, yet this was nothing like it. It was simply a ride home. A ride home with someone who was sorta my boss and at the same time, someone I had sorta secretly dated for over a month. Stealing glances at each other, exchanging hurried kisses in the changing room, sending texts before going to bed. But never really talking about it, never really going further. I didn't know what he really felt; I didn't know what he thought of me. I didn't even know if he saw someone else outside work hours or if he thought what we had, if we really had something, was exclusive. The way I thought. I dreaded asking him. At the same time, I burned with desire to know.

Colt put his hand over mine the moment we were inside his car. That strange heat again, spreading through my body, pouring down my spine. When I looked into his eyes. When I thought of his lips.

“What are you thinking about?”

I flinched, feeling guilty. His voice sounded hoarse. It always sounded hoarse because of all the smoking, which he'd meant to quit but the most he managed was two weeks. But right at that moment, my dick hardened at the sound of it, more quickly than usual. I wanted him so much. I was tired of stealing kisses during breaks. I wanted something real, something palpable. Did he know just how much my body ached for his touch?

“I'm thinking you should stop smoking.” Liar. I was such a liar. And I blushed again.

Colt huffed, amused. “I really should.”

I swallowed loudly as silence fell again. Hell, what did people say in this kind of circumstance? “Could you stop the heat?” That had sounded damn perverted.

Colt's eyebrows rose. "It's the middle of summer. I haven't turned on the heat." He chuckled and lowered both our windows. "Better?"

I nodded with my head down.

"Where's your place again?"

"Here," I said, pointing to my apartment complex. "You can park in front of that shop."

He parked in an empty spot near the clothes boutique I had pointed to, and stopped the engine. "Well, see you on Monday, then. Take care, pup."

"Would you..." *Don't say it, idiot. He'll laugh at you.* "Would you like to go inside?" Shit. My big mouth again.

Colt gave me a long, unreadable look. "I thought you'd never ask," he eventually said, a sly grin spreading on his face. Seriously? I let out a long breath I hadn't been aware of holding and closed the passenger door. He extracted himself from the car, locked it with the remote and looked at me expectantly.

"This way," I said, smiling. I tried to avoid his gaze because I was feeling embarrassed and more than a little dizzy.

"What floor?"

Unaware, I had walked the way to my building on autopilot, opened the front door and entered the elevator, followed closely by Colt.

I shook my head. "Eight. Sorry, I guess I'm feeling a bit tired," I lied.

"No worries. Today was stressful."

"Yeah."

We fell silent as the elevator climbed. The door finally dinged open and we walked out. My apartment door was right in front of us. I took out my key and unlocked it. My hand was slightly shaking.

"Well, this is it," I said with a wide hand gesture and a nervous laugh.

"Pretty."

“Pretty? You call a guy’s house pretty?” I would have sounded angry if he hadn’t been so near, his breath tickling my ear and the nape of my neck, his body heat so close it was almost palpable. Instead, I sounded like I was on the brink of an orgasm. How embarrassing.

“But it is. You even have flowers,” he whispered in my ear, the bastard probably very aware of my reaction to him.

“What’s wrong with flowers?” I managed to mumble.

“Nothing,” he said, shrugging and suddenly pushed himself away from me and walked into the living room. He splayed himself on the sofa, and because of his large frame there was barely any empty space left. “They’re pretty.”

Ah, he pissed me off. He turned me on.

“Come here,” he said, patting the small place beside him. I walked slowly, his watchful gaze intimidating me.

“Relax, pup,” he whispered after I sat down next to him with a stiff posture.

His hand fell on my shoulder, massaging gently. Out of their own accord, my eyelids closed. I let out a soft moan and melted under his touch. Damn, but he knew how to touch.

Suddenly, hot air fanned over my face. Then I felt his lips, barely a soft, feathery touch on my jaw. Then another on my cheek, and another, getting closer and closer to my mouth. I opened my eyes and gazed into his. He was waiting. With a sigh, I parted my lips and allowed my eyes to close again. His lips descended on mine, his tongue invading my mouth. Hot. Wet. Willing. I let him drag me into his lap, let my hips gyrate against his and my hands explore his strong chest. Shy touches, then more persistent ones. Wanting to feel his skin. Craving it beneath my fingertips.

I heard him moan. Or was that me?

“Oh, kid. You’re driving me crazy.” Me? I couldn’t even protest against the irritating endearment, afraid his touches would cease.

He cupped my head in a tight grip and looked me in the eyes. There was so much desire in his gaze, so much passion that it took my breath away.

“I want you, Nico. All of you.”

“You... do?”

“This is your last chance to say no before I devour you whole.” His intense gaze made me trust he was serious.

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I want you too, Colt.”

“Good. Get naked.”

I complied as fast as I could, hands shaking, breath hitching. As soon as I got rid of my boxers, being left naked in all my “glory”, Colt grabbed me by the nape of my neck and brought me close again, joining our mouths in a wet kiss.

“Jesus, kid, looks like not all of you is small.” He looked down at my erect penis, which jolted from excitement, and licked his lips. “Wanna taste that so bad.”

“Really?”

He grinned at my awed expression, but who could have blamed me? Colt Anderson wanted to suck me. I had waited for this for what seemed like an eternity. Didn't even think we'd go farther than a few kisses, judging by how slow things seemed to move with us. This was definitely my lucky day and I didn't know what I did for everything to have worked out so perfectly. Maybe that meant we really were dating. Maybe it hadn't all just been in my head.

“Lay down.” He got up from the couch and I quickly took his place, afraid, he'd change his mind before letting me feel his hot mouth against my aching dick.

I shouldn't have worried, though. Colt put each of his legs on either side of me, barely fitting on the narrow couch, but he didn't let that bother him. He lowered his mouth to my skin, teasing me with small licks on my belly and thighs. I opened up my legs for him, moaning approvingly as his lips got increasingly closer to my member.

“You smell so good,” he purred, burying his nose in my pubic hair and inhaling deeply. I contracted my muscles and made my cock twitch to attract his attention. It hit Colt’s cheek and he let out a long groan that mingled with my own. God, his teasing felt so good, yet so painful at the same time. Finally, sensing my impatience, he grabbed the base of my cock and gave it a long swipe with his tongue from base to head, finishing with a kiss on the crown, which prompted me to put a hand on his head, forcing him down on it.

“Patience, kitten. Wanna make this last.”

“Holy shit, you’re driving me insane,” I finally cried, frustrated.

“Patience.”

He gave my cock a few slow strokes and licked the head again. Slowly. Excruciatingly slowly.

“You make me want to strangle you.”

He chuckled with the crown of my dick in his mouth, sending painfully good vibrations all the way to my belly. I let out a pitiful whine.

“Actually choking you would be the best option in these circumstances.”

He let go of my cock with a loud pop and lowered his head to my balls, taking his time to lick them thoroughly.

“Let out those noises again and I might just let you choke me, baby. You’ve got me so turned on.”

“Colt.”

“That’s it, call my name.”

Suddenly he swallowed me whole in one move. I cried and trembled, arching my back as if possessed. I could feel his throat muscles around my dick, his spit sliding down my balls. I looked down to find him watching me with an intense gaze.

“Please,” I whispered. I wanted him to make me come. But I wanted this to last.

I wanted him to kiss me. But I couldn't bear separating his mouth from my dick. The sensations were so good I felt on the brink of fainting.

“Colt, please!”

He took my cock out of his mouth and looked up at me, after giving it a couple of affectionate licks on the head.

“How far do you want this to go, Nico?” he asked with a sudden serious expression.

“What do you mean?”

He answered with a smile. “I mean... have you even gone all the way? Do you want to?”

“Anal sex?” I asked, the meaning of his question finally registering. For a panicky moment, I had thought he'd meant us.

Colt nodded. I nodded back. “It's okay. I did it one time, in high school. Not really a stunning experience, but if it's with you I think I can manage,” I whispered, blushing.

He gazed at me for a long moment. “I want us to take it slow.”

I nodded slowly.

“So it's okay if we don't do it today.”

“Okay,” I whispered and couldn't help feeling relieved.

Colt smiled and went back to sucking me, and I quickly forgot anything and everything we'd spoken about.

I soon exploded in his mouth, my vision blurring and millions of stars dancing behind my eyelids.

Colt climbed up until we were face to face. With a playful grin, he trailed kisses and bites all over my neck and chest. It took a couple of seconds before I could go back to breathing normally and I realized he hadn't come yet. I slapped away his hand from his gorgeous cock and took over jacking him while looking in his eyes. It took Colt only a few seconds to orgasm with a loud cry. He looked so beautiful in that moment that I felt like I wouldn't be

able to live on without seeing this face again every single day of my life. The thought scared me. I didn't want to ponder on what it meant.

Colt got up and searched through his jeans pocket, retrieving a few tissues he then used to wipe my hand. We sat silently, looking at each other, and then we both burst out laughing.

Colt ruffled my hair and hugged me. I let my head fall on his broad chest with a yawn.

"We have twenty-four hours until the next shift. You think you can handle a repeat?" he whispered as he stroked my hair. I could feel the smile in his voice.

Yes, definitely dating.

"Only if we take this to the bed," I replied with a smile of my own, meeting his gaze and sealing the deal with a long passionate kiss.

THE END

Author Bio

Shayla made her debut in the writing world during elementary school with a heart-breaking story about how her grandma's chicks died from an unknown disease. It was published in the school newspaper, spurring a significant amount of pitiful looks directed her way. Being a stubborn Aquarius, she kept on striving, publishing cheesy love poetry, an endeavor that thankfully proved to be far more successful. Her writing life changed dramatically when she read her first yaoi manga and discovered her real calling. Imagining guys together has become her favorite pastime. Aside from writing, daydreaming about men and devouring any M/M book she can get her hands on and, she also loves manga, kpop, jrock, classical music, crafts and art. An earnest romantic, she's always been convinced there's a soulmate out there, searching for her. It appears he's been lost. Maybe word hasn't gotten to him that cars are faster than white horses. In case you've seen a prince on a white horse (though a sports car would be preferable), Shayla would very much appreciate if you let her know.

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