

A circular frame containing two men. On the left, a shirtless man with short, styled hair looks intensely at the camera. On the right, a man in a light blue button-down shirt smiles broadly. The background within the frame is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor scene.

**Cherie Noel**

*Love Has No Boundaries*

**Quality  
Control**

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## QUALITY CONTROL

**By Cherie Noel**

### 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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# QUALITY CONTROL

By Cherie Noel

## Photo Description

Two men stand close together at a park, laughing toward the camera. The man in front holds a baby in a soft, blue denim dress. The man holding the baby has dark brown hair and the one standing behind him has sandy brown hair.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*See the man on the left, holding that baby? Yes, that's me. I worked in a condom company as a quality product supervisor. You would think that it would get me lots of dates, right? WRONG. It seems that once people know where I work, all they want is free condom samples. Damn it.*

*But then I met this guy (you decide HOW) and he has this most amazing baby—I could fall for him, I swear. But then he told me HOW he ended up with the baby. Broken condom. And it's the condom products from the company where I work. In which I am responsible to supervise the quality.*

*\*head desk\**

*How can I possibly have my HEA with him?*

*PS: I don't want the other guy to be straight—he can be gay or bisexual or experimenting during the night in which the baby is created. And please, don't let the female character (a.k.a. baby mama) be a bitch or irresponsible or anything bad. In fact, I would love it if the baby mama is still around and the two of them make an agreement to raise the baby together (they are NOT married or live together). I want the female character to be portrayed well, in positive way. No bitching the female character, please*

*Sincerely,*

*Ami*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** men with children, nursing profession, unplanned pregnancy, HFN

**Word count:** 24,698

*Dedication*

Because love truly has no boundaries, and because Ami asked, I got to meet the lovely boys of Quality Control. Thanks also go to all those at the Goodreads M/M Romance group who work so tirelessly to make the group run and be able to sponsor fabulous events like this. Oodles of gratitude go to the real life Sasha, who inspired my main character's fictional best friend. And as always, special thanks go to my dear Balthazar for giving me the push I needed right when I needed it. Because of him I will always yearn and strive to become the best writer I can.



# QUALITY CONTROL

By Cherie Noel

## PROLOGUE

Paulie stared blearily at the machine in front of him. What were the calibrations supposed to be set at again? The numbers blinking at him from the monitor looked completely foreign to him, despite having overseen others doing this job for nearly two years. He'd come straight in as management. Jeff, his mentor and surrogate father, had insisted he take the position once the plant was up and running. He heartily wished for the millionth time that at least two of his quality control staff would come back from sick leave. He was no damn good at their jobs. Shivers raced up his spine, followed by a sneezing fit that had him falling half off the stool he sat on. He banged his elbow hard against the console, scraping against one of the multiple toggle switches standing like tiny little black-clad sentinels on the far left side of the monstrous machine. The techs who usually worked in here called it "Pinky", claiming they were the brains of the operation. The two guys who worked on Paulie's shift were both skinny little guys, so it was probably easy for them to move around in here without banging into "Pinky" and sending shafts of white hot fire lancing up through the bones of their arms. Paulie clenched his elbow, moaning and mumbling.

"Aarrgh. Shoulda stayed home. Jesus Christopher Christ! No, Mary on a moped with baby Jesus in a basket on the back!"

He sat, watching through the big Plexiglas window in the wall directly in front of him, as the automated machines inflated condom after condom with air to check for weak spots or with water to test for leaks. The machines whirled through endless motions. The condoms moved like a dizzying, multicolored, all-condom musical. Paulie giggled to himself for a second until his vision wavered. He shook his head to clear it, but that only made him feel dizzier. His mouth pinched at the corners as a stronger wave of nausea rolled through his midsection and pushed a sourly acidic taste up the back of his throat. He'd been the first one hit with this rotten flu bug, right as he was

getting over bronchitis, so he ought to have gotten better before the others came down with the malady. He refused to stay home today, especially after he got the call that Tim and Carl had both called in sick. Sweat popped up on his brow, his face flushed, and he lurched to the side to empty his stomach into the half-full wastebasket next to him. Oh, gross. His stomach heaved again at the sight of readily-identifiable chunks of multigrain bread smeared with strawberry jam splattered across the wadded up office memos and half of yesterday's evening newspaper. The hot, bitterly pervasive scent of bile rose up to envelop him, triggering a fresh bout of heaving stomach muscles, but there was nothing left to come up other than a thin dribble of saliva from his mouth. A small, defeated whimper escaped his ravaged throat. He wanted to lie down and wrap up in the cool cotton sheets of his own bed so badly his eyes stung, but he couldn't go home. He'd promised Jeff they'd make the quota needed for this first shipment to the new client, a small family owned chain of drug stores located in and around Syracuse.

Paulie's vision wavered for a moment, and was something beeping? He turned his head back and forth, to listen to both sides of the room with his good ear. God, if he didn't owe Jeff everything for taking him in when his papa had tossed him out for being gay, he'd have his well-padded Sicilian ass firmly planted in his big brass bed. Jeff had made him stay in high school, put him through college, and even offered him this job when Paulie's old quality control job got downsized right out of existence. Another wave of nausea washed over him. Paulie moaned again before reaching over and tying up the sourly stinking bag in the waste can.

“Two more hours—that's all I have to last for. I can hang on for two more hours until the second shift gets here. Then they can finish up getting everything boxed and ready for the truck in the morning.”

Pausing, he swallowed thickly. Oh, crap, he was talking to himself like crazy old lady Guthries who lived down the block from him on Ashworth Place. Another wash of heat rolled over him. Raising bloodshot eyes to the glass separating him from the very expensive machines busily testing condom after condom for microscopic holes, he pushed a hank of dull, nearly black hair off his forehead. His mama would cry if she saw him looking like this.

First, she'd whack him with the wooden ladle she cooked with and shriek for him to get his idiot ass in the bed, and then she'd cry. Paulie sighed. Over six years later, he still missed his mama fussing over him.

“Maybe one day Papa will forgive me. Then I could visit Mama and Teresa again, at least. The boys are never gonna speak to me, but maybe Mama and Teresa...”

His words trailed off as another wash of heat flooded over him.

“Ah, I don't care if I sound as crazy as Mrs. Guthries. At least I listen to myself. Jeff's the only one who does, besides me, and he's way too busy these days to have time for the whiny crap coming out of my mouth lately.”

Four quick sneezes in a row nearly knocked Paulie off the stool again. He braced one hand against the console, reaching over to the left to find the jumbo cup of tea he'd made half an hour ago in hopes it would help him make it through the rest of his shift. His team was supposed to test this entire batch of condoms and get them boxed up, but there was no way he could do all that by himself. Besides, as sick as he was, he really shouldn't touch the product at all, except from right where he was, safely sealed in the control booth. The machines wouldn't sneeze all over the product. The tea, cold and bitter, made his stomach heave a few more times. His mama swore by hot tea for helping to get over minor ailments. Even if the crap out of the box didn't taste quite as good as what she brewed up in her fancy rose-covered china teapot, he still felt kind of obligated to drink at least one mugful a day when he was sick.

“Ugh.”

Casting a quick glance at the Christmas tree like blinking lights of the console, Paulie guessed it wouldn't hurt anything if he scooped over to the break room for two minutes to make a fresh cup. A little weaker, a touch hotter, and the stuff would morph from grosser than licking a slug's balls, to as warmly comforting as his mama's kitchen in the winter.

Paulie sniffed. Okay, so maybe slugs didn't have balls. But if they did, licking them would be pretty much the grossest thing he could think of. His stomach gave a warning little lurch, so Paulie dropped that line of thought. He pushed the same hank of overly long dark brown hair out of his face, and

wobbled to his feet. Wrinkling his classic Roman nose and pressing his plump, dusky-pink lips together, he gingerly picked up the waste can to dump and rinse it while he was there.

As he turned to push open the door with his ass, he dimly thought that the new red lights flashing among the blue, green, orange, and yellow ones made the console look even more like his mama's Christmas tree. He sneezed, stumbled backwards, and bumped into a solid form. Craning his neck around, he found himself looking a few inches up into the blue-gray eyes of Ryan Saunders. Ryan was making a face; his eyes, which always reminded Paulie of a storm at sea, were wide and watering slightly. Ryan's nostrils flared as he swallowed repeatedly and a small, tight smile flickered on and off his firm-flipped mouth. With one last convulsive movement of his throat muscles, he spoke.

"Geez, Paulie, you look like shit. Why don't you—oh sweet fuck, how long have the warning lights been on?"

Paulie peered back through the window in the quality control room door. Ryan was pointing at the pretty Christmas lights. Flinging an arm up to cover his nose as he started to sneeze again, Paulie managed to soak the entire front of his last almost-clean shirt with cold tea. The short-sleeved button-down had been one of his favorite work shirts, but that was all over now. The light green material sucked in the dark brown color of the tea like a cactus sucks in water. The sea foam shade would never look the same again. Paulie sniffed, gagging a bit as a big glob of snot ran down the back of his itching throat. Ryan jumped back at the noise, his gorgeous eyes taking on more of a steel gray color and widening as he took in the object in Paulie's other hand. Paulie blinked at him. What had he asked? Oh, he wanted to know about the lights.

"The blue and green ones were there all along. Um, but the pretty red ones just started."

Paulie swayed on his feet. Ryan caught hold of his upper arm, a frown flitting across his face as he touched Paulie.

"For Christ's sake Paulie—here, lean against the wall. I gotta stop the machines."

Ryan hustled into the control booth, swearing at the machinery as it whined and groaned to a halt.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, turn off, turn off, turn off!”

Moments later, he was back, reddish brown brows pinched together tightly, and wide, sensuous mouth in a pinched line as he spoke into the shiny black cordless handset pressed to his ear. Huh. How about that? Paulie hadn’t even noticed him calling anyone.

“Yes sir, that’s right. I don’t think he can drive himself home. No. That would be great, Mr. Murchison. Yes, thank you. No, Paulie said it just started. Yes. I’ll reset the machines and retest everything that went through in the last five minutes. Yes sir, I think we can still make the order for the new client up in time. I’m going to take his car keys and get him situated in the break room. All right, I’ll make sure he knows. Yes, he’ll be there waiting for you. Okay. Good-bye, Mr. Murchison.”

\*\*\*\*

*Two months later*

Eli blinked at his bestie Sasha’s beautiful heart shaped face in astonishment. She didn’t appear to have hit her head. Eying her head carefully, he couldn’t detect any discernible damage. No bruises showed on her forehead, and no goose-eggs pushed her perfectly arranged red curls awry.

“Have you lost your fucking mind, Sasha?”

Sasha blinked back at him, her dark blue eyes gazing steadily up at him. Long black lashes fanned against her cheeks as she blinked at him. Tilting her head to one side, she pursed her pouty looking lips tightly together and gazed up toward the left for a moment. The sun beat down on them as they stood near the center of the cafeteria courtyard. The warm rays combined with her body heat enhanced the faint touches of jasmine scented oil Sasha was obsessed with wearing. The other students bold enough to brave the unusually hot day by eating outside were all lounging around the edges of the space in the shade provided by strategically placed overhangs and a few patio tables with big navy blue and white striped table umbrellas. He and Sasha leaned against a big rectangular slab of white concrete. The kids at the school all

laughingly referred to the thing as make-out rock, because you couldn't even sit too close to a member of the opposite sex there without Mr. Raychik, the kitchen and cafeteria workers' supervisor, practically having a coronary.

Sasha had one hip leaned against the structure, the hand on that side idly picking at the remaining fruit from her lunch, and the other hand tucked into the pocket of her boot-cut jeans. Pushing aside a wedge of orange in favor of the large green grapes that were left, she popped one in her mouth, chewing slowly as she seemed to give serious consideration to Eli's question about her mental state.

"Hmm, no I don't think I have, Eli. You know I always have somebody trying to get me to do it. And I want to. Like I mean, I really want to, you know? But..."

Sasha broke off, a tide of red washing through her cheeks before she tipped her head down, hiding the midnight blue of her incredible eyes. Eli regarded her downturned head thoughtfully. Though he'd never been with a girl, he liked them well enough. He just liked boys better as far as fooling around went. There was something to what she was saying though. He'd never gone all the way with someone for nearly the same reason. He wanted it to be somebody he loved. Christ, he was actually gonna do this, wasn't he? Snorting, he reached under her chin and lifted her face up.

"Okay, Earthgirl, but you better not turn green and scary after dark, or actually be taken over by an evil alien from some crystal planet, 'cause we're gonna have to wait 'til my parents go to that work thing of Dad's this weekend. The evil alien will totally eat your brains before I can save you if that's what's going on. So... okay. I get it. And, seriously, I'm kinda glad you thought of this. I haven't gone all the way with anybody else yet either. I bet I haven't had full-on sex for all the same reasons as you, or at least for most of them. So, um... just let's have no weirdness after, okay? We're not gonna pretend we're boyfriend and girlfriend, okay? That would just be too weird for this Spaceman."

Sasha, laughing as she made a far too realistic gagging noise, smacked the back of her hand into his stomach.

“Hah. You should be so lucky, dork-boy.”

Eli grinned crookedly down at her as a gust of wind sent his blondish-brown hair blowing into his face. He ran the long fingers on one hand down over the creamy pale skin of her nose.

“You’re right, Sasha. If I could find a guy as great as you I’d marry him tomorrow. Are you sure you won’t do the gender reassignment surgery?”

He’d meant it as a joke, to keep them from getting too spooked by the huge plans they’d just agreed on, but Sasha stepped back, glowering hotly enough to cow even the bright red of her hair.

“That’s horrible, Eli. I can’t believe you’d mock trans people that way. I’m ashamed of you. Just forget it. I don’t—”

Eli clapped a hand over her mouth as she started to get loud, praying she wouldn’t bite him. Well, that she wouldn’t bite him *again*. Lord knew she’d bitten him more than once over the years. Wench was waaaaay too free with her teeth.

“Oh crap, you’re right. I’m sorry. That was a shitty thing to say. I know you’re a girl and you like your parts just like they are, and you prefer to match them up with guy parts. I’m a dick. I’m sorry. I won’t—I’m sorry, Sasha. I’d never say something like that in front of Michele.”

Sasha’s little sister, Michele, was five. She was also, according to Sasha, accidentally born into the wrong body, and Sasha was lobbying hard to have her parents take Sasha to see a psychiatrist so they could start the process of helping her transition before puberty gave her the bulky shoulders and low voice her accidentally-male body would force on her without medical intervention. She was winning too, as she’d already convinced her dad of the merits of at least getting a qualified doctor’s assessment of the situation. Eli ducked his head to look her straight in the eye.

“Hey. At least they gave her a name that could go either way, so she won’t have to pick a new name.”

Sasha’s frown eased, though her bottom lip still stuck out. Eli poked it with the tip of his finger. Batting his finger away, Sasha gave a reluctant sounding chuckle.

“You really are a total dick. Why am I friends with you again?”

Eli shrugged. “I’m the only one who sees past that movie starlet face of yours to recognize the twisted sister living within.”

Sasha choked, sputtered, and then burst into her trademark dying-donkey bray. She claimed the hideous noise was a laugh. Eli flashed a quick glance around the courtyard of the high school. A few faces turned toward them, but no one stared overly long. Thank God he and Sasha were both seniors. They were both going to college in the fall, though Sasha would be going to Syracuse University while he’d be headed for Onondaga Community College. His mom couldn’t afford the big bucks to send him to S.U. like Sasha’s folks could. Sasha’s folks had wanted her to go away to a school like Yale or the University of Michigan. Fortunately, she, like Eli, had turned eighteen toward the end of this school year, and her parents felt the change to legal adult status meant she should have a bigger hand in deciding her own future, at least as far as where she went to college.

Sasha smacked her hand into the dark blue fabric covering the taut muscles of his gut again. “Oi. Spaceman. What are you wool-gathering about?”

Eli laughed, flicking his finger gently against her nose. “Yeah, Tenth Doctor and Donna all the way, huh?”

The bell ending their lunch period rang, and Eli leaned down to press a quick kiss to Sasha’s cheek. “Make sure you tell your folks you’re sleeping over at Taylor’s on Saturday.”

Sasha rolled her eyes at him. “Your sister is going to rat us out one day.”

Eli lifted one broad shoulder negligently, the well-worn cotton of his favorite school shirt creasing with the tension. Buffing his neatly trimmed fingernails against his dark blue polo—chosen to match his girl Sasha’s eyes, of course—he smirked down at her. “Nah. I have waaaaaaay too much dirt on her.”

Sasha laughed as she turned to walk toward her fifth period chemistry class. Winking over her shoulder, she blew him a kiss while crossing her eyes. Eli’s chest filled with warmth. He had the best life in the whole world. Two more weeks and high school would be over. Three months after that he’d be



starting college, along with his twin sister Taylor. And even though he couldn't afford the fancy school his best friend was going to, he wouldn't lose her friendship to distance and gradually diverging lives.

Hal Matheson bumped his shoulder as he stood staring after Sasha. "Hey man, I know your girl is smoking hot and all, but you better get your ass to class or Principal Jenkins really will give you detention every day until graduation. You know he has a total hard-on for you ever since the pot-belly pig incident last year."

Hal nodded down the hallway to where the dark haired, kinda-hot-for-an-old-guy principal stood glowering at them both. The second bell rang, and Eli spun around, loping off toward his calculus class. God help him get through the rest of the school year without getting caught in the principal's crosshairs. Geez, he really hadn't meant for the pig thing to get so out of hand. It was supposed to have been funny. Eli huffed out a breath, and reached up to push his hair out of his eyes. He bolted through the door to his class and slid his ass onto the unyielding plastic seat of his desk just as the final bell rang. Whew. Two more weeks until his life started. Holy fuck, he could barely wait.

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Four Years Later*

Paulie stretched his back, gratified to hear the pop of the small bones at the base of his spine realigning. God, that felt so good. It just about killed him, working the doubles every Saturday and Sunday, but doing so let him work full time and go to school full time without having to juggle his schedule around too often. He went to school Monday thru Friday and worked all day Saturday and Sunday. It hadn't left much time for a social life, but for the first couple of years after he single-handedly ruined Jeff Murchison's condom company, he'd been too depressed to do much of anything. And since then he'd been too busy to worry about it. He was never going to be able to take back what he'd done to Jeff or all the other people who'd been affected by that one stupid decision—when he'd chosen to try running the quality control section of Jeff's small company all alone on a day when he was sick as a dog. No, he couldn't take it back, but he could go into a career field where he could help people. It would never make up for all the harm he'd caused, but maybe it would let him get back to a place where he could look in the mirror without flinching.

Paulie bit down on his bottom lip. He allowed his mind to continue to wander as he got his time card from its slot in the metal rack next to the time clock and waited for the seconds to count down until the clock read the correct time. Shaking his head, he slid the proper day and time space into place under the stamping device. He laughed, low and tired but still, it was a laugh, right? No one punched-out on old fashioned time cards anymore, not at any of the other places the temping agency sent him, and not at the first long term care facility he'd worked at while training for his certification. It was good that some of the things around here, like the so-last-century time clock, could inject a little humor into his days. He needed reasons to laugh after another grueling thirty-two-hour workweek crammed into two sixteen-hour days.

As back-breaking and soul-consuming as working in the nursing home could be, he got a lot of satisfaction out of the little moments. When he got someone to the toilet before they wet themselves, or got to mark off in his aide binder that someone got their shower on time, ate well, walked down the hall

with assistance, or finished a crossword puzzle. Those things would have seemed like nothing four years ago, but now he knew better. The little victories were the sweetest.

He wouldn't be here, wouldn't be anywhere if it weren't for Jeff. After Paulie set off the great baby boom of the greater Syracuse area—and he shuddered to think of what could have happened if Jeff had gotten the contract to supply condoms to vending machines in the local bars, he'd been horrifically depressed. God—it still pained him to contemplate all the things that could have gone wrong. Paulie could think of at least four gay bars where those things sold out so fast the resupply guy had to stop by four to six times a week. He didn't know about the straight bars, because he didn't frequent those, but he figured they likely had the same rates of condom usage. He could have killed people if they'd been drunk and dropping quarters in vending machines for Murchison Rubbers. At least the people who'd gotten the faulty condoms had most likely been sober—at least when they bought what they thought would protect them. Thankfully, thus far all the complaints had been in regards to unplanned pregnancies, and a few curable types of sexually transmitted diseases. There hadn't been any new cases of HIV linked back to the error, but Paulie still woke up some mornings afraid to turn on the television or pick up the paper.

Two good things—no, three, had come out of the whole fucked up chain of events. One, he'd learned that Jeff and Ryan were the best friends a man could ever ask for. Two, his mother had put her foot down and told his papa that he could either be the dad of a gay man or he could be the divorced dad of a gay man, because she was done mourning a son who lived right across town from her. Finally—and Paulie personally liked number three the best of them all, even though one and two were pretty damn stellar—Paulie found a career that he absolutely loved. He was just a few weeks away from graduating with his two-year degree. Once he passed the national testing, or nursing board exams, he'd actually be a registered nurse. His mom and sister were bursting with pride. His papa said it was a good job for a gay boy to have, because that way if he got the “gay disease” he'd know which ones were the good doctors for that sort of thing. Paulie was pretty sure that comment was gonna earn Papa a solid month or more sleeping in the guest room while Mama served him cold

food and discussed potential divorce lawyers with Teresa right in front of the old man.

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Eli stared into the beautiful midnight-blue eyes that were a few shades darker than his precious Adrianna's. Gritting his teeth together, he counted to twenty in his head. Ten just wasn't going to cut it. When he reached seventeen without any discernible lessening of the acid wash his brain was currently putting his stomach through, he bent down, picked Adrianna up, settled her on his hip and then pressed one of her ears against his chest while he covered the other with his hand.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? Again? No, I am not quitting my job and going to school. Adrianna's insurance is through my job. I pay for her daycare. You don't even have a job yet!”

Pausing to bite the inside of his cheek, Eli glanced around the clean, bright lobby of the mid-sized Unitarian Church they'd opted to attend together. This was not the place to have this discussion. Mrs. Peters was pretending to adjust the fit of her wide-brimmed sunhat while avidly watching them with a concerned look on her face. The church's minister, a short, perky middle-aged woman with shorter hair than his, was due to walk out of the meeting room at any minute. And while Eli liked the woman, he didn't know her well enough yet to feel comfortable discussing personal things in front of her. Worst of all, he couldn't send Adrianna to play with her pet, a fat, lazily tolerant old cat named Snickers, while a *Dora the Explorer* tape handily masked the sounds of him talking Sasha out of her latest leap-before-you-look plan. “Talking”, as in arguing in furious whispers, about why she needed to think things through more. The whispers only lasted until Sasha got good and pissed, and told him loudly to stop acting like an old man.

He really hated when she gave him the “old man” speech, one hand planted on her hip, the other waving an accusatory finger in his direction. She always talked about how he needed to take time for himself and that he shouldn't carry the larger share of the bills... dear God, it went on and on. But somehow, no matter how much they argued about him working two jobs, or her chronic, serial leap-first syndrome, they never let things devolve into bitter

recriminations. They had a great set of role models in the Tenth Doctor and Donna, so figuring out the whole co-parenting with a partner who was a best friend rather than a—well, a romantic partner came pretty easily.

Hah.

If easy meant crying a lot—Sasha, and Adrianna covered this end of things. Eli concentrated on holding down a pretty good job where he worked full time in a machine tooling shop, and another not so great part-time gig in a crappy warehouse. At the warehouse, he was basically a brute-force laborer, pulling heavy flats of various candies and sweets out to be assembled for differing vendors and then packed onto the proper delivery trucks. On weekdays, he worked from six in the morning until three in the afternoon at the machine shop, then picked Adrianna up from daycare, and kept her until six or seven when Sasha got home to their shared duplex from whatever classes and clinical rotations her day had held. Thanks to her parents co-signing on a loan, they'd been able to purchase an awesome side-by-side duplex and make minor modifications that enabled them to easily split time with Adrianna.

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“Oh my God, you aren't even listening to me.” She stomped her sensible white nursing student shoe—did they have to make the things so damned ugly that even Sasha couldn't quite pull them off?

Eli squinted at her, wondering why she was still harping on this same tired subject. He'd thought the matter settled earlier at the church. Clearly he was mistaken. Sasha huffed out a body shaking breath.

“Take that stupid frown off your face, Spaceman, and listen for two seconds before you start in about how you need to keep working yourself to death. Eli, I got the job. The one I wanted up at the VA hospital. The pay isn't as high as some of the other hospitals around here, but the benefits are unbelievably good and they do the team nursing thing I liked so much in my clinicals. You can quit the crappy warehouse job. Go part or three-quarter time at the machine shop so you still have health care, but damn it, go to school.

Get your degree. Have two minutes a day that aren't about Adrianna and me. For Christ's sake, fucking go out to a bar. Have a drink. Get laid."

When her eyes filled with crystalline tears, shimmering and tugging at every single raw place inside him, he knew she'd won. Damn her and her ugly white leather nursing student shoes anyway.

"What... wait. Did you just say you got a job? How? You haven't even graduated yet."

Sasha smirked up at him, her pretty mouth twisted into a ridiculously smug cupid's bow that every single one of the glaringly hetero dudes he worked with would give their left nut to get near. Not that any of them were good enough for his best friend, so he'd warned them all off. She laughed, reaching up to pull the neon blue Scunci brand hair band she wore in her hair to fuck with the latest clinical instructor's neurotic sense of propriety.

Buffing her nails on the front of her garishly-white scrub top, Sasha quirked a gingersnap reddish-brown eyebrow at him. "Yep."

She made sure to pop the *p* at the end of the word as annoyingly as possible, grinning wider when he gritted his teeth.

"Sasha, give over. How is that even possible?"

Whirling around, she flopped down on the cool—well, Eli thought it was cool even though the first time Sasha saw the blue leather sofa he'd found second hand at the Goodwill she'd smirked, pointed at him and trilled out the words, "Super-Gay". Wrinkling her nose at him, she stretched her legs out in front of her, curled one hand behind her neck and used the other to pat the sofa cushion next to her.

"Nurses are in really high demand, Spaceman. It's one of the reasons I liked the career so much. Good job security. So, I get that plus the bonus of most places being willing to hire us right out of school, and let us work as graduate nurses while we're waiting to take the Nursing Board's licensing test. You know, the NCLEX I keep whining about studying for? Close your mouth. Yes, I got a job."

Eli thought about that. Whoa. No wonder she'd insisted on going into nursing. She got her degree in two years, and from what she'd been telling him

for the last six months, she could keep going to school part-time while she worked, and in about six years be the nursing equivalent of a General Practitioner with an M.D. license but without all the insane student loans. All the bits of information she'd been feeding him over the last few weeks lined up in his head, finally clicking into place.

“Oh my God, Sasha... we're finally out of the woods, aren't we?”

Sasha's eyes welled up again. “Yeah, Spaceman, we really are.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

Paulie eyed the suddenly blank screen in front of him, hands sweating as he tried to believe that the test had cut off so quickly because he'd passed with the least possible amount of questions asked. The sudden shut off could also mean that he'd failed miserably. Oh, God, what if he'd failed? What if he was the most miserable failure ever in the history of the NCLEX? His normally dark olive skin paled to a shade far too close to white. He bit the inside of his cheek and smacked his thigh. There was no way he was going to pass out in the middle of the scrupulously tidy NCLEX testing site. Not only was the place way out in a suburban shopping complex that he'd never be able to get back to on a bus if he got carted away in an ambulance, but he'd be forever known as the gay guy who fainted at the nursing licensure exam. His father would never shut the fuck up about it, and he really didn't want to be the cause of Mama and Papa finally getting that divorce Mama threatened Papa with practically every other week at this point.

“If you're done, it's all right to get up and leave.”

His startled grunt didn't disturb everyone in the testing room. The girl at the far end of the room, wearing jeans and a hot pink Nerds shirt didn't even flinch. Then again, Paulie knew from being in a clinical rotation with her that she was profoundly deaf. She wouldn't have heard a freight train roll through the room. Wiping his sweating palms against the light tan fabric of his Dockers, he glanced up at the little woman standing next to his chair, with her mouth agape and one thin hand clutched over her heart. His smile came out then, an anorexic thing wobbling at the corners and doing nothing to hide how freaked out he was.

“Sorry. I didn't expect anyone to touch me. Sorry.”

Wire rimmed glasses slipping down the sharp line of her thin nose, the testing monitor nodded at him warily. Paulie raised his brows, waiting for her to step back so he could get up without knocking into her. The woman continued to hover where she was. A spark of temper lit at the back of Paulie's mind.

“Do you mind, ma'am? I can't get up without bumping into you.”



The woman cleared her throat, pointing behind him with one frail looking finger. “Ah, you need to tell the test you’re finished.”

Paulie spun around to find the blinking cursor and blank page had been replaced with a message asking if he was okay with exiting the test, or if he wanted to review his answers. His cheeks heated and his right leg started to jiggle.

“Oh. Um, thanks.”

A strange, constricted sound issued from the woman’s throat. Flinching back slightly, Paulie found himself automatically assessing her for signs of distress. Her face was growing redder by the moment. She nodded and spun in the opposite direction. As he took in her shaking shoulders and listened again to the rhythmic noise she was making, Paulie realized she was trying to stifle laughter, probably at his dorky behavior. Well, at least she was nice about it. Shaking his head at himself, Paulie sent a quick prayer winging toward who or whatever might deign to answer to help him pass, or at least not die from the knots in his stomach before he got the results back in two days. He’d heard that they used to have to wait weeks and weeks before getting their test results back. Pushing the button to select the ‘yes please close the test’ option, he snorted softly to himself. Glad he hadn’t taken his exam back then, he heaved a sigh as he levered himself up out of the chair. He was pretty sure he’d never have lived through the torture of waiting that long.

A red-haired girl he remembered vaguely from one of their lecture classes together stood up at the same time. She smiled as they walked out the door, hiking the strap of her white and blue sundress over her shoulder as she blew out a huge gust of air. Geez. She looked way too small to hold that much air in her body. Sticking out one hand in greeting while she used the other to push a hank of coppery hair out of her face, she started talking in a melodic rush that would put a xylophone to shame.

“Hey, I remember you from the Cardiac rotation. You were in ‘Black Mamba’s’ clinical, weren’t you? How’d you do? On the test I mean—I couldn’t tell, it cut off so fast and maybe I totally failed but at least I have a job already—did you get picked up at the job fair like I did?”

Paulie blinked at her, nervously straightening his favorite charcoal grey hoodie's sleeves. It didn't match the tan pants he had on, not really, but he made them sort of work by wearing the black Converse All Stars he'd found at the thrift store by his little three room apartment. The girl was watching him out of the most incredible midnight-blue eyes. She looked like something off a runway with the startling mix of copper and flame tones in her hair—it had to be natural, because no nursing student could afford the kind of hairdresser who could pull off that level of believable variation.

“Um. Job fair?”

The cupid bow lips parted, rounding into an O-shape that told Paulie he'd missed something important. Great. Even Nursing Student Barbie was two steps ahead of him. He mentally smacked himself for the unkind thought. From the little he recalled about her, the girl was a nice enough sort. Her mouth was moving though, so he tried his damndest to rein his brain in to pay attention.

“Oh my God, you didn't go to the job fair? They even held it on Saturday afternoon so no one would have a conflict with classes or their clinical rotation. Geez, have you been hiding under a rock?”

Paulie's cheeks flamed in mortification. “Um. Yeah. That's a pretty good description of the past few years. Ah, nice to see you. Good luck with the test and all. Bye.”

Paulie turned and trotted away as quickly as he could without looking like he was running from her. He was out of breath halfway across the parking lot to where his pathetic excuse for a car was sitting. Gah, he really needed to start getting more exercise now that he was done with school.

Of course, the slightly gasping breaths might have more to do with the mild panic attack trying to sneak up on him, but he wasn't going to admit to that. He was done with those, and once he had an actual nursing job, maybe he'd join a gym. He patted his less than firm midsection with one hand, wishing he'd opted to wear just a T-shirt that morning instead of giving in to his desire to wear the hoodie. As light and comfortable as the soft gray cotton of the jacket was, he could feel sweat starting to pool in the dip where his

lower back ran into the ginormous swell of his jiggly, bubbled-out butt. Well, at least his butt seemed ginormous and jiggly to him. His sister Teresa said she would kill to have a nice ass like his, but she was his sister so of course she said nice things about him.

Paulie shook his head at the reflection of himself in the driver's side window. Nah. The sweaty back was worth all the comfort of having his chubby belly covered so he didn't obsess about it during the test. A waft of salty, fetid air blew across his face from the little wetland area in front of where his car was parked. He pulled his keys out of a slightly too tight pants pocket, gazing out over the marsh sprawling out from behind the building where the testing center was. Fumbling, he dropped his keys. Of course, the damned things skidded halfway under his rust-bucket of a vehicle. Crap. The old Nova sat too low to the ground for him to get his thick body under there. This wasn't the first time he'd dropped the keys and had them end up under the car. If he was home, he could get one of the kids from the block to shimmy under there and fetch them out. Well, maybe he'd be able to reach if he kneeled beside the car and stuck his arm under. Squatting quickly, and then kneeling with his face pressed to the pavement as his eyes scanned the underside of the car, Paulie searched for the tell-tale silver shimmer of the keys...

The low purring sound of a well-tuned engine crept closer and closer until it stopped immediately behind him. A car door opened and then closed with a thunking sound. Paulie wondered if that was the girl's ride picking her up. Grunting he wiggled a little as he tried to shove his arm farther under the car. He could swear he'd seen—

“While I'm terribly entertained by the view, I can't help wondering if you'd like some help?”

The rich deep tones of the voice danced across his ears in the same way a pancake drenched in a puddle of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup would dance across his tongue. His stomach clenched, his breath stilled in his chest, and he immediately sought to drop his rear end down, tuck his legs under him and spring effortlessly to his feet. He'd clearly lost all sense of who he was. Attempting to jerk upward with an arm half under over two tons of steel and

rubber didn't really work out so well for Paulie. He lurched up about half an inch, got caught on his own arm, and then face planted against the side of his own car. Fire exploded in his nose and his vision went white.

“Shib. Tha hursss.”

Oh, crap. The last time he sounded like this was the night his father broke his nose while tossing him out the front door. Mama had been at bingo, and—avoiding the whole divorce thing—Paulie had never told her about it. He wasn't even sure if the blow had been intentional or more of the collateral damage he wound up carting around after that night. Bracing one hand against the side of his Nova, he extricated his other arm completely from underneath the car. Then he flopped around to land inelegantly on his butt.

“Thorry. I thimb I boke iith.”

With one hand cupped under the edge of his jaw directly below his nose, Paulie vainly attempted to capture the warm, bright red rush of fluid filling his cupped palm quicker than he could figure out what to do with it. Wincing, he flicked a glance up to send whoever it was on their way. Scuffed black work boots led to long, lean and—Baby Jesus in a sidecar—mouthwateringly muscular legs. The guy had to be at least three to four inches taller than Paulie, and dear God in Heaven, every one of those inches was packed with long ropes of muscle. Paulie swallowed thickly as his gaze slid past the man's rock hard thighs to the rather large bit of divinity he cradled at their apex. Hoping he hadn't let his gaze linger on the f-ing amazing package—holy Moses on a pogo stick, Paulie had no doubts he was going to be seeing that gorgeous bulge in his dreams and fantasies for a long time to come. He jerked his gaze upward, jumping past a forest green Henley and what he suspected were some truly gawk-worthy abs to a land on a face of chiseled, nearly god-like perfection. Reaching up to confirm the goose-egg he must have on his forehead to be seeing Roman demigods come to life, Paulie was surprised to find only smooth skin. The guy's sandy brown brows drew together.

“Hey, buddy. I didn't mean to make you hurt yourself. Damn. Hang on for a second and I'll see if Sasha stuffed an ice pack in that nursing student emergency wonder-kit of hers. And I'll grab the towel from my work out

bag—it's clean. I was going to the gym after I dropped Sasha and Adrianna off at home.”

He loped back toward the Subaru, all sleek male animal, buzzing with energy and alpha in his prime intensity. The long thick muscles made Paulie's mouth water just a little. Looking like that—not an ounce of spare flesh on him—and hurrying back to a car with the beautiful Sasha waiting, his fine male form was just another that Paulie would have to admire from afar. So, Paulie sat on the pavement that was starting to burn his plump ass a little through what used to be his second best dress pants. He pressed the hand not trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose against his soft, round little pooch of a belly and sighed very, very quietly.

Maybe someday he'd find a gay man who wanted a chubster like him. Hah. Maybe he'd find a way to fix everything he'd ruined for Jeff too, right after he won the lottery and got declared Mr. Universe in the same People Magazine issue where Andrej Pejic lamented the fact that he'd never been brave enough to ask the uber-hot Paulie Bellizi for a date. He was still chuckling painfully when a set of slim feet encased in brown leather sandals and topped by glittering toenail polish in bright pink edged into his line of vision.

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Holy fucking hotness, Batman. Eli paused for a second with his hand on the top of the Subaru, breathing deeply as he tried to will his unruly cock to stand down right the hell now. Okay, so maybe he'd been celibate for too damn long. Maybe hearing that he was going to be able to start having a life that didn't revolve around making sure Adrianna and Sasha had what they needed had pulled his libido out of the deep freeze and set it out in the corner to thaw. Either way, it somehow still seemed just wrong to spring wood when a—admittedly smoking hot—guy nearly knocked himself out at your feet. But Goddamn, that was a double handful of yummy man back there. Even with the painful misplacement of his nose distorting things, he had the sweetest Little Italy accent Eli had ever heard. Eli could so see himself pinning the round cheeked, olive skinned guy to his mattress and fucking him within an inch of his life. The big brown eyes and that dark brown hair waving over his forehead were absolutely delicious. Even better was that flash of something—needy and

vulnerable in the man's gaze. It looked sweet and shy; Eli could see himself giving the man just what he needed until they were both sweaty and spent. Vivid flashes of just what that might look like flooded Eli's brain. So. Not. Helping. Shit.

A tapping on the driver's side window had his eyes springing open. Sasha's face was looking out at him, her nose wrinkled in that way it did when she was trying not to laugh. The strap of her favorite sundress fell down her shoulder, revealing a dark tan line. A heavy pang of sweet warmth shot through his chest. Eli was damn glad he'd caved and bought her the thing last year for her birthday. She'd been feeling so down, struggling in school and just so damn sad all the time.

*The night before they went shopping for Adrianna's spring and summer clothes, he'd overheard her on the phone with her mom. She'd been crying, telling her mom how she was fat and ugly now with stretch-marks all over her belly, and she didn't know what she was going to wear when summer came because they couldn't afford new clothes, except for Adrianna. So after she hung up, Eli had swallowed the bitter taste of his pride long enough to call his mum up and see if she could lend him a hundred bucks until he got paid the next time. The next day he'd bought Sasha the sundress and a pretty gold and blue bikini. She'd tried to make him take back the bikini, saying she couldn't wear one. Eli had laughed at her and then told her she should be proud of her silver lining showing. She'd looked at him like he was crazy, and he'd grabbed her in a big bear hug.*

*"Listen, Donna" he'd said, affecting a very David Tennant as the Doctor stance and an English accent so bad it was a wonder the Anglophile Accent Police of America didn't slap a huge fine on him, "I don't know what anyone else has been telling you, but every time I see those marks I think about how my best friend took what could have been the darkest day of our lives and turned it into the most precious thing in the world. Don't you put down those warrior marks in my hearing, okay Donna? I don't think I could bear it."*

*She'd sniffled, and then replied with this. "Oi, Spaceman, now you've gone and made me ruin my face."*

*She started coming to the gym with him after that, and they'd taken turns working out while the other one watched Adrianna. As soon as they put the word out that they weren't a couple, she'd been surprised, and pleased, to find herself on the receiving end of numerous invitations to dinner, drinks, and even a hot air balloon ride. Though after Eli had informed the guy that he'd better treat her like a lady or Eli would rearrange every molecule in his body via a good old-fashioned ass-whooping, he'd slunk off like the snake Eli had suspected him of being all along. But seriously, who asked someone out on a hot air balloon ride as a first date? That was a psycho move.*

Sasha tapped at the glass again. Eli blinked. The noise recalled him to the present, and he stepped back, bending down to see her face better before motioning for her to roll the window down. Once she had it down a few inches, he started to speak.

“Hey, your friend from nursing school kind of broke his nose against the side of his car. Do you have an ice pack in that monstrous first aid kit you made me put in the car?”

The laughter fled Sasha's face. She'd only been in one clinical rotation with Paulie, but nursing school was a lot like going to war. The other students were your fellow soldiers, guarding your back in the dangerous nearly militaristic maneuvers where you fought the actual illnesses, as well as your own lack of experience. The instructors were like drill sergeants trying to beat every hit of weakness from your nursing skills, and the patients were the territory you sought to conquer. Even one day spent together would have been enough for Sasha to learn a lot about Paulie. After a whole semester guarding each other from the gimlet eyes of their instructors while trying to give the patients assigned to them the best care possible she knew more about Paulie than any ordinary acquaintance would.

“Oh, no! Poor Paulie... he's always been kinda clumsy, but I never saw him actually hurt himself before. Sh—oot. Sugar, honey, iced tea.”

She grimaced, pointing toward the back seat where Adrianna watched them avidly as she sucked on three fingers and clutched a stuffed monkey to her chest. Her eyelids were heavy, dropping shut every few seconds. Sasha undid

her seatbelt and opened the passenger side door, climbing quickly from the car.

“Let me go take a look at him. Um, if he hit his head hard enough to break his nose he might have given himself a concussion. Let me see him—I’m sorry I think you might miss your workout time.”

Eli waved his hand at her. “Go, go check him out. I’ll wait here. He—geez, Sasha—”

His voice cracked on the last bit, and Eli could feel his cheeks heating up. Sasha blinked at him, and then hopped up to stand on the edge of the doorframe by the base of her seat. Leaning forward, she spoke in a whisper.

“Oi, Spaceman... you like him. No, wait, you think he’s hot—hah. He is just your type. And you had to go scare the shize out of him and make him almost kill himself. Even worse, now you have to rely on someone else to go patch his boo-boos.”

Eli glared at her, answering just as quietly without even trying to put on a fake British accent. “Don’t push it, Donna.”

Cackling, Sasha hopped down, strolled with agonizing slowness to the back of the car to lift the hatchback and rummage around in the big red emergency travel kit she’d put together for the back of their car. After a thousand eons, she emerged with a single ice pack no bigger than Eli’s hand. Eying her incredulously, Eli pushed his hand through his hair. The humid air blowing across the marsh seemed to be gluing the stuff to his forehead.

“That’s all you’re taking? What about something for pain? And gloves... didn’t you get all huffy about how we always have to remember blood transfer of germs?”

Sasha grimaced, reached back into the still open hatch, and came out with a pack of gloves and bottle of water. She bit her lip.

“I don’t have anything in there to deal with more blood than I can clean up with a couple of gauze pads unless I want to use the sterile dressings to clean up a nosebleed. Do you have something in your gym bag?”



Eli's stomach did a slow roll as he smacked his hand against his forehead. "Geez. Yeah, I think I already told him I'd give him my towel... maybe. I dunno. Sure, you can use it. I meant to tell him we'd get him something."

Sasha grinned. "Thanks, Spaceman. I'm a little rattled too. I think when it's somebody I've known for two years, it makes things different, you know? And his name is Paulie. We had the same lecture time for our first semester of nursing."

Eli rolled his eyes before giving her a lopsided grin. "And with your memory, of course you remembered. And it was no problem reminding you about the gloves Sasha. I have a vested interest in keeping you healthy, ya know. Otherwise, I have to go looking for a new bestie and baby mama. Sheesh. Way more work than I want to have to do. You know how lazy I am."

Sasha snorted, flipping a hand at him as she gathered her supplies up into a bundle wrapped in the towel, and made her way over to Paulie. Eli grinned to himself as he watched Adrianna's cute little button nose scrunch up. She batted a strand of silky reddish blond hair out of her face, and clutched her monkey tighter. Eli mouthed the sexy Italian-looking man's name. Paulie. He liked the name, liked the way it felt in his mouth, the way saying it made him press his lips together and then open his mouth. It also fit the sweet, round-cheeked look the man had going on very nicely. He would have to make sure they exchanged numbers before they left the parking lot.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Paulie watched Sasha approach with an acid spewing, ten-foot tapeworm eating holes into the tender surface of his stomach. She was everything he would never be. Graceful, slim, obviously well off to judge by the costly diamond studs she wore in her ears, and most damningly, female. He didn't want to be a woman. Paulie was plenty happy being born with a dumbstick and two balls in the center pocket. He liked being a guy who liked other guys. He just wished he were more the kind of guy that other guys who liked guys went for. Or better yet, the kind of beautiful guy that everyone went for. Sasha sank down like a willow bending in the wind, standing above him one moment and sitting in a tidy little half kneeling position with her skirt belled out in a perfect circle around her the next moment. She sat back on her heels, opening the towel she held and using her skirt as a sort of makeshift barrier between her supplies and the ground. Huh. That was clever. Shaking out the towel she'd carried everything over in, she held it out toward him.

“Here, use this to help you catch the blood.”

Paulie took one end of the towel gingerly, careful not to touch her with his bloody hands. He was disease-free, but she had no way of knowing that. With brisk, efficient motions, she snapped a pair of gloves onto her hands before opening the bottle of water she'd brought over.

“I doab thin I caaan dink”

Sasha slanted a long look at him out of those dark blue eyes. One corner of her mouth tipped up. “Yeah, well that's good, because the water is to wash your face off so I can pop your nose back into place. It's gonna hurt less and heal faster if we do it now.”

Paulie leaned back away from her. “We dibent learn dat in cass”

Laughing, Sasha shook her head. “Hah. I know. My uncle runs a gym for boxers. He taught me—well, his trainer, Matty, taught me. I honestly know what I'm doing.”

Regarding her closely, Paulie thought for a moment. His brothers Tony and Luigi both had plenty of broken noses growing up, and he thought he recalled Tony saying something about his nose feeling better as soon as they reset it.

“Okab.”

Reaching over, Sasha placed her thumbs on both sides of his nose. Paulie’s gaze strayed over her shoulder toward the car where he could just make out the big, gorgeous man’s beautifully firm ass pointing straight toward Paulie as the other man bent to look in the open car window. When Sasha cleared her throat Paulie guiltily jerked his gaze back to her. Looking deeply into his eyes, her little hands spread over his round cheeks, she smiled angelically at him as she spoke.

“Eli’s gay you know.”

Then, while his brain was trying to wrap around the most delightful thing he’d heard in over five years, she wrenched her thumbs sideways with a sudden snapping motion of her wrists. White-hot fire exploded up his face and knifed through his brain. Paulie bellowed, attempting to scuttle back from the evil harpy before him. Clearly, she thrived on the pain of—holy Mary, his nose felt better already. Whoa.

Paulie blinked at her, and the motion felt intensely different from two minutes ago. “Wow. That feels better.”

Tipping her head back, Sasha laughed before gesturing for him to move forward again. “Come on, don’t be a baby. I promise not to do anything that painful again.”

Paulie shook his head as he scooted back toward her. Tipping his head to one side, he bit down on his bottom lip. “Why did you say that? Um. About Eli.”

Dumping water on a gauze pad, Sasha looked up at him with one eyebrow raised. “I said it to get your attention off what I was about to do... and because it’s true.”

Paulie gulped. “Really?”

Sasha pulled off one glove, and then used that hand to draw an X over her heart. “Cross my heart. And you, sir, are just his type.”

Eying him with a wicked twinkle in her blue eyes, she smirked slightly. “Yep, he’s always gotten hot for men with sexy Italian or English accents. I

would have fixed the two of you up a year ago, but he was too preoccupied to make anybody a decent boyfriend then. Eh, he's still a big geek, but trainable. You think you might wanna apply for the position?"

Paulie gaped at her as she pushed up to standing with the same willowy grace she'd utilized lowering herself to the ground. His head echoed with the small sounds of wind rattling through the tall cattails on the other side of the low rail lining this side of the parking lot. His brain floundered, completely bereft of any response to her statement. She'd forgotten completely about washing his face off, but before he could mention it Sasha grinned, and the expression was so sly and naughty he half expected a cute little pair of horns to suddenly sprout from her head.

"Huh?"

Laughing, she turned to walk away. After a few steps, she paused to look over her shoulder. "Hey, do you have someone at home to keep an eye on you and make sure you didn't give yourself a concussion?"

Paulie didn't even have to hear the end of her sentence before he was shaking his head from side to side. "Um. No. I live alone."

Delicately arched copper eyebrows lifted toward her hairline. "Well. All right then. Do you want us to leave you at Crouse Hospital's ER or do you want to stay at our place tonight?"

Paulie blinked at her again. Shit. "I thought you were sort of a life-sized Nursing Student Barbie, but you're really more of a deceptively innocent seeming Kick-Ass-Ninja-Drill-Sergeant Barbie, aren't you?"

Sasha smirked at him again before turning toward the hot sex-god loping back toward them. The sight of his thighs flexing knocked any idea of protest at being called Italian clean out of his head.

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Adrianna finally lost her fight with the tiny little zzzzz-monsters dangling from the ends of her eyelashes, and Eli lost no time taking advantage of the opportunity to zip over to where Sasha was taking care of her hot nursing buddy.

“Paulie.”

He tried the name on for size, liking the way it felt in his mouth when he actually said it aloud. And nearly as much as he thought he might like to have some part, any part, of the man where he could lick and nibble at it. He got close enough to hear Paulie just as the man made his comment about which Barbie Sasha most resembled. Eli snorted, catching her gaze as her eyes widened and her mouth quirked up at the ends. With a laugh tickling the back of his throat, Eli nodded toward Paulie, who was currently making Eli’s dick do the Macarena in his pants.

“Make another conquest, Earthgirl?”

Sasha’s eyes danced with mischief. “Nah. He’s more your type anyway, Spaceman.”

A rush of heat flooded down into Eli’s groin. He glanced behind Sasha, surprised to see Paulie simply sitting on the ground watching the two of them with his head tilted to one side, brows scrunched up a little, the hint of a smile playing around his mouth. Turning his gaze back to Sasha, Eli gave her his best shark smile.

“Good. I call dibs.”

On the ground, there was a short burst of laughter followed by the best quote possible from Eli’s favorite Brendan Fraser movie ever. “Nobody gets dibs on the mountain guide.”

Sasha and Eli both cracked up at that, Sasha actually going so far as to set the ice pack she still held down on the car’s dull yellow hood. Eli did a double take.

*Wait a second. What was she still doing with that?*

Eli’s laughter evaporated as he realized the little bit of relief they could offer Paulie hadn’t been given to him. He tapped Sasha’s arm.

“Hey, isn’t he supposed to be holding that up against his face?”

Sasha took a second to wipe her streaming eyes, and then looked where he was pointing before turning stricken eyes to Eli. “Worst. Nurse. Ever.”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “Oi, nobody talks about my best mate that way, Earthgirl. I’ll take care of it.”

Then he picked up the little icepack, breaking the pouch inside to release the activating chemicals to mix with whatever other stuff was in there. Eli shook the bag back and forth as he waited for Sasha to squeeze past him to get to the car. When she paused at the driver’s side of their car, he squinted one eye at her.

“Sash? What are you doing?”

She tipped her head toward Paulie, and Eli turned his head to look at the man again. He had dark stains down the front of his charcoal grey shirt, and his tan pants were a complete loss with the bright red blood on them rapidly turning rust-colored as the heat of the day quickly dried the precious liquid. Paulie was still sitting on the ground, face covered in blood and his mouth open as his gaze flitted between the two of them. His brown eyes were wide and his short, dark brown hair flopped appealingly over his broad forehead. Sasha’s voice came from behind Eli, but he didn’t take his eyes from Paulie to look at her. He couldn’t.

“I’m waiting to find out if our mountain guide is going to go to the doctor to get cleared to go home or if we’re taking him home with us.”

Paulie’s lips opened up to speak, and a tsunami of panic tumbled Eli up, down, and sideways. He blurted out a series of commands. “He’s coming home with us. I’ll drive his car, and you take ours. I’ll carry Adrianna in when we get home, so she doesn’t wake up before it’s time for her nap to end, though. And toss me a rag or some napkins or something from the glove box, okay?”

He could nearly hear Sasha’s shrug behind him. Turning, he caught the cloth she threw while speaking. “Eh, it’s fine with me. You might want to check with Paulie there though. He’s not used to your bossy ways, yet.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

The deep, commanding tone of Eli's voice distracted Paulie from the actual gist of the conversation for a moment, but then the words the two beautiful near-strangers were exchanging penetrated his pain, lust, and general life confusion. No, he couldn't go home with them. Them and... somebody named Adrianna? A mini factoid jiggled loose in his brain. Sasha had a baby. He'd heard her talking about the little girl with a couple of the other nursing students one day while they were all waiting their turns to sign up for the next semester's classes. They shared a house or apartment; that was made clear by the way they both kept referring to home and saying "our place". Paulie needed to go home. He was working swing and the overnight tonight to make up for missing the day shift to take his exam.

"I have to go home. I need to get ready for work tonight."

Eli squatted down in front of him, those wicked, softly-aged looking pants cupping his balls and pulling taut over his impressively large cock. Paulie bit the inside of his bottom lip to hold back a whimper as the man leaned in, and he was suddenly enveloped in a faint cloud of Usher cologne. Eli handed him the ice pack as he reached for the bottle of water to wet the cloth he'd brought to clean Paulie's face.

"No. You're going to give me your phone, and I'll call in for you. Then, after we get Adrianna and Sasha settled at home, I'm taking you either to an ER, one of those urgent care places, or your primary care doctor so someone besides Mean-Ass-Killer-Ninja-Drill-Sergeant Barbie Nurse can assess you for concussion. Then I'm taking you home—to our house, not wherever you live alone—and you can get some sleep. I don't have a bed yet for the guest room, but if you don't want to share my bed I can sleep on the couch."

A wave of heat and need washed over Paulie. His mouth dropped open as he stared into Eli's light brown eyes. Sasha was right. The guy was a bossy bastard. And didn't Paulie's dick just want to stand up and wave hello to him? Sheesh.

"What? Dude, I'm not your girlfriend." He nodded his chin toward the direction of Sasha.

Eli just laughed, gesturing for him to put the ice pack to his face. “Well, thank God for that. The world cannot handle two Sasha McMillan’s, that’s for damn sure. We’re gonna have enough trouble when Adrianna gets old enough to start following in her mama’s fiery footsteps. God.”

He paused for a second, the minute flecks of green and blue buried in the rich amber of his eyes seeming to flare like tiny Christmas lights. Paulie stared, his train of thought shattered by the startling play of multiple colors where he thought there had been only brown just a moment before.

Eli continued speaking, though his face fell into purely serious lines that somehow seemed to highlight the strange tension created by his youthful authority. “I’m assuming you work in healthcare, like Sasha. Do you really think it’s a good idea to go to work where you might injure someone because you aren’t well enough to be there?”

A sledgehammer of emotion smashed against Paulie’s heart. Joseph, Mary and Moses on a pogo stick. This kid—because, beautiful as he was, there was no way he was a day over twenty-five. Paulie placed him somewhere closer to the lower end of his twenties based on the lack of lines around his eyes despite how much he seemed to smile and laugh. He had faint smudges of purple under his eyes too, and yet being obviously tired didn’t detract from his proud masculine beauty in the slightest. In Paulie’s experience, only the very young, the obscenely wealthy, and the genetic lottery winners got that kind of slack where rest and looking good were concerned.

“I—no, I don’t want that. I never want that. I-I’ll call my supervisor, and then my doctor. But I have to get my phone from inside the car. Um. My keys are still under the car.”

A low sound rolled over and through him as Eli tipped his head back, sun glinting off his sandy brown hair and the pretty white teeth that Paulie could so easily envision worrying at various bits of his anatomy. The man’s throat worked as he laughed, and the sight of those corded muscles moving did pull a groan from Paulie. Eli tilted his head back down, a smile still stretched across his mouth and those unbelievable chips of blue and green danced in the warm brown of his eyes.



“I’ll get your keys out from the other side, and then get your phone out for you to make those calls. Just keep the ice pack on your face, hmmm?”

Paulie swallowed thickly. “Um. Okay.”

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Walking around the back of the car, Eli pulled the hair tie out of his shoulder length hair and ran a quick hand through it before pulling it back into a ponytail again. Squatting once he got to the midpoint of the passenger side of the car, he craned his head to peer under the car. Nada. Shaking his head, Eli put his hands down, flattening his body out into a pushup position while holding his long body a scant inch above an oily-looking patch of pavement. Crap, these might be work pants, but he liked them. Plus, it was Sasha’s turn to do laundry this week, and he really didn’t want to make extra work for her. He looked again. Aha. Shifting his weight to his right hand, Eli bent his elbow a fraction more and hooked the keys out with the tip of his pinky finger.

“Got them, Paulie. I’ll have your phone out for you in a sec.”

Bouncing up to his feet, Eli made quick work of unlocking the beat-to-shit yellow car’s door and snagging the older model cell resting in the little console down by the gearshift. As he walked around the back of the car, he started talking to Paulie.

“Hey, Paulie... this car would almost be cool if it were in slightly better shape. Are you gonna keep it and fix it up once you start getting paid those big nursing salary checks? ’Cause, seriously, if not? I’d love to talk to you about buying it.”

As he started up the side of the car where Paulie still sat on the ground, a thick hank of shiny brown hair falling across his forehead, Eli was struck again by the way the line of the man’s shoulders—nearly as broad as Eli’s—drooped just a little. The way Paulie’s neck arched to tilt his head just slightly toward the ground and the sweet, shy way he looked up at Eli through his long, silky black lashes sent a pang of want spearing through Eli’s guts. He caught his breath and continued to talk about the car.

“I never could resist a sexy muscle car, you know? So I kinda hope you opt for ditching the vehicle, because then I could probably buy it cheap. I really love working on cars.”

Paulie didn't say anything, but the corner of his mouth was curving up and he just kept watching Eli with those eyes. God, he made Eli hard without even trying. He tipped his head a little farther to the side, an inquisitive sort of hum coming from the back of his throat. Eli squatted next to him, handing the phone over. A jolt of electricity arched between them. Paulie's pupils flared, turning his dark eyes almost black. Eli swallowed thickly.

“The reason the car I share with Sasha looks so great is because we saved a ton on maintenance—I do all the upkeep on the Subaru—so we can afford to keep the paint job nice and put new or newer tires on whenever we need them.”

Paulie nodded, his eyes shining above the ice pack. Something about the way he watched Eli—the guy made him feel about ten feet tall, and like he had a superhero cape on or something. Eli kept on talking. Even when Sasha listened, she didn't make him feel like a hero just for fixing up the damn car.

“Don't get me wrong—I had fun learning the ins and outs of the Subaru, but man, was I ever glad I insisted on a way-old model. There was no way I'd have been able to do all the upkeep on one of the newer ones, not without buying a bunch of specialized equipment to deal with the things that are computerized.”

Paulie nodded as his gaze flickered to the mint condition Subaru and then back to Eli's battered boots. Eli followed the line of Paulie's gaze from the car back to his own thrashed boots. The side of his mouth turned up and he lifted one eyebrow.

“I bet you're wondering how a nursing student and guy straight out of high school working as a laborer could afford such a sweet car, aren't you?”

Paulie made another of those humming noises that went straight to Eli's cock, but this time the sound sort of lifted on the end like he was agreeing with the question. Eli grinned, settling his back against the side of the car for a second before pulling away from the hot metal with a hiss.

“Shit. That’s hot. Um... well, Sasha’s dad and mom helped us with the down payment on both the car and the duplex we share. Hey, a guy’s gotta be close to his bestie and the most beautiful baby on the planet, right?”

Paulie made a muffled noise that Eli couldn’t quite decipher. Since the other man wasn’t yanking down the icepack to give him a ration of grief about living right next door to Sasha he decided to view it as mildly approving and move on. He shrugged.

“I work a lot of hours to make the payments, but Sasha and I have a deal. She gets her nursing license while I work, and then she’ll support me while I go to school.”

Paulie finally pulled the icepack away from his face to speak. “Ah... you guys are really close, huh?”

Eli shrugged again. “Yeah, we always have been. I know it seems weird to some people, but Sasha’s my best friend in the world. Can you imagine how cool the world would be if everyone got to live right next door to their best friend?”

Paulie made another of those little sounds at the back of his throat, and suddenly Eli wasn’t thinking about raising the level of world happiness or how cool it was to live next door to his bestie. The world kind of shook around him, maybe the whole damn universe was trying to knock him into the rich brown depths of Paulie’s eyes. Reaching up to touch the car behind him, Eli ran the tips of his fingers over the side of the factory issue early seventies tail lights. Sweetly chunky and solid, they grounded him. Glancing back over, he locked eyes with Paulie again, and a vision of the two of them tangled in the soft green sheets currently on his bed swam hotly through Eli’s imagination. Paulie was so solid looking, with little lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth that told Eli he’d passed twenty-five a few miles back.

“Here’s your phone.”

Shit. He handed over the phone, well aware that his voice had gone all deep and growly. There was no way Paulie was gonna miss that. He was probably giving the poor guy, what Sasha called, his “fuck me” eyes, too. She claimed he’d never given them to her, not even the one time they actually did

it, but that she'd seen him give those burning looks to a couple of his hook-ups as they stumbled away on morning after walks to wherever they came from. He didn't do hook-ups anymore, not since Adrianna was born. Sasha still teased him about the few he'd been with while they lived in that crappy two bedroom apartment they had before her parents ponied up the down payment for the duplex they lived in now. Though the older couple had sworn they would have nothing to do with Sasha's "mistake", they caved within two minutes of seeing Adrianna after she was born. In fact they begged to be forgiven for trying to pressure Sasha into an abortion when they found out she was pregnant.

Paulie's eyes widened above the ice pack, dropped to Eli's groin area and then flicked back up to his face with—oh, please let that be a flicker of heat from lust and not a flicker of anger at Eli's crass lusting after the injured guy. He lowered the ice pack, setting it on his lap as he reached out for the phone.

"Thanks. I'll just be a minute, okay?"

Eli nodded wordlessly, afraid to speak lest he scare Paulie away. Fuck, the smoky tenor sound of Paulie's voice was waking his dick up faster than a highly caffeinated double cappuccino with a sweet frothy layer of cream on top. Eli suppressed a groan at the thought. What he really wanted to do was just tell the sweet, hot double armful of caramel-coated man that he needed to get used to having Eli around, because Eli didn't do casual sex anymore, and he knew with an absolute certainty that he was going to have sex with Paulie. He could wait for a while if Paulie turned out to be a guy who needed romancing first. Eli licked his lips to wet them. He was going to have Paulie's softly bitable round ass in his bed as soon as possible. It was all he could do to not whip his dick out right now and piss in a circle around the man while shouting out, "Mine, mine, mine!"

"Sure. Take your time. I'll just go let Sasha know to take Adrianna home the long way, and we'll meet her there in about twenty minutes."

Then he turned, squaring his shoulders as he tried to figure out how the hell to tamp down his possessive streak. Sasha had never been bothered by his caveman attitudes—shit, Sasha laughed at him when he got all caveman on her. She said—repeatedly—that he could take that shit and stuff it back up his

ass or flush it down the toilet. She wasn't going to deal with him getting his nuts in a knot every single time she went on a date, because being his best friend did not—and she usually repeated *not* four or five times to make sure he understood—make her his personal possession.

Well, that was Sasha, though. She didn't take shit from anyone, for any reason. Eli had a feeling Paulie might need a little bit of a softer touch than that. There was something—

“Oi. Spaceman. Time to allons-zee?”

Eli rolled his eyes at Sasha. She was beautiful, uber-smart, and utterly incapable of speaking French without slaughtering what might well be the most graceful language on the planet. He carefully avoided thinking about the way butchered Britglish, the Brit version of English, whenever he tried to speak it. Yep, so not addressing that... it was far more important to concentrate on how lucky Adrianna was that her maternal grandparents, Auntie Michele, and her daddy could both speak French semi-fluently.

“Oi. Earthgirl. Do not butcher the mother tongue of your people.”

Sasha tapped one sandal-clad foot against the blacktop, lifting a single brow like a scathing indictment of his intelligence. Eli suppressed a smirk, knowing now was not a good time to rile her. She was still biting the inside of her cheek and twirling her hair with her right hand—both sure signs she was as jittery as all get out.

“Okay, Sasha. He's calling his job right now. We'll follow you back to the duplex in his car, I'll help you get the little princess settled, and then I'm going to run him to his doctor's office to be checked out—and before you even go there, just don't.”

Sasha pasted a patently false expression of innocence on her face. Eli knew the innocence was false, because it was on *Sasha's* face, and she was the most diabolical soul this side of the river Styx's bleak shores.

“Hey, that's not nice. I don't even know what you're talking about.”

He slid a skeptical glance from the tips of her shell-pink toenails to the top of her gleaming red hair. “Liar. You were going to say you didn't see why the doctor was necessary since I'd been checking him out ever since I pulled into

the parking lot. That or something close was about to roll right out of those glittery pink lips of yours.”

Sasha wrinkled her nose at him. Then she held out her hand. “Okay, busted. Give me the keys so I can get this show on the road. You want me to take the long way home to keep perpetual motion baby asleep?”

Eli shook his head. “What makes you think I have the keys?”

She smirked, pointing to his left front pocket. “Because your ridiculous alpha streak demands you take control of the smallest detail of your surroundings, up to and including pocketing the keys the second you take them out of the ignition—which, by the way, you always do as soon as you come to a stop anywhere that isn’t a stop sign, stoplight or some sort of traffic thing. Plus there’s an extra bulge in your pocket that has nothing to do with the pleasingly plump cutie over there with the ice pack on his nose.”

Dammit, she was right. He did always take the keys. “Shi–shitake mushrooms. This not swearing crap is really hard. Here, but make sure—”

Sasha mouthed the words with him as he continued, which was another clear indicator that he did this controlling crap a lot more than he realized. “—make sure you leave them in the yellow and brown key dish in the front hall on my side of the duplex.”

Eli pulled the Scunci he’d stolen from Sasha that morning out again, dragging his hand through his hair from forehead to the nape of his neck. “Geez, Sasha... I don’t know how to turn it off. The alpha thing is like breathing to me. And I don’t think he’s gonna just tell me to fuck off like you do. I—did you ever meet somebody and know you wanted to see what being with them would be like? I—what if I scare him off?”

One corner of her mouth quirked up as her midnight-blue eyes twinkled at him. “I don’t think you’ll scare him. Maybe turn him on, but never scare. I saw his face when you were bossing him around just now, and I heard that little dip in his hot Italian drawl. Trust me Eli, you have nothing to worry about.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Paulie would have thought he'd be irritated with some young guy bossing him around like his papa used to, but on Eli, the attitude was strangely hot. All through the brief exam by Doc Middleton—Paulie really loved the rotund black doctor who endlessly reminded him of a happy black Santa Claus—Eli had issued orders to him, until Doc Middleton had laughingly insisted he go sit out in the waiting room. Paulie had actually been really grateful, because keeping his dick from boning up when Eli talked to him all bossily in that deep, gravel filled tone was not something he could do. And having a stiffy while Doc Middleton checked him for a concussion was decidedly uncomfortable on about twelve different levels. His doctor had asked him several leading questions about Eli, and how he'd met the younger man. The point of all the probing questions became apparent when Kelly, his favorite nurse in the office, slipped him a discreetly sealed envelope when he checked out, murmuring that it contained the results of his latest blood test. She'd also murmured that Doc Middleton thought he might want a copy to take with him *just in case*. The whole thing turned his face burningly hot even an hour later. Geez. Doc Middleton knew he was going to gladly wave his ass in the air tonight for Eli if the hot younger man gave any indication of interest. If he didn't love the care he got from the old man, Paulie would so have to change primary doctors—today.

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Eli's voice, still low and rumbly as he showed Paulie through his half of the little duplex broke into Paulie's thoughts.

“Hey. It will be easier if we both sleep in here, but I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, so take your time and let me know later, okay? For now, why don't you lie down while I get some soup ready for our dinner?”

Those freaky, hot flecks of color were back in his eyes again. Paulie cleared his throat. “I'm not hungry. I know—”

Eli moved a half step closer than the easy arm's length away he'd been standing, making the room they stood in seem to shrink around them. The dark wood of the bed and dresser set, coupled with the way the large bed covered in

forest green bedding dominated the space, had already made the room seem fairly small. Eli took another half step toward Paulie, raising one big hand to press a long finger against Paulie's lips. With his stomach jumping, Paulie drew in a quick breath. Oh, God. If Eli stepped any closer—Paulie's dick throbbed at the idea—he'd be able to feel just how hard Paulie was.

"I said wait until later. I want you to think about it while your cock isn't rock hard, and while I'm not in the same room with you, okay? I don't do casual sex, Paulie. Not anymore. When we fuck, you're gonna be mine. Sleeping in my bed doesn't mean we're gonna fuck. But right now you're thinking with your little head, and I want you thinking with the other one before you decide if you want me in that bed with you tonight. Because us both being there doesn't mean we have to fuck, but it sure as hell raises the level of possibility. I want to pound your pretty ass right through that king-sized mattress, and I'm pretty sure you want the same thing."

Paulie's breath stuttered in his chest. He tried to pull back to speak, but Eli's other hand came up to rest lightly against the back of his head, not pushing, but holding him firmly in place all the same.

"Shhh. This is what we're gonna do, Paulie. I'm gonna take a look at that clean bill of health the cute little nurse at your doctor's office slipped you at his insistence—I have excellent hearing by the way, and I don't think she realized how close I was standing to you—and once you know I've seen it, I'm going to help you take the edge off. Then you're going to lay down in my bed and take a little nap while I get dinner ready."

Paulie whimpered. Baby Jesus in a sidecar, he'd turned into the kind of guy who whimpered when somebody talked dirty to him.

"Shhh, honey, shhh. If you don't want me to help you, then I'll just go make dinner and you can jack-off before you decide. But one way or another, I want you to get off before you decide if I'm couch surfing tonight."

Finally, he pulled his fingers away. Paulie almost whimpered again, but instead he swallowed hard and then replied. "I want you to help. Please."

And he reached into the too tight pocket of what used to be his second best pants, pulling out the envelope Kelly had given him. Eli took the starkly white



envelope, slitting it open with a penknife he snagged from the top of his dresser. Extracting the info sheet from its cozy nest, he flicked a glance over the results. Pressing his lips together, he lifted hot eyes to Paulie's.

“You're clean across the board, Paulie—although we're going to have to talk about your low iron levels later, when you're feeling better.”

Stepping back, he raked Paulie with a look so hot and tangible Paulie felt as though his clothes had been burned from his body. Reaching past Paulie, he returned the penknife to the top of the dresser. Then he smiled, and the expression was wicked, smoldering, and suggestive—in short, everything Paulie could wish for when he stood in a handsome man's bedroom. He nodded toward a door on the far wall of the bedroom.

“There are clean towels on the shelves in the bathroom. Get cleaned up; I'll leave you some sweats and a tee on the bed. Shower without getting yourself off, then you get a stellar blowjob where you do get off, and finally we have dinner before you tell me where I'm sleeping tonight. I expect everything to happen in that order, okay?”

Paulie nodded mutely. With his tongue welded to the roof of his mouth, there really wasn't anything else he could do. Eli reached around him again, brushing their chests together as he pulled open a couple of drawers. He stepped back, placing a pair of sweats and a T-shirt Paulie knew would be too small for his thicker body. His face was going to cook right off if he kept blushing this much.

“I don't think your things will fit me.”

Eli raked him with another one of those burning glances. “Oh, I think they'll fit you just fine, Paulie. Don't worry about it if they're not as loose as you like. You'll look great.”

The younger man's voice dropped even lower on the last few words, like his whole mouth was making love to the sounds. Paulie shivered, nodded, and headed for the shower in the master bathroom, scooping up the clothes on the way. It did not escape his notice—despite the lack of adequate blood flow to his brain—that Eli neglected to give him underwear. His dick did a little happy dance over that, nearly strangling itself in his tighty-whites. Okay, the hot

younger man might have a point. That thought brought to mind the one thing he needed to know right now before they went even one suggestive comment farther down this path.

“Eli, how old are you?”

Eli chuckled, and the deep gravel of it made the sound somehow deliciously dirty. “I’m grown, Paulie. I’m twenty-two years old. Why don’t you tell me how much older you are so we can get the fact that I like you being older out of the way.”

Paulie gaped for a second, and then answered. “Thirty-one. I’m nine years older than you. Shit, I could have been—”

Eli closed the three steps between them in the blink of an eye. One long arm wrapped around Paulie’s waist and hauled him up against Eli’s long, lean form. The scent of his cologne closed in around Paulie, and he moaned. The younger man bent his head, brushing his lips lightly against Paulie’s once before whispering against them.

“You could have been my insanely hot babysitter. The one that I’d have beat off to images of as soon as I got old enough to figure out that my dick was for something besides pissing. The one whose smoky tenor voice would have gotten me hard every time he spoke. The one I’d have tried to seduce every chance I got once I was old enough for that.”

Then he stepped back, pointing imperiously at the bathroom door. “Go take your shower. I’ll be in the kitchen. When you get done, come get me in there.”

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Eli’s heart pounded against his ribs like an over-eager paperboy on collection day. He got the crockpot out, setting the small sized slow-cooking device on the counter top with shaking hands. He’d nearly killed himself holding back in the bedroom, and his body was still reacting. He decided he’d get a light chicken soup going in the crockpot, and then pulled some premade rolls out of the freezer. They would thaw about twenty minutes before the homemade chicken soup was finished cooking, leaving him plenty of time to have them ready to go with dinner. As long as Paulie didn’t show any signs of concussion before dinner—roughly three hours since he’d hit his head

according to Eli's calculations—he was going to let the man have a decent, light dinner. Cutting the chicken breast he'd thawed yesterday into small bite sized bits, Eli added some of the soup stock he'd made last week, and then cut up the carrots and onions to add later. He finished, washing the cutting board, knives and other paraphernalia he'd used to prep everything just as the whine in the pipes gave away the fact that Paulie had finished his shower. He set the cutting board to sanitize in the bottom of the sink, spreading a capful of bleach over the top. He was looking for a good eco-friendly alternative to bleaching the board, but until he found one that satisfied him, he wasn't taking any chances with his family's health.

A throat cleared behind him, and Paulie's beautiful accent rolled over Eli.

“Hey. I, um, I finished my shower.”

Eli turned as slowly as he could, which probably meant he looked like a superhero in a phone booth. Damn it, he wanted to see if Paulie had followed his instructions. He let his gaze roam over every visible inch of the man, from his long, naked toes, up the long, beautifully thick legs to—oh, hell yeah, the rock hard cock perfectly outlined in the slightly too tight pants. If he could convince the man, Paulie would be wearing slightly too tight pants for the rest of his life. Eli's gaze lingered for a moment on the slight roundness right where the drawstring of the low-slung sweats was knotted. His mouth watered as he imagined planting dozens of open-mouthed kisses right there. Finally, he let his glance move over the other man's barrel chest and up to the round-cheeked adorableness of his face. Those cheeks filled with a flood of red color as Eli watched, making him want desperately to see them flushed with ecstasy. He shook his head, trying to clear it enough to maintain his control.

“I see you are. Done showering, that is. I've got everything set to take care of itself while I take care of you.”

Eli could hear the rough darkness to his voice getting thicker and darker. He didn't try to speak again, opting to simply hold out his hand as he walked past Paulie. The older man grasped his hand with one that shook slightly. Eli squeezed lightly, pulling a squeaky-clean Paulie along in his wake as he walked with firm strides back up the hall leading to his bedroom. He'd called Sasha as soon as he got to the kitchen, telling her not to come over for dinner

tonight, and he'd make it up to her with breakfast tomorrow morning. The rotten wench had laughed, telling him she'd already made alternate plans for both herself and Adrianna—evidently Adrianna was spending the night at his mother's house—and she'd take his guilt-breakfast with pleasure.

At the door to his bedroom, Paulie halted, his hand still shaking but his melodic tones firm. "I want you to sleep in here. I already know. You can make me tell you again later, but I already know."

Everything in Eli went still for a second, and the quiet rolled out, seeming to silence the whole house around him. Paulie held his breath, obviously waiting for a response. Eli lifted his free hand, cupping the side of the other man's face and pulled him close enough to whisper against his lips again.

"Okay. Just—tell me if you change your mind."

Then he pulled Paulie fully into his bedroom, shutting and locking the door behind them.

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## CHAPTER SIX

Paulie shivered, the sexy feel of words whispered against his lips running straight to his cock. Holy Moses, Mary, Joseph and at least one of the Disciples on a big-ass Harley with the Baby Jesus in a sidecar—this boy, barely a man, was turning Paulie inside out. His whole body felt hot, heavy and ready for absolutely anything Eli wanted from him. He moaned, the low, thready sound falling from tingling lips. Eli took the sound into his own mouth and then fed it back into Paulie's. In the process, he turned a filthy, gritty laugh into so much more than an invitation to join him on the wide green expanse of his big, big bed.

“I have something to show you.”

With that, Eli stepped away from him. The other man's warm hand stayed wrapped around one of Paulie's wrists, pulling him along like one of those little quacking duck toys with the flapping feet that little kids always seemed so fond of. The calluses on his palm and fingers abraded the thin skin at the inside of Paulie's wrist, sending a shot of electricity from the invisible hot button there, right to the tip of his hard dick.

Eli led Paulie right to the edge of the bed, turning to push him down on the bed with an almost rough, entirely playful shove.

“Well, actually I have a few things to show you, but let's start with this.”

He pulled open a drawer of the bedside table, pulling out a slightly tattered slip of paper that had clearly been folded and refolded many times, a bottle of Gun Oil, and a roll of condoms he'd stashed in there when Sasha told him about the VA Hospital job and his imminent return to the land of the socially alive. He set the lube and condoms on the edge of the table, in easy reaching distance from the head of the bed, and then set the paper in Paulie's hand, closing his fingers around Paulie's.

“I don't have a shiny new paper because I haven't been with anyone since Adrianna was born—there are a lot of reasons that aren't important right now that answer the question of why. All I need you to know is that this paper tells you I'm clean, and I haven't been with anyone since I got these results. The

lube is to make you feel good, and the condoms are for in case we get carried away. Not planning anything; just can't help hoping, though."

A tightly furled knot of sorrow eased, the frayed ends of endless guilt and self-recrimination falling free in a small room in his soul. He dropped his head forward to hide the moisture glistening on the surface of his brown eyes. No one but Jeff had ever talked to him like that—not the sex part, but like he was special. Of all the people in the whole world, only these two men had seen him, and taken pains to show him the way he shone in their eyes. A hot salt drop landed on his lap.

The room stilled. Listening, Paulie couldn't even hear the sound of Eli's breath. Oh, hell. He'd ruined everything. Raising his head, he met Eli's eyes, and what he saw there, slammed through his chest like a comet falling through the vapor and heat of the atmosphere. Eli's eyes were shimmering too.

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When the drop of water fell from Paulie's eye, it cut free the thing in Eli that had been held in reserve. The day he and Sasha waited for a piss-covered piece of plastic to reveal the course of their future, he had learned in a fundamental way how life could turn on a dime. He'd also learned to listen to his heart and not give a flying fuck what the rest of the world thought. So when he saw that salt saturated liquid crystal proof of Paulie's vulnerability he took the sledge hammer he kept in the back of his heart's house and started knocking walls out.

Reaching with trembling fingers, he moved to tilt Paulie's face up, but the man surprised him by lifting his face on his own.

"Fuck. Looking at you steals my breath."

Abandoning his plans from earlier, he pushed Paulie flat, sliding his lush body up the bed until his dark brown hair rested against the pillows at the head of the bed. Slipping fingers under the edge of the tee he'd given Paulie to wear after his shower, the silky, resilient flesh under his hand made Eli's teeth ache with a need to bite, and made his dick point at the man like the needle of a compass pointing toward magnetic north.

Paulie drew in a ragged breath, speaking in those lilting tones that connected his vocal cords straight to Eli's cock. "It's—you see me."

Eli meant to answer, but the warm, rolling sound of the words hit him right in the gut. Anyway, just then his teeth made contact with the succulent, tender flesh that lay just above the waistline of the low cut sweats. Exhaling on a low moan, he gave himself over to the pure visceral pleasure of tasting the faintest trace of salt still on the man's flesh despite having showered less than half an hour ago. A hint of something else lingered on his skin, and after a moment of licking his way across the soft flesh, Eli identified it as the herbal cucumber and melon rinse he made for himself. Oh, ho. Someone had been peeking through the bathroom cupboards after his shower. That would be where the faint taste of salt came from as well. Eli used salt in the mix to keep the cucumber and melon from breaking down so quickly. He usually followed it with a special lotion as well, to keep his skin from getting irritated by the salt, but Paulie would have had no way to know of the high salt content unless he tasted the concoction.

"You taste like summer."

Eli pushed the sweats down a fraction farther and bit at the pad of flesh over one hipbone. Paulie gave a high cry, arching up off the bed. He liked that—how very convenient. Eli licked the bite mark he'd left behind, and then sucked at the spot while Paulie writhed and gasped below him. Those sounds were driving him mad as Alice's Hatter, though he'd never been one to play with mercury. He pushed Paulie's shirt—his shirt and oh yeah, didn't his dick thump hard and heavy against the inside of his jeans at the thought of Paulie wearing his clothes—high enough to get his mouth on those rose-brown nipples. He laved them with the flat of his tongue, nibbling and sucking before he blew streams of cool air across them. Paulie sang for him, sweet high notes of want and need punctuated by single syllable words in that sexy fucking accent.

"More. Oh, God. Please."

Reaching blindly to the table, Eli snagged the Gun Oil, dropping it on the bed next to Paulie's hip. He surged up to nip at those plump lips, sipping sighs

and moans from them as his fingers danced over the new land he was discovering inch by silky inch. Paulie waxed his chest. Eli grunted.

“No more waxing.”

Paulie blinked at him, brown eyes held wide open with the pupils wide and unfocused. “Wh-what?”

Eli pulled back. “No more waxing. Your body is perfect like it is.”

“Ookay.” The agreement was enough, even though the raised brows and down-turned lips sang a symphony of disbelief.

Eli would work on the belief later. For now, he was busy teaching and learning the body language that was a blend of his own and Paulie’s. He pushed the soft cotton of the T-shirt up over Paulie’s head, letting it linger for a moment over the other man’s face. Later they’d have to play a bit with blindfolds, when Paulie felt safe enough with him. Once he had the shirt free of Paulie’s hands, he tossed it to the far side of the bed, missing getting it all the way over so it hung over the edge of the bed like a wrinkled red testament to his focus being wholly taken by Paulie. Working his way back down the too smooth chest, he made his way quickly to the barrier of cloth just at Paulie’s hips. With one hand, Eli pulled the string, untying the little bow Paulie had put it in. Cute. Once that was done, Eli shoved himself down to Paulie’s feet.

“Lift your hips.”

With one quick yank, the soft cotton of the pants was crumpled in Eli’s hands, and he was easing it over Paulie’s feet. Glancing up with a toothy smile, Eli pulled Paulie’s legs apart, bending the knees to press them up toward Paulie’s chest.

“Hold those for me.”

Paulie grasped his knees, gasping as Eli squirted a bit of Gun Oil in his hand and slicked it along Paulie’s thick, circumcised cock as he shoved his other hand underneath Paulie’s ass. Paulie’s low moan and little wiggle sent more blood thumping straight to Eli’s groin. Palming Paulie’s cushiony cheeks, Eli tilted Paulie’s hips higher. Then, flexing his fingers against the bouncy resilience of the man’s flesh, he spread Paulie’s ass cheeks far enough



to get his first glimpse of the dusky pink rosette his mouth was watering to taste.

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Paulie lurched as Eli practically did a high dive head-first into his ass. Oh. My. God. Beautiful, demi-god Eli was eating his ass. And by all that was holy, it felt—it felt like nothing in Paulie’s prior experience. Eli lapped at his hole, his tongue moving in endless circles around the tight muscle there. What did the man do to make his tongue have such strength and endurance? Were there some sort of calisthenics for tongues that none of Paulie’s previous lovers had ever heard of?

At Eli’s startled intake of breath and short burst of laughter, Paulie realized he’d actually spoken those thoughts aloud. Oh, God. What would Eli think? As if the man were reading his thoughts, Eli spoke at that exact moment.

“While it’s very flattering to be considered the best you’ve ever had, I’m doing something wrong if you can still think about other men in any context.”

Paulie blinked up at the ceiling, his fingers tightening on his knees in reflexive mortification. Then there was a sudden squirting sensation as something warm and slippery rolled against his ass and then, with a sting and a pop, one of Eli’s big fingers was in Paulie’s ass. The digit seemed to have a road map and an unerring sense of direction, for once inside his body it slid straight across his prostate.

“Holy Moses on a pogo stick!”

The finger stroked again, jiggling a little as Eli gave a full on belly laugh. Paulie didn’t care, because the jiggling in addition to the pressure against his prostate was sending sparks flying behind his eyes. With a wiggle and a twist, another finger slipped in next to the first and Paulie started pushing his ass down toward them. In and out they slid, again and again, until he began to whine and beg. Then a third came to join the first two, and Paulie was chanting the same thing over and over again.

“More. Now. Please, in me, more.”

But, the fingers left him instead, leaving him whining and writhing on the bed. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, he dropped the hold he had on his knees to grab for his dick. A bigger hand smacked his away.

“No. Wait. I’ll get you there, Paulie. You want more?”

Paulie opened his eyes. Eli hovered over him, face stark with need, eyes big, nearly black with wanting and those crazy green and blue flecks just fucking glowing at him as the man moved to slowly strip off his clothing. Then he crawled back over Paulie, hanging tantalizingly above him again, his sandy brown hair hanging around his face and the muscles of his arms bunching and flexing as he lowered himself closer to Paulie. Shaking with need, Paulie drew in a shallow breath to speak.

“You. Want you. Please.”

Eli gave that nasty grin he’d given just before he started to eat Paulie’s ass Paulie surged up, wanting Eli’s lips back, needing the other man’s kiss like air in his lungs. He was desperate to taste himself on Eli’s mouth. Their lips met, tongues tangled in a rush of heat and wet and musk. Eli pressed him back against the bed with one hand on his chest.

“Like this?”

Paulie nodded, listening to the snap and crackle of a condom wrapper tearing open. Eli’s jaw clenched as he rolled the condom down. His eyes. Oh, sweet mercy, his eyes.

“Yes. Like this. Want. I want to see. Eyes.”

Eli grinned again, but this time softer at the edges, beads of sweat just starting to rise along the sides of his face.

“You want to see and be seen by these eyes, isn’t that right, Paulie?”

As he spoke, something fucking huge and hard pressed against Paulie’s hole. It hurt, but the hurt was good and felt like more. Paulie could feel his mouth stretching into an *O* of painful bliss. Eli gritted his teeth, and pressed forward slow and steady. Paulie breathed, locking his eyes on Eli’s, losing himself in the wild flecks of green and blue that almost didn’t seem real. The ring of muscle guarding the entrance to his hole gave way. Paulie breathed out

hard, and Eli slid all the way in. A finger feathered down the side of his face, and Paulie opened the eyes he didn't realize he'd closed.

“There you are.”

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Paulie's lashes fluttered down, so Eli bent to feather a kiss across his mouth, pulling back just enough to speak. “Keep your eyes open for me, Paulie. I want to watch your eyes when you come.”

Thrusting as he spoke those words wasn't strictly playing fair, but Eli didn't care. Something about Paulie pulled at him, and he was more than willing to play dirty, seeing as how he was playing for keeps. Paulie gasped, a flush of color running up his chest toward his neck and jawline. Eli picked up the pace, starting to slam his hips into the finely padded ass under him. He grasped one of Paulie's hands, pulling it down between them and wrapping the fingers around Paulie's cock.

“Yeah. Almost there, aren't you, Paulie? Come on. Stroke yourself. Push right over the edge, and let yourself fall.”

And then he didn't have the breath to tease Paulie with his words any more, too busy pumping in and out of his slick channel, too busy drinking in the wordless cries tumbling helplessly from the older man's lips. Paulie's mouth opened wide, sounds dwindling into a perfect silence until the moment glistening strands of pearly cream shot from the tip of his cock and a tiny catching sound whispered out from the back of his throat. Eli let himself go, thrusting wildly through the contractions milking his mind right out through his dick, yelling loud enough for both of them. He had just a moment to be glad that Adrianna was at his mom's place because *this* would surely have woken her, and then he was lost in a haze of white and pleasure that bent his mind and squeezed his whole being through a pinprick in the fabric of the universe. Lunging up, he fastened his teeth in the meaty place where Paulie's neck met his shoulder, biting down hard. Some fragment of sense remained, because he stopped shy of breaking the skin, if only just. Paulie yelled then, but Eli felt his cock twitch too, so it was okay. Then he collapsed, shuddering every time Paulie's channel contracted around his too sensitive shaft, taking

eons to realize the fucker was doing it on purpose. If Paulie hadn't laughed, he might have never caught on.

“Beautiful bastard. That's not sporting.”

Paulie gaped at him, and Eli replayed what he'd said in his head. “Oh, shit. You're not, are you? I mean, technically, I am a bastard, but that's all to the good 'cause if that prick was still around I'd have to go to prison for killing my own father.”

Paulie continued to gape. Eli slid to one side, shuddering again as his spent cock slipped free of Paulie's body. “What did I say Paulie? You're looking at me like I grew another head or something.”

A flush rushed over Paulie's face. “But... you—why did you call me beautiful?”

Now it was Eli's turn to gape. Lifting his brows nearly to his hairline, he rolled to his side. He grabbed a tissue from the box stashed in the headboard, sliding the used condom into it and tossing the whole mess into the bedside garbage. Girls had cans in the bathroom. Guys had them next to the bed. Eli shrugged. It made perfect sense to him. He threw his leg over Paulie's legs, and hauled him in until he was tucked right up against Eli's heart.

“I called you beautiful because you are. Now, if I've fucked all the sense out of you—as that question would indicate—I suggest you close your eyes and get some sleep. I'll be waking you up in a couple of hours to check that you don't have a concussion. How's the face?”

Paulie laughed and the bell-like tenor notes lit Eli's soul like sun through a stained glass window. Grinning, his sweet round cheeks creased with a smile, he touched one finger to his nose. “You ask now? It hurts. Still was worth it to kiss you though.”

Eli grunted. “Good. Go the fuck to sleep. I'm going to feed you some soup in a few hours, and put you back to bed, and then in the morning I'm going to kiss you some more. If any part of that doesn't work, now's your chance to negotiate.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

A hand roaming up his side woke Paulie in the morning. He jerked the covers, trying to pull them up to cover his little love handles. Eli smirked, pulling the crumpled green sheets down to place his hand directly over the wobbly bit Paulie had been trying to cover. Eli leaned forward. Paulie threw himself backward off the edge of the bed.

“Morning.”

Standing there with his hands clasped over his cock and balls, Paulie felt about twelve years old. This was fully as awful as the day he realized he had a crush on Louis Fenguli, except he'd had clothes on to hide his chub back then. Eli gave one of those Great White Shark smiles, throwing back the covers and crawling over the bed toward him like a big cat stalking prey. Paulie fled to the bathroom with a whimper. God. Eli was all lean, sinewy grace, like a tiger in the wild, while he was... like a damn overfed zoo penguin. He turned the shower on, muttering to himself. Eli turned the knob of the door Paulie could swear—

“I locked that door.”

Flashing those teeth Paulie could still feel against his flesh, Eli prowled closer. “Yes, you did. I just happen to know how to pick that lock.”

He wrapped both arms around Paulie, holding tight when he tried to wiggle away. “I was just going to take a good morning kiss, but if you keep wiggling like that I might get other ideas.”

Without waiting for permission, Eli swooped in, using that same curiously tender ferocity he'd displayed last night. He was probably just being careful of Paulie's nose. He didn't gag, or make noises like he's just been forced to lick the floor of a bathroom stall in some seedy bar's men's room. And he tasted—good. Real. Warm and a little funky, but that fled quickly. He bent Paulie back against the long bathroom counter, one hand holding the hip he'd bitten the night before and the other lightly framing Paulie's jaw with the tip of his pinky finger rubbing the soft spot behind Paulie's ear. Making little noises low in his throat, Paulie moved to tilt his head to the side, crying out in pain when his sore nose bumped Eli's.

“Ow, ow, Baby Jesus in a sidecar, that hurts.”

Eli snorted with laughter, dropping his head down to rest on Paulie’s shoulder while he shook with his repressed mirth. “I never heard anyone go to such lengths to avoid swearing. That’s it, I’m keeping you. You can teach me to talk in a child safe way.”

He snorted again, leaning back, fingers flexing against Paulie’s hip. “Good morning, Paulie. I’ll leave your clothes on the bed... I threw them in the wash last night after the second time I had to wake you. I’ll be in the kitchen making breakfast. You like pancakes? Bacon?”

Paulie’s stomach growled and heat rose in his cheeks. “Yeah. I love pancakes and bacon. Um, can we have scrambled eggs too?”

Eli brushed his lips against Paulie’s and did that sexy whisper-against-the-mouth thing again.

“Yeah. I’ll make you eggs, baby. You like ’em cheesy?”

Paulie flashed a look down at the little pooch of his belly, and then looked over at Eli’s flat, toned abs. “Um. No that’s okay. I’ll, ah... I can just have some toast and coffee.

Eli stepped back, eyes lit up with those flecks of blue and green again. A lopsided smile curved up one corner of his mouth. “Hah. Cheesy scramblers, pancakes with syrup and bacon for my baby it is. Don’t take too long in the shower, gorgeous. I want to have a moment with you to myself before that Killer-Ninja Barbie from next door descends on us.”

Then he was out the door before Paulie could find the right words to puzzle together a sentence that meant he really, really wanted a tiny slice of desert-dry toast and a cup of bitter black coffee to start his day. His stomach grumbled again, and he patted it absently.

“Yeah, he didn’t buy it either.”

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Eli slammed a few pans around as he pulled out the big griddle to make pancakes, and a nice cast iron frying pan to scramble the cheesy eggs for Paulie. If he ever got his hands on whatever fucker had made that man think

there was something wrong with his body he'd kick the ever-loving shit out of them. He knew though, he knew what a lot of those damn bitchy gay boys were like, worshipping at the altar of youth and beauty without a single thought that maybe not everyone—

“Jesus, Eli, what did those frying pans ever do to you?”

Eli spun around, his startled gaze landing on Hal Matheson. What the fuck was a shirtless Hal Matheson doing scratching his damn stomach in Eli's kitchen—really his hands were almost in his damn pubes considering the fucker hadn't even done up the placket of his button-fly jeans properly. Eli had just opened his mouth to ask Hal that very question when a breathless, barely dressed and clearly well-fucked Sasha tumbled through the connecting door leading from his kitchen to hers. Eli set the frying pan on the front left burner with perhaps a touch more force than strictly necessary. Christ, they both reeked of sex. No, that was wrong. Hal and he reeked of sex. Sasha's hair was wet, so she'd likely just taken a shower, while—

“Hal, what the fuck are you doing half naked in my Goddamn kitchen? And for God's sake, button up your damn pants. I really hate to bust your bubble, but I have no desire to see your cock. Save that for Sasha's bedroom.”

Sasha narrowed her eyes at him, but didn't speak. Hal put a gentle hand on her shoulder, pulling her around to look at him. “Baby, I thought you said he'd be okay with this.”

Tearing her laser-like gaze away from trying to carve curse words in his forehead must have been tough, but Eli had to give Sasha credit for pulling the task off with more aplomb than he'd have expected from a hussy with big purple hickeys decorating her throat. She turned a limpid, mush-filled look at Hal, pushing a hank of loose red hair out of her face.

“Yes, he will be okay with it. But Hal, honey, you were supposed to wait and come over with me.”

Hal shrugged, pointing toward Eli. “It sounded like a flipping home invasion. I didn't want you to come over here to find your baby's daddy gutted in his kitchen or something.”

Sasha was starting to look pissed, and curiously, that made Eli like Hal a little better, but still—

“Oi, Earthgirl... Hal Matheson?”

“Oi, Spaceman, Paulie Bellizi? Really? At least Hal didn’t single handedly set in motion the accidental impregnation of half the nubile females in the greater Syracuse area, including myself!”

A shocked cry from the hallway leading to the bedrooms on Eli’s side of the house had the other three whipping their heads around. Paulie stood there, his face blanched bone white. It was a neat trick considering his normal olive complexion. A rough snort from Hal tore Eli’s attention away from Paulie to regard the man leaning against the black tiled island in the center of Eli’s kitchen. Hal wasn’t paying Eli any mind though. He was standing with his arms folded across his muscular chest as he turned his head to glower hotly at Sasha.

“Dammit Sasha, everyone knows he was sick. The poor guy was in the hospital for a week after that incident, with double pneumonia and a case of that flu that killed a bunch of people. Show a little compassion.”

Sasha bristled, clearly gearing up to light into Hal—who was obviously going to be a fixture if he had both the balls and the good sense to stand up to Sasha when she was being an idiot. Eli’s estimation of him rose. Eli’s Earthgirl had gone to a lot of trouble, having his mom watch Adrianna and—hold on, Adrianna had been going to see one set of grandparents or the other at least once a week for the past six—

“You’ve been dating her for over six months, haven’t you?”

Hal gave a curt nod and scrubbed a hand over his face before nodding toward something behind Eli.

“You better go get your man, bro. I think he might be heading for the hills.”

Eli turned to spot the curve of Paulie’s plush, sweatpants-covered bottom disappearing through his front door. He took off at a run, shouting back over his shoulder to Hal.



“Go argue with her in her house. We can do brunch another time.”

Then he was out the door, and he needn't have run at all, because Paulie was on his knees next to his car, ass in the air and head down by the pavement. Eli had learned something yesterday, so he walked around to the passenger side of the car, dropped down to lay full on the ground and snagged the car keys a second before Paulie managed to.

Big brown eyes blinked at him from under the opposite side of the car. “Give them back, please.”

Eli bounced up to his feet, almost like yesterday. “Nope. Come back inside.”

Paulie clambered to his feet, face still so pale Eli was terrified he would keel over at any second. He tried to sidle around the car to get close enough to catch Paulie if he went down, but every time he moved closer, Paulie moved further away.

“Oh come on, Paulie. Stop making me chase your sexy Italian ass around the car. Are you really going to blow me off because my best friend is a bitch when her feathers get ruffled?”

Paulie shrugged. Plucking at the edge of his shirt with one hand, he stepped toward Eli. Holding out his hand, he spoke. “Not Italian—I'm Sicilian. Um. Please. Can I have my keys?”

The shake in his lightly-accented voice nearly made Eli cave, but he couldn't, not right now. If he gave in right now, Paulie would disappear. Eli just couldn't help being convinced they could maybe have something great. Maybe. But not if Paulie vanished into thin air. Eli made his voice low and a little mean.

“No. Not unless you look me in the eye and tell me why you want to leave.”

Paulie shook his head, but Eli could tell he wasn't refusing so much as working up his courage to say what he thought had to be said. Mrs. Cohen from across the street was pretending it took longer than two fucking seconds to pick her paper up off her front porch though, and the curtain on the Grasses' front window kept twitching. Eli lost his patience.

“Come inside and talk to me, Paulie. I sent Sasha and her boyfriend, or whatever the hell Hal is, back over to her place. Come inside. I don’t want this conversation to be TiVo’d by my damn nosey neighbors, okay?”

Paulie dropped his head again, nodding with a heavy reluctance that made Eli’s teeth ache, but he stood still and let Eli walk around the car to take his hand. Twining their fingers together, Eli pulled Paulie back in through the front door while winging prayers up, sideways, and in great big freaking curlicues to thank whomever was the patron saint in charge of gorgeous and klutzy gay Sicilian men.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Paulie knew eventually he was going to come face to face with someone whose life he had damaged that day, but dear God in Heaven, he'd never envisioned it happening like this. To have his ugly mistake rise up to smack his face this hard—especially the morning after such a wonderful night—was nearly unbearable. Eli—why wasn't he looking at Paulie like he was the scum of the earth? If Paulie understood things correctly, he'd been the cause of an unplanned pregnancy that had set Eli's best friend on a life path she never would have chosen otherwise.

“I don't understand why you want to say anything to me. I—”

Eli turned, pushing the front door closed behind them with a thump, and turning the deadbolt. Then the younger man continued into the house, dragging Paulie behind him again. When they reached the kitchen, he pushed Paulie down onto one of the tall, dark wooden barstools arranged on the far side of the kitchen island-slash-breakfast bar. Paulie's plump ass hit the thick red leather cushion with an audible smacking noise. Eli used their still linked fingers to draw first Paulie's arm, and then his whole torso forward. Bending his head, Eli brushed a kiss against Paulie's lips.

“What are you doin—”

“Shut up. Don't you move, not a single inch. I'm going to lock the connecting door so Sasha can't come swooping back in here in five minutes or so when she realizes what a nasty bitch she just was. She can grovel later, after I get a chance to chew her ass off in private—and not in the fun way I was chewing on your ass earlier.”

Paulie couldn't hold silent though, not when he knew full well the fault was his. “But I was the one who made all those faulty condoms... I-I bet she never planned to be a mom when she was what, seventeen? Eighteen, maybe?”

Eli leaned in close enough his lips brushed Paulie's, and the touch sent shivers racing up Paulie's spine. “We are not having this conversation until I lock that damn door. Wait here. Do not make me chase you around Syracuse. Understand?”

With that, he slapped Paulie's car keys down on the gleaming black tiles of the counter top. Stalking off toward the slightly ajar door on the far side of the kitchen he still held Paulie firmly in place with the masterful tone of his voice.

“Look at the refrigerator and tell me what you see, Paulie.”

Tearing his gaze away from the long line of Eli's body sent shards of glass tumbling to and fro in Paulie's stomach. Putting his attention anywhere else was so terrible and lovely when he knew full well he was never going to get to look at Eli like this again, not when Eli really understood what he'd done. The slope of Eli's naked shoulder was both balm and scourge to Paulie's eyes. He turned with more than a little relief to see what Eli demanded he observe. Nothing could hurt more than gazing on what Paulie wanted more than the svelte body he'd dreamed of having but never lived in, more than his next lungful of air. But he never really had Eli, either.

The gleaming silver of the fridge's surface was interrupted over and over. Too many badly drawn pictures to count, big, impossibly bright, magnetized letters and numbers holding them up. A cauldron of molten iron tipped, pouring itself through some crack in time and space to fill Paulie's entire gut with a burning the likes of which he'd never thought to feel this side of hell. He gasped and craned his stinging eyes back to Eli. Heart pounding as the pieces fell into place, he opened his mouth to speak but found his voice completely burned away.

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Eli's pulse pounded in his head as he pushed the connecting door carefully closed. He knew the second Paulie put it all together from the stricken gasp. Turning the lock—of course Sasha had a key, but the fact he'd locked it at all would give her pause, and possibly give Hal time to catch up to her fractious ass and pull her away until Eli opened the door of his own accord. He turned back to Paulie. Shit. The man's face was even whiter than before. Scratch that, it was almost green. He looked like he was about to lose the breakfast he hadn't had, all over the the pain-in-the-ass-to-keep-clean black tile counter that had taken Eli nearly three months to get done to his satisfaction.

“Look again, Paulie. You're not really seeing what's there.”

Paulie turned huge, wounded looking brown eyes on him. “You’re the father—I—you’re bi?”

Eli shrugged, a painful heat starting to skitter over his skin. “Not the point. Sort of. I dunno, I guess I think it’s kind of a spectrum. I—geez, it’s embarrassing, okay? I wanted to have sex. Sasha wanted to have sex. But neither of us wanted the first time to be with some jerk who’d tell the whole school about it the next day. So it was supposed to be safe, right? We were best friends, and there was no chance of any weird confusion about that just ’cause we had sex. Even back then, I knew I liked guys. At eighteen my dick would stand up for a summer breeze though, so it wasn’t difficult to perform. We used a condom—as Sasha so eloquently informed you—but it broke at a critical moment and we ended up with Adrianna.”

Paulie’s face looked more stricken than before, but Eli thought he knew why, and what’s more, he was pretty sure he could show Paulie that he was wrong. He turned and stepped over to the fridge. Once there, Eli began to take down some of the things. Some of them were stuck there in haste over the past few years, some with tears and laughter, and some with careful precision and as wonderful surprises on special days. As he took them down, he described each one to Paulie. The picture from their first terrible Christmas after they found out Sasha was pregnant but before Adrianna came into their lives. They posed woodenly before a festive backdrop with his mum. Mum’s smile was wide and genuinely pleased while the lines of strain showed clearly on his and Sasha’s faces.

“My mum promised we’d want this stupid picture later. We were so scared, Paulie, you know? Nothing more than babies ourselves and there we were, about to have a baby of our own.”

He snorted out a laugh, raking a hand through his hair as he set the picture directly in front of Paulie.

“We didn’t have the money to get more than one big one printed. Mum has it up in her living room. She tells all her friends that even though Sasha and I look like a couple, we aren’t, and then she pats Sasha’s belly in the picture and starts talking about how beautiful her granddaughter is.”

Next, he pulled down the brown crayon scribble with a dizzying swirl of blue and green to one side. Adrianna had proudly declared the monstrosity da-da.

“Did you know there’s this really funny period of time when little kids call everything da-da? Well, at least that’s what Adrianna did. God, once she stepped in dog shit and called it da-da. I seriously think maybe she thought da-da was a color and not a person.”

Then he put the first Father’s Day card, the irreplaceable one with the tiny hand and footprints inside, in Paulie’s trembling hand. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he remembered the stupid, worried look on Sasha’s face when she gave it to him.

“I thought Sasha was going to cry that day. We’d just moved in here, and everything was still such a damn mess. Her folks put up the down payment for this place and cosigned so we could get the loan, but we wouldn’t let them do anything else.”

Paulie held the little card in his shaking hand, face tipped down. Eli growled, reaching out to place a finger under the man’s chin and push up.

“We’ve got this big stupid album where we put stuff when the fridges get too crowded. At the very back are four pages we put in the day after Adrianna was born, the day we decided to keep her and try to make a family by our own standards.”

Paulie’s lips were trembling as hard as his hands, but he still wasn’t speaking. Eli’s heart was beating in long, slow thuds.

“One of those pages got filled up a month ago, on May seventeenth—”

Paulie’s eyes widened. “Our graduation day.”

Eli moved around the counter slowly, trailing one hand on the surface to cool his hot hands. When he reached Paulie, he pulled the stool out from the counter to wedge his body between the hard surface and the open spot he created by spreading Paulie’s legs.

“The last two pages are for us to put pictures of Adrianna’s other two daddies when we find them. I’m not saying your picture is going to go on that

page, Paulie. But I am saying it could, maybe, someday. If you want it to, and we give this thing a shot.”

Grasping both of Paulie’s hips, he sank his fingers into the sweet pad of flesh he found there, pulling the other man forward. “I have to warn you though—you don’t get to meet Adrianna for a while. And, Sasha is pretty much the definition of a redhead. She’s all flash, fire, and a lot of apologizing after the fact. You’ll get used to that part. Well, you could get used to it. I—God, Paulie. Say something. Tell me if you think you could give this a try.”

Paulie still didn’t speak, and now the trembling had spread to his whole body. Eli pulled him a fraction farther forward, to where his ass wasn’t all the way on the stool any more, right to where he had to lean into Eli or risk falling on the floor. Then he leaned down to whisper against the other man’s mouth. Dirty tactics, but again, Eli didn’t give a fuck.

“Please give us a shot, Paulie. I really think we could be great.”

Paulie’s arms moved, hands releasing the death grip they held on the sides of the barstool’s cushion to slide up around Eli’s neck. The rasp of skin sliding over skin made Eli draw in a fast, hard breath. Then Paulie whispered back to him, but Eli’s heart was beating so loudly in his ears he couldn’t tell what was said. This was too important to get wrong, so he crushed the protests of his pride and said what he thought Paulie might need to hear.

“I couldn’t hear you, Paulie. My heart was beating too loud. I’m scared as shit that you said something like ‘that’s nice’ which would actually be the nicest brushoff in the history of gay romance, but I’m gonna pretend you said yes, and maybe even gave me a rousing ‘yes, please, let’s try’.”

Paulie smiled then, thank fuck. He lifted his head a fraction, pressing his lips in a chaste, closed-mouth kiss against Eli’s. “I said, ‘Yes, I’d like that’—I don’t know if it’ll work—but I’d like to try.”

Eli’s fingers tightened on Paulie’s hips for a second to hide the way his knees wobbled at the sound of that smoke-filled tenor promising to try. Then he lifted Paulie completely off the stool, spinning around to seat himself on the stool with Paulie draped over his lap. Then he got down to the business of proving to Paulie that he’d made a very wise decision. A long time and a lot of

swapped spit later, he raised his head to holler at the annoyingly persistent scratching coming from the door connecting his place to the other half of the duplex.

“Oi! Earthgirl, you’ll have to apologize later. I’m busy playing Doctor.”

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Butcher, baker, candlestick maker... ummm, eww, every chance I get, and I surely would if these damn characters would ever shut up. Born in West Palm Beach, Florida and raised... er, is all over the damn place a sufficiently descriptive term? No? Then how about this? Tinker, tailor, Indian chief... Ooooh, especially when smexy men are involved (!), only under duress, and did the cheek-bones give it away?*

*Seriously? I've lived in Washington D.C., Virginia, Upper Michigan, Texas, New York, California, and Alabama in the United States; Hessen in Germany, London in England, Masirah Island in Oman and... sometimes it was in a house, sometimes in a tent, and sometimes anyplace I could find to lay my head.*

*I've been in love with words since before I drew breath, and I don't see that ever changing. I write stories. Sometimes I write music with them, sometimes they're poems, and lately, to my great delight, M/M erotic romance. Yum. Smexy man to the second... or third power... now that's the kinda math I can get behind!!*

*The hair curls or frizzes as it will, the eyes are green and tend to look in two different directions—no, really—and the rest is subject to change. You know the guy who didn't know if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man or a man dreaming he was a butterfly? Yeah, that's me, but substitute drag queen for butterfly and wacky, wild ex-Army chick for man.*

## Contact Info

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