

A black silhouette of a man in profile, facing left, looking down at a smartphone held in his right hand. He is wearing a long-sleeved shirt and trousers. The background is white.

Cari Z

Making It

Work

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

MAKING IT WORK

By Cari Z.

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A handsome silver-haired man stares into the camera, leaning his head against one hand. He's backlit by the sun, and his face and bare chest are in shadow. He appears both intent and faintly amused, and it's hard to look away from his smoldering eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm sending this on behalf of my boss of whom the picture depicted. Been working with him a couple of years as his law firm as his secretary replacing a string of female secretaries in just a few months.

He's not difficult to work for, my boss is. Honestly. I just think my successors expected too much from him... outside of work. I mean, look at his face! Admittedly, even I have a bit of crush on him. But even I had to face the fact that he's way, waaay out of my reach. Come to think of it, he's never had any romantic involvement with anybody during the years I've worked for him. The only dinner, lunch, or breakfast reservations I have had to make for him were either for work meetings or with his folks. Which reminds me, I have to make one soon for the latter as his folks are coming for a visit the day after tomorrow.

As courteous as he'd been with them, my boss doesn't really seem close or comfortable with his elders. He gave me a short version of his not-so-happy-happy childhood earlier in my days so that I stopped yapping at him to buy meaningful gifts for them. As kind and quiet my boss is, he can be quite stern when he rebukes me. I find this quite sexy, but please don't tell him I say so.

So, dinner reservations for three on next Friday evening... Wait, is that a "4" he wrote in my agenda or I need to have my eyes checked? It IS! Does this mean he'd bring a date to meet the 'rents? How did I miss this? I didn't see him behaving any differently around the office. People who date should've shown some symptoms, shouldn't they? And how come I never known that he's gotten close with anyone; male or female? I'm with him almost 12 hours a day! Well, at the office, on the phones, etc., etc.

I've got to find out more about this!!!

Sincerely,

Didi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: lawyer, age gap, friends to lovers, humorous, over age 40, slow burn/ust

Word Count: 18,254

Dedication

Huge thanks to Tiffany, Caitlin and Eloreen, without whom this would have three times as many mistakes. You're all so good to me.

MAKING IT WORK

By Cari Z.

As soon as I got to the office on Wednesday morning, I knew something was wrong.

For starters, my boss' door was closed. The only time he ever closed his door was when he was with a client. The rest of the time he left it open because the man had something against his intercom and refused to use it to let me know when he needed something. There were personal assistants in this building who could go for days without ever speaking to their lawyer in person, just handling errands and delivering files and taking care of business via their computer and the intercom. Not my boss. Not Beau Montgomery.

The second "wrongness" tipoff was the fact that my coffee was stone-cold when I picked it up off my desk. The three of us had a habit of ordering coffee for each other from the shop down the block, depending on who got in first. That meant Beau usually made the order, but the coffee was almost always still hot by the time I got in. I looked across the hall at Lorna, who grimaced and shrugged at me. "It's been this way since I got in," she said.

"And your coffee?"

"Lukewarm," she said ominously. "And I got here at seven." Lorna's start times revolved around how much sleep her almost two-year-old had gotten the night before, which meant she might be in as late as nine or as early as six thirty. Once Lorna was awake, she was awake, a trait her daughter Caroline had apparently inherited.

"How is the birthday girl?"

"Happy that her grandma is there to look after her today. Mark is too, it gave him a chance to sleep in." Lorna pointed a finger at the door. "Back to *that*, though. You don't know what's up?"

"No." I sat on the front edge of my desk, and tapped on the lid of my cup as I considered it. "I left around seven last night. Beau was still here, but he was getting ready to leave too."

"The earliest Starbucks delivers is six-fifteen," Lorna said. "He must have

made the order as soon as he came in, for it to be *blah* by the time I got here. So something happened last night, either here or at home, to make him..." She considered for a moment, then decided on, "Chilly today."

Uh-oh, *chilly*. Not a good descriptor for the man we both at one time or another called boss. Beau wasn't really an effusive guy, but he had a warmth about him, a gentility and friendliness that made him popular with his clients and the other senior partners at Bowman & Sons, as well as his staff. I'd come to work for him with the expectation that I'd be sent back down into the secretarial pool on the first floor after a week, which was what he did with the three candidates for this job just before me. I had expected someone demanding, unreasonable and possibly misogynistic if the comments from one of the girls who preceded me were true.

Instead, I met Beau, who asked me to call him that instead of Mr. Montgomery because, "Please, don't make me sound like my father." He was courteous and professional, and warmed up enough to lift me out of the shark pool and make me his personal assistant after the trial week. In the two years since then, I could count on one hand the number of times he'd left his office door closed in the morning, and one had been because he'd been stuck in traffic during one of Seattle's freak snowstorms. Another had been right after the death of a client. Never without a very good reason.

"Check his messages, it's possible something went wrong with the Davis case," Lorna advised. "Or look at his schedule. Maybe he has to get an emergency root canal or something."

"The Davis case is a slam dunk, we're just waiting for opposing counsel to come back with the signed contracts at this point," I argued as I walked around to my chair and booted up the computer. I could have checked Beau's schedule on my phone; I had access to his work email and files, but I didn't feel like squinting at a tiny screen after a late night out. I stared at my reflection in the dark screen while waiting for it to turn on. I looked... pretty good. No bags under my eyes, my hair very deliberately messy, my shirt crisp and pressed. Not like I'd been clubbing until two a.m. before heading home to get as much sleep as I could cram in before coming in to work. I loved my job, but I wasn't going to let my social life suffer because of it, unlike *some* people I could mention. Not that I ever would.

"You left Saturday free, right?" Lorna reminded me as I opened Beau's schedule. "Year one was bad enough, there's no way I'm having a birthday party for Carrie with a dozen other toddlers at it without plenty of backup."

“Yeah, of course,” I said, skimming the appointment list for the rest of the week.

“And you put it into Beau’s calendar? Because he’s brilliant with corporate mergers but not so good with remembering dates.”

“Yes, I’ve got it.” There it was, Carrie’s second birthday party in pretty pink text. If I could have made it sparkle, I would have. Lorna had been Beau’s longtime personal assistant before taking a year off when her daughter was born, and they were more like family than work acquaintances at this point. Beau was great with Carrie. I had watched, with my own stunned eyes, as she squished a grape all over his gorgeous silk tie while babbling at him during a visit two weeks ago. He had just smiled, cleaned off her hands and gone tie-less for the rest of the day, which I strongly felt he should do more often. I doubt I could get away with Carrie’s method, though.

I scanned the rest of the schedule for anything out of place. There was the teleconference with Trident International, there was his meeting with the other senior partners tomorrow, there was Jackson Hughes’ appointment tomorrow... oh, that would be fun. Jackson was a beautiful man and an incorrigible flirt, and he always came bearing flowers for Lorna and a compliment for me. He was one of Beau’s oldest clients, and they got along like the proverbial house on fire. If Beau was ever going to consider dating someone, it would probably be someone like Jackson: handsome, successful, and outgoing.

The rest of his schedule for the week was pretty open, except for—oh, there. A new appointment with his parents. They came up from Charlotte every few months, more often in the summer when the weather was better, and they always got together with Beau for a meal while they were here.

I had never met Beau’s parents, but I didn’t have a sterling opinion of them. Back when I first started working with Beau and was eager to learn more about him, I’d not-so-delicately broached the upcoming Mother’s Day celebration by asking, “So what would you like me to order for your mom? Or is that something you prefer to take care of yourself?”

Beau had stopped in his tracks on the way into his office and looked at me. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s Mother’s Day this Sunday,” I’d said with a smile. “What would you like to do for your mom? I always get my mother a pair of baseball tickets—she loves the Rockies. We used to go to the games together before I moved out here. What would you like to do?”

“Nothing.”

I stared at him, aghast. “Nothing?” I squeaked.

“No, Eric. Nothing.”

“But she’s your *mother*.” And I knew she wasn’t dead or anything, I’d already scheduled several lunches for them at Canlis on other visits. “Don’t you want to do something special for her?”

“No. That’s a fight I’m not about to have again.” Then he’d walked into his office and closed the door, leaving me confused and feeling like I’d done something wrong.

That was the first time Beau took me out to lunch. On busy days, he ordered in for both of us, but on days he thought he’d been rude, we went out together. It was a level of consideration I’d never had from a boss before, and just made me more confused with regards to his mom. Beau was clearly a thoughtful guy, so why wouldn’t he want to do something special for her? He’d done his best to explain as we fought for a table in one of my favorite cafés.

“I’m not close to either of my parents, I never have been,” Beau said as he waited for his chowder to cool enough to eat. “They didn’t take my coming out well, or my decision to go into law and not banking.”

And *bam*, in one fell swoop he’d answered a question I hadn’t quite been nervy enough to ask. The way he’d gotten rid of his previous, sometimes very *hungry* personal assistants had suggested that he wasn’t interested in being pursued by the ladies, but that wasn’t enough to base assumptions on. Then I caught up on the rest of his statement.

“Wait, your parents are unhappy that you’re a *lawyer*? Isn’t being a successful lawyer the sort of thing most parents pray for when it comes to their kids?”

“I don’t know about most parents, but mine didn’t care for it, no,” Beau had said with a little smile. He was so pretty when he smiled. “My father managed a hedge fund that I was expected to take over. I preferred a job that was more honest.”

“And so you became... a lawyer.”

“Trust me, by comparison? This is much easier on my conscience.”

I had no idea what was involved in being a hedge fund manager, but I’d at

least heard of Bernie Madoff. If Beau didn't want anything to do with that kind of crap, who was I to say no? "Well, my mother would freaking love you," I said to him. "In fact, she already does because you have, according to her, *given my life a sense of purpose*." I loved my mother, but she was such a hippie sometimes. "She sends me your weekly horoscope." And cue my enormous blush. I hadn't meant to let that slip.

Beau's smile got wider. "How does she know my birthday?"

"I... may have mentioned you were a Capricorn at one point. It's the kind of thing she asks, it's like knowing that your eyes are blue as far as she's concerned!" I said defensively. "I'm not sharing anything really personal with her, or anything pertaining to any of your cases, I swear..."

"Eric." His voice cut through my imminent babble. "It's fine. Relax. Eat."

When Beau told me to do something, I did it. Not just because he was my boss, either. There was something about his delivery that just got me, *bam*, right in the chest. It made me feel *happy* to do what he said, which was maybe kind of fucked up, but clearly worked for me. We ate lunch, and he ended up upgrading my mom's seats from the nosebleeds to practically right behind home plate, which made her wax rhapsodic about Beau's karma for five straight minutes when I next called her.

More crumbs of information dropped about Beau's family as time went on, and none of them left me with a great impression. The little that Lorna shared with me when she came back to work didn't make Beau's past any less murky, and I decided not to pry. Beau was friendly, but he was also my boss, and his past was none of my business. His parents were nothing more than names on a screen to me, and all I had to do with them was book a table for three at—

Wait. A table for *four*? No, that had to be wrong. Four people implied that Beau was bringing a date to their dinner, and as far as I knew, Beau didn't date. He hadn't in the two years I'd known him. He didn't take days off, he didn't schedule weekend getaways. He didn't even eat out unless it was for a business meeting or with his folks. So what was this, then?

"Lorna," I said slowly. "Are you aware... I mean... is Beau dating someone?"

Lorna snorted. "Are you kidding me? He hasn't dated anyone, really dated them, since Richard, and that was four years ago." Her gaze narrowed a bit. "Why do you ask?"

“Because...” It suddenly occurred to me that maybe I wasn’t supposed to be spreading this around. Lorna and Beau were good friends, but if he was dating someone and hadn’t told her yet, there had to be a good reason for it. I plastered on a quick smile. “It’s nothing, I was just wondering. Since, you know, Carrie’s party is coming up. I thought he might bring a date or something.”

“Right, because the best time to introduce your significant other to your closest friends is at a toddler’s birthday party,” Lorna deadpanned. “Let them see you handle the chaos that is chocolate cake and bouncy castles, it’s a surefire turn on. Eric,” and now her voice took on a lilt that I knew to fear, “are you wondering because you’ve finally decided to declare yourself?”

“What? No! Shut up,” I snapped at her.

“You know we could get around the conflict of interest thing by switching desks. Papa Bowman doesn’t care who he has for an assistant as long as his files are enlarged enough that he can see them around the cataracts.”

I shook my head. “You just want your old job back. I’m not falling for it.”

“Honestly,” and now the lilt was gone, replaced by something more sincere. I chanced a look at Lorna, and saw her staring at me with a soft expression. “I only mentioned it because I really do think you guys could work.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not going to be that kind of cliché. I’m not trying to get in Beau’s pants, thank you very much.”

“You don’t have to try, he’d *let* you in, I’m sure of it! Belt off, zipper down, everything but a welcome mat laid out for you.”

“It’s unprofessional, and overreaching, and he’s a brilliant corporate lawyer while I am a glorified secretary, and just *no*.”

“Fine,” Lorna said, pursing her lips as she sat back and looked at her computer. “You don’t want to think about it, that’s fine. But don’t go and denigrate our jobs just because you have self-esteem issues, Eric. The work we do is what lets our ‘brilliant’ lawyers get their jobs done, and it’s important.”

How had I turned the morning into such a clusterfuck in so little time? “You’re right,” I said apologetically. Lorna didn’t say anything. “Really, you’re right, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Shouldn’t you be working?”

Oh ouch, now it was going to be the cold shoulder until I made amends. I knew Beau used to send her flowers when he screwed up, but I didn’t want to copy him. I made my own mistakes; I’d find my own way to make amends.

First things first, though. I needed to make this reservation. A big part of me wanted to knock on Beau's door and confirm that he really meant four—maybe it was all a mistake, a typo that could be laughed off. If it wasn't, though, I'd probably regret asking, and I'd already committed enough faux pas that morning. I called up Canlis, made the reservation with the very friendly hostess, then got to work. I spent a few hours conferring with Research on some of the information Beau was going to need for upcoming cases, spot-checked a few briefs before forwarding them to him, and answered calls from way too many people who wanted a piece of Beau's time.

Beau was the only senior partner at the firm who wasn't part of the Bowman clan, and that made him desirable to a lot of prospective clients. Bowman & Sons was a successful, very profitable firm, but the family motto seemed to be, "Don't fuck with me, because I will *end* you." All five of them, from Bowman senior to his youngest daughter, Jennifer, were long on aggression and short on charm. They got results, but they often left hard feelings behind. Beau was the exact opposite, but managed to do just as well for himself. Thus, the inundation of requests for his time. I'd had clients try to bribe me to get a meeting with him with everything from boat rides to Super Bowl tickets, which was just disgusting.

Especially since the Broncos lost. I still owed Beau fifty bucks for that, damn it. You'd think the man would have some loyalty and stick with the Panthers but no; he was a Seahawks fan all the way.

At half an hour before noon, I stepped out into the main hall and dialed up Mark. "I need your help," I told him.

"Did you annoy Lorna?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Are you guys coming for lunch?"

"Yeah. Carrie's been asking for her mother all morning, naturally, and poor Grandma's at her wit's end."

"Can you bring a cupcake from Cupcake Royale with you?" I'd have ordered one myself, but it was on the way from Mark and Lorna's house, and I didn't want to go out any longer than I had to with her upset at me.

"What do I get out of this?"

"A happy wife," I said sincerely. "And a happy wife means a happy life, or so I've heard. And I'll make it up to you with a bottle of your favorite scotch at the next company party."

“Done. No, sweetie, it isn’t Mommy, it’s Uncle Eric,” Mark said, and I heard Carrie’s baby-high squeal of delight. It made me smile, despite my crappy morning. “We’ll be there soon.”

“I’m aquiver with anticipation,” I said sincerely.

“Dude, you should be.” Mark hung up, and I went back to my desk to sweat out the minutes until lunch.

Mark and Co. were about five minutes late, but Lorna’s annoyance evaporated when she saw Carrie running down the hall, pretty in a pink dress, patent leather shoes and a purple cowboy hat. Never let it be said the DeLaureo girls didn’t know how to accessorize. “There she is!” Lorna cooed, and caught her daughter as she hurled herself at her mother’s legs. “How’s my sweetheart today?”

“Energetic,” Lorna’s mother said wryly as she sat down in her daughter’s chair with a sigh. Mark carried up the rear, and plopped a red velvet cream cheese cupcake down on Lorna’s desk with a little flourish.

“Aww, honey, you didn’t have to get me that.”

“It’s from Eric,” he said, and I loved him so much in that moment.

Lorna turned to look at me. I smiled hopefully. “Oh, stop it,” she sighed. “You’re forgiven. Just don’t be an idiot again.”

“I wish I could promise that, but I’m pretty sure I’d be lying,” I said.

The moment was broken by Carrie, who looked at me and shrieked, “Red!” She held her arms out toward me, and I took her with a grin.

I had been Red since Carrie could speak, back when Eric was still a little too hard. It was an obvious nickname; my hair was the kind of bright red you usually only got out of a bottle. I was pale and freckled, broad-shouldered and lanky, and in another life, I’d probably been an Irish step dancer, because I had fast feet and a good sense of rhythm that didn’t come from either of my parents.

Carrie bounced her shiny shoes off my hip and said a string of words that made no sense, but I nodded anyway. “You don’t say.”

“Yes!”

“Oh, you do! Well, that’s different then.”

“No!”

“No, it’s not?”

“Are you arguing with a two-year-old?”

I spun around and looked at Beau, standing in his open doorway with a little smile on his face. The PA in me took note of the faint silver stubble along his jaw, the fact that he was wearing his reading glasses despite hating the things, the lack of tie—all signs of fatigue. The admirer in me insisted that the stubble was sexy, the glasses were cute and losing the tie was a great first step. I reined in my unprofessional side and said, “I’m trying to agree with her, actually. She’s just being difficult.”

“Canny,” Lorna corrected, peeling the paper away from her cupcake. “Carrie is canny. She might make a great lawyer someday.”

“Oh yeah?” Carrie reached toward Beau, and he took her easily, making my heart flutter a little bit. Don’t get me wrong, babies weren’t really a thing with me; I didn’t have any little nieces or nephews of my own, and the only child I spent any time with at all was Carrie. But there was something about seeing how the tension in Beau’s broad shoulders eased as he looked at the beaming little girl that made me stupidly mushy.

“What do you think, sweetheart?” Beau asked. “Do you want to be a lawyer someday?”

Carrie considered for a moment, and then nodded decisively. “Yes! ’Cuz Mommy.”

“Because then you’d get to spend all day with your mommy?”

“Yes.”

Beau chuckled. “Looks like you win, Lorna.”

“Of course I win,” his former PA said tartly, coming over and taking Carrie back before she secured her grip around Beau’s glasses. “I’m *Mommy*. And right now, Mommy wants a real lunch, not just sugar, good as it is.” Mark was finishing off the rest of the cupcake, clearly more than happy to make sugar a big part of *his* lunch. “We’ve got reservations at Seastar, but you two are welcome to join us.”

“Work,” Beau said, taking his glasses off and rubbing to soothe the indents on the bridge of his nose. “But feel free to go, Eric.”

I suppressed a frown and said instead, “I’ve got plenty to do here. I’ll order something in for us.”

“Fine. Mark, Gwendolyn—” Of course he remembered Lorna’s mother’s name. “Have a good day. I’ll see you both Saturday.”

“Bee!” Carrie declared, and Beau smiled for her.

“You too, sweetheart,” he told her. Lorna grabbed her jacket and purse, and the little family left, and Beau headed back into his office. I stopped him before he could close the door, though.

“Quick question,” I said before I could lose my nerve. “On your schedule, I saw that you need a reservation for four on Friday. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Uh-oh, single-syllable answers, that wasn’t a good sign. Nevertheless, I forged ahead. Might as well go for broke while I had the chance.

“Whose name should I put down for the reservation?” I smiled a little. “Are you seeing someone special?” It would be more than a little depressing if he was, but I still kind of hoped for it. Beau deserved to be with someone who could see how fantastic he was.

“Leave it generic.”

“But—”

“Eric.” Beau stared straight at me from where he stood beside his desk, and I froze like a deer in the headlights. “Just do it, please.”

“Yes, sir.” I shut the door behind me and exhaled slowly. *Yikes*. That was the voice of someone on his last nerve, someone doing his damndest to keep from yelling. Being Beau, of course it meant tacking a “please” onto the end of it, but that did nothing to soften the authority of his voice. I usually loved it when he got all authoritative, but today there was no humor to soften the blow, no pat on the back or clap on the shoulder. It was just Beau, impatient and tired, and me, too slow at doing my job. I was supposed to lessen his stress, not add to it. Chastened, I sat back down at my desk and got back to work.

The reservations were easy, Beau was a regular patron of Canlis and it was one of the few restaurants in Seattle that his mother approved of, apparently. I worked steadily through his schedule for the next two weeks, noting his court appearances, the files that would have to be pulled for briefs, the prep time for meetings with opposing counsel... nothing else personal. Not a hint.

“Eric?”

“Huh?” I hadn’t even heard Beau come out of his office; I’d been too absorbed in my computer.

“Where’s lunch?”

“What?”

“It’s been forty-five minutes. Lunch?”

Shit, fuck, goddamn son of a bitch motherfucker. “I’m so sorry,” I said slowly, knowing my face was almost as red as my hair. I couldn’t lie to save my life, my tendency to flush at the first hint of discomfort gave me away every time. “I completely forgot to order it. I just got caught up with work. I’ll do it now.” I reached for the file folder of delivery menus, silently cursing myself.

“Don’t bother.”

“No, you need to eat,” I said resolutely, looking at the menus. “Is Italian okay?”

“Eric.” All of a sudden, Beau’s hand was on my shoulder, the touch light enough that I wanted to push back into it, just to get more of the shivery sensation Beau’s hands always gave me. “It’s fine. Let’s go out, I need a break from the office anyway.”

“You want... me to go with you?” I clarified.

“I don’t want to go out to eat on my own.”

“Just checking,” I said with a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Just let me shut this off...”

“I’ll meet you downstairs in five minutes,” he said, heading back into his office. I watched him go, feeling a little whiplashed by his mercurial mood today, but not about to object to being taken out to lunch by Beau.

I beat him down to the lobby and waited on a bench near the front desk. The receptionist was named Amanda, and she had been one of the hopefuls a couple of years ago that Beau had given the boot. Needless to say, we weren’t friends.

“Running some errands for your boss?” she asked me once she finished a call.

“I’m not running anywhere—” I spread my arms out and gestured to myself. “—Obviously. I’m sitting. I like this bench.”

“Picking something up, then?”

“Nope.”

Her eyes narrowed. "Waiting for someone?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because if my secretary was wasting time sitting around in the lobby without a good reason, I'd definitely want to know about it," Amanda mused. "Maybe I should let Mr. Montgomery know."

"Maybe you should," I agreed. "Oh look, here he comes!" I waved as Beau got off the elevator. He'd put his jacket and tie back on, but left the jacket unbuttoned. The silver-gray suit was a shade or two darker than his hair, and looked amazing on him. Undone by bits and pieces, Beau still looked good, but when he put everything together, he was just edible.

I smiled at Beau, and then turned back to Amanda. "Now's your chance."

"Chance for what?" Beau asked.

"Nothing, Mr. Montgomery," she said so cheerfully that I almost couldn't hear the sound of her molars grinding together.

He looked at her for a long moment, then turned away. "Ready for lunch?"

"I'm starving," I assured him. We left the Bowman & Sons building and walked down to the closest seafood café. The lunch rush was over, so we got a table pretty fast, and our food a few minutes later. Beau got the chowder, of course; I don't think he ever ordered anything different when we came here. I got a catfish po' boy and we each had coffee, because this was Seattle and because, honestly, you could never have too much.

I decided to open the gates, so to speak. "I'm sorry for prying earlier. That was rude."

"You were fine," Beau said immediately. "You just caught me in a bad mood. I'd hoped this particular dinner tradition was over since my parents didn't bother last year, but then my mother called me last night, convinced that she was dying and made her request."

I almost dropped the spoon I was using to stir in the cream. "Your mother is dying?" I choked. I knew Beau didn't care much for his parents, but despite that, they were still his... his parents! I'd be a complete and utter wreck if my mother were dying.

"No," Beau said dryly. "Although I'm sure that's the reaction she was hoping for. No, my mother is perfectly fine according to my sister, but she likes

to use her supposed ill health as a means to make me do what she wants. In this case, to show her I won't die a bachelor and deny her grandchildren for the rest of her miserable life."

"Uh." *Wow, awkward.* "She knows you're gay, though."

"Yes. She's set on the idea of a surrogate. 'Ah know some looovely young ladies who would be so honored to bear mah grandchild,'" he said, drawing out the high voice and a rolling southern accent. "Never let it be said that my mother can't get her hands on what she wants."

I was caught between wanting to laugh at his impression and being straight-up horrified. "I'm sorry, wait... your mother is pimping potential baby mamas to you?" Because that was a level of invasive that was just wrong.

"She's determined to settle me down with a pack of infants, but in her world that means I have to be married first. Even if it means being married to a man. So she told me to bring someone to dinner, and give her the hope and strength to carry on with life."

Holy shit. "And she does this on a yearly basis?"

"Usually right after her annual physical," Beau said, taking a bite of chowder. He closed his eyes for a moment, savoring it, and I savored right along with him. It was nice to see him really enjoy something, to see the stress from this morning ease off a little. Beau always looked good, but when he was happy, his attractiveness went from "hell yeah" to "transcendental experience."

I cleared my throat and reached for my water. "So who are you taking, then? One of your friends?" I grinned suddenly. "Is it Jackson?" Being charming and tricking people seemed like just his kind of thing.

"Jackson went with me six years ago, and after dinner made me swear never to put a friend through that again." Beau shrugged. "Now I usually put an ad out on Craigslist. 'Pretend to know me, put up with my parents, get a free gourmet dinner.'"

Oh, that was just sad. "Doesn't your mom see right through that?" I asked a little weakly.

"Of course she does. That's half the point." He took another bite of chowder and I stared at him, dumbfounded, because no. Just no. Apart from the general lack of wisdom displayed by placing that kind of ad on Craigslist, of all places, it couldn't be helping the state of the war between Beau and his parents.

Bringing a stranger to a family dinner was a Maginot Line tactic: bold and satisfying in the moment, but in the long run all it was going to get you was outflanked.

Yeah, I studied history in school. Does being a PA pay my loans off faster than tutoring or being a waiter or anything else you can do with a Bachelor's in History? Why yes, yes it does. I still loved it, though.

Back to Beau. "You can do better than that."

"Better than what?"

"Better than suffering through a meal with your parents and a complete stranger!" I exclaimed. "Why should you put up with that just to please your mother? Why shouldn't you actually take someone who cares about making you happy?"

Beau smiled, just a little curve of his lips, but it was enough to make me smash my heel against my instep to keep my body from doing something stupid. "Richard went once too. We broke up about a month after that, actually. It's just easier for me this way, Eric. I don't mind it. I'm a *dutiful* son, if nothing else."

"You are scarily passive-aggressive with your parents," I told him before I could hold it in.

"Yeah, I know. I come by it honestly," he said with a sigh. "Don't worry about it."

"No, I worry. I'm your personal assistant, I'm allowed to worry. What if you take a serial killer to have dinner with your parents? What if it's all 'I'll have the liver and fava beans to go, and oh, this chianti is lovely!' What then?"

Beau gaped for a long moment before he broke down laughing. He laughed so hard his shoulders shook and he had to put down his spoon. I stared at his bright silver hair and the curve of his ear and the faint lines on his forehead, and felt somewhere between happy and hopeless. Goddamn Beau. Goddamn me for being able to make him laugh like that.

"Jesus, Eric," he sighed after he caught his breath. "Only you could make taking a serial killer to dinner seem like a good time."

"It's supposed to be a scary example, not a funny one," I chided, but my heart wasn't in it. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll find you a date for Friday night. Someone vetted, not just some random dude from the creepy section of the Internet."

"I think you're missing the part where this isn't going to be a fun experience," Beau reminded me. "I don't want to put another friend through that."

"We've just got to find the right guy," I said. "There are plenty of men who'd put up with one night of hell a year for the pleasure of dating you." *Like me.*

"Yeah?" He arched one eyebrow, a trick I'd never mastered despite years of trying. "Where are you hiding all these clearly desperate individuals?"

"I have connections," I told him confidently. I'd never had a shortage of friends, no matter where I lived, and more than a few of them had met Beau and commented on his silver fox status. This dinner could be a trial by fire for dating him. "Come on, we can make it work," I begged when he still looked dubious. "I'll find the *perfect* guy for you, I swear. You won't regret this."

Beau stared at me and I met his gaze, unwilling to back down. This was non-negotiable as far as I was concerned. He didn't have to settle for some random Craigslist hookup when there were plenty of guys out there who would be more than happy to put up with his mother once a year in exchange for the awesomeness that was Beau. I had complete confidence that at least one of those guys was in my circle of friends.

Suddenly, a smile broke out on his face: not the broad, gleaming thing he'd worn when he was laughing or the small, barely-there lip curve he'd given Lorna and her family back at the office. This was a sweet, slightly smug smile that I could have stared at for hours. "It's a deal," Beau said.

"Yes! You're making the right call," I assured him. "This will be so much better than before. This will be the best awful dinner with your parents ever, I guarantee it."

"You say it, I believe it," Beau agreed. "Finish up quick. We've got to be back to the office in fifteen minutes."

Wow, time flew. I scarfed down my mostly-cold sandwich, still delicious, polished off my coffee and managed to keep myself stain-free despite my haste. The walk back to work was quiet but comfortable, and as we both settled into the afternoon rush, my newfound confidence buoyed my mood back up to its awesome sprightly levels. And by sprightly, I meant my "move aside, motherfucker, I am the god of office efficiency!" mood. Lorna put up with it pretty well, all things considered, although she'd confiscated all of my

fluorescent Post-its last week after I'd flown one too many hot pink paper airplanes decorated with motivational slogans her way.

"Who poured crack in your coffee?" she asked me at five as she prepared to leave. I didn't follow suit—there was still work to be done, and while I was eager to get going on the whole date thing, I didn't have any pressing reason to get out of the office. Wednesday was my DVR love and Mom-calling night, because one couldn't party all the time, no matter how hard I'd tried in college.

"I don't need artificial stimulants to kick ass," I told Lorna as I forwarded Research's precedent files to Beau's inbox. "I'm perfectly capable of turning my frown upside down all on my own."

"Really? Because this morning you were downright morose, and all afternoon you've been... perky." She came over and glanced in my trashcan. "Ah. Beau took you out to lunch. No wrappers," she added when I stared at her. "Plus there's no scent of air freshener, which there would be if you'd eaten in because you've got a love affair with garlic."

"I always brush afterward," I said automatically, impressed despite myself. "Jesus, Carrie's teenage years are going to be hell having Sherlock as a mom."

"Nonsense, we'll be the best of friends."

"Keep telling yourself that when she comes home with a new boyfriend, a new piercing and an application for Stanford all in the same week," I taunted. Not that I'd done that, but according to my grandma, my mother had. And that had been a good week.

"Goodnight, Eric."

"Night, Lorna." She walked out, and a minute later, Beau called me into his office.

"You don't have to stay," he told me, glancing up from his screen. He had the glasses on again, and I held onto the doorframe as a precaution against melting into the floor. "I've got a handle on the rest of this."

"Yeah, but you've been here since, like, six in the morning. If anyone should go home, it's you," I told him. It was a familiar argument, and one I was fully prepared to follow-through with, but a second later, he took the glasses off, sat back and stretched. He arched his back, stretched his long, buff arms up over his head, and I did my best not to let my jaw drop.

"Maybe you're right," Beau said as he relaxed a moment later, much to my relief. "Do you have any plans tonight?"

“Calling my mother and Game of Thrones,” I said. “Because at least I know better than to get attached to anyone on that show. I’m never watching The Good Wife again, by the way.”

Beau grimaced. “Yeah, I wasn’t too pleased when they killed off—”

“Don’t even speak of it, I’m still traumatized.”

“You poor thing,” he teased me, and there was something about the way his accent came through when he said “thing” that made me sigh. Fuck me; I was really off kilter today if my compartmentalization was failing me so completely.

“Fine, so, home for both of us,” I said briskly. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning, and if I don’t beat you in to work, I’ll set Lorna on you.”

“Scary.”

“I know. This is me playing hardball.”

Beau leaned forward, opened his mouth as if he wanted to speak, but hesitated. I knew that I had to flee. What if he was having second thoughts about me finding him a date? I couldn’t give him a chance to talk me out of it, because the man was persuasive as hell. “Okay, gotta go, Danaerys awaits! See you tomorrow, Beau.”

“See you,” he echoed, and I shut down my computer, grabbed my jacket and left the office with a sigh of relief.

Watching Game of Thrones ended up taking a backseat to making myself a home-cooked meal, because too much takeout would kill me someday, and calling my mom. Some boyfriends had called me a mama’s boy. I just called them jealous.

“Hi, hon.”

“Hey.” I stirred the noodles in the pot on the stove and decreased the heat a little. “How are you?”

“I’m good! Grading papers, drinking tea, watching baseball... it’s a lovely evening in.”

“How’re the Rockies doing?”

“Actually, it’s a Mariners game. I figure I should get a handle on their players if I’m going to be watching them in person.”

That was news to me. “When are you going to a Mariners game?”

“When I come out to visit over the summer, hon.”

“Were you planning on informing me of this at some point?” I demanded.

“That’s what I’m doing right now,” she said calmly, making me feel like an idiot. “Don’t worry—it’s all taken care of. Beau got me the tickets as an early birthday present.”

My boss got her... “Since when has Beau been buying you birthday presents?”

“Oh, just this year, after I mentioned how much I appreciated the great seats he got me for the Rockies last time. He’s such a nice man, Eric. I’m glad you’ve got someone like that for a friend.”

“Mom, he’s not my friend, he’s my boss,” I told her sternly. “Please don’t make me look unprofessional.”

“I think he’s both, clearly, or he wouldn’t be so nice to me,” my mother replied. “I always call your best friends on their birthdays, remember? Joey? Ishmael? I called Zach just last week. None of them mind. And it’s not as though I solicited the tickets or anything, Beau bought them of his own volition, so calm down and stop scolding me.”

“Sorry,” I said with a wince. Maybe she was right. I was being too sensitive. “Long day.”

“I understand. I’ll let you get back to your dinner, Eric.”

“And I’ll let you get back to your ball game. Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too, hon.”

We hung up, and I thought about what she’d said as I drained the pasta, then tossed it with garlic and olive oil and poured it into a nice Italian ceramic bowl. Maybe it wasn’t impossible for me to be friends with Beau. After all, he’d been friends with Lorna forever, and she’d been his personal assistant a lot longer than I had. The scenario was undeniably different, but he did the same things for her that he did for me: the coffee buying, taking her out to the occasional lunch, coming to her daughter’s birthday party—okay, not that one for me, but he’d come to my housewarming party, that had to count for something.

In fact, he’d given me this pasta bowl. The set of four was the nicest thing in my cupboards.

I’d moved into my own place about three months ago, when my roommate

Aaron indicated that he was making an offer on a house and might not be around once the lease was up. His offer fell through, but I left anyway. We were still good friends; in fact, we were supposed to meet up tomorrow to go clubbing at—

Oh. Aaron. He'd be perfect for Beau. I'd been running friends through my head all evening, weighing their good points and bad points, and Aaron had far more of the former. He was an engineer at a local biotech company, he had travelled a lot overseas, he was good looking, and he was almost extroverted at times—I mean for an engineer, he was downright chatty. He and Beau had talked for almost an hour at the housewarming party, something about the Greek Isles and sailboats.

Perfect. I should feel happier about my deductive success. Hunger was probably sapping my energy. I carried my bowl and a fork into the living room, and cued up the newest Game of Thrones episode. I would call Aaron with the good news tomorrow.

I was the first one to the office the next morning, which meant I ordered the coffee for everyone, turned on the lights and booted up the computer. It was kind of nice being the first one in, quiet in a way the office rarely was, and I hummed as I scanned the calendar for any new additions to today's schedule. Client phone call, client meeting, Jackson's visit—that one was in candy-apple red—and then a partner meeting right after that in the conference room. Easy enough. I made a few notes, got a few things printing for the meeting, sent a quick email to Aaron and then lost myself to Amazon's toy section. There were so many options; it was hard to decide what to get for Carrie. I forwarded a few selections to Beau, just in case he hadn't shopped for her yet.

My phone dinged. New message from Aaron.

I'm sorry, did you just pimp out your boss to me?

I smiled.

No, because you couldn't afford him like that. This is a genuine invitation to go on a genuine date. Admittedly, it's going to suck but that won't be his fault.

Why would I want to go on a shitty date with Beau?

Oh Aaron, forever missing the bigger picture.

Think of this date as your trial by fire. The doors to dating him like a normal person will be blown wide open, pun totally intended.

What makes you think I even want to go on a date with him?

I frowned at my phone.

Because everyone with eyes does. Plus you've met him, you guys have talked, can you honestly tell me you're not attracted to him? Don't lie, be honest.

Point.

Damn right, I had a point.

But does he have any idea you're doing this?

Yep. All above board, totally not creepy and you're saving him from taking a potential serial killer to dinner with his parents. His backup plan is Craigslist, dude. Not cool.

So why don't you go with him, then?

I didn't want to get into that now.

Look, in or out? If in, tonight we skip clubbing to dress you like a normal person.

There's nothing wrong with the way I dress!

I scoffed.

Whatever you say, Mr. Rogers.

"Who's that?"

"Whoa!" I spun around in my chair so fast I almost fell out of it, clutching my phone to my chest. Beau was standing to the side of me, looking impeccable in a dark gray suit and blue tie. "How did you sneak in here?"

"I spend my weekends moonlighting as a ninja," he replied, and my heart gave a little quiver at his perfectly deadpan delivery. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, releasing my death grip on my phone and setting it face down on my desk. It dinged, but I ignored it. "I'm fine, no problems. Just talking with a friend, it can wait until later. Good morning! You look..." *Amazing.* "Well rested."

Beau smiled and shrugged a little. "I'm feeling a lot better about tomorrow. That definitely helped to relax me."

"Great! Glad I could help. It's going to go well, I promise." My phone dinged again, and I sincerely hoped it wasn't Aaron telling me he'd decided not to do this after all.

"Maybe you should get that," Beau suggested as he headed into his office. I waited for him to sit down at his desk before furtively glancing at my screen. Two new texts.

I do NOT look like Mr. Rogers.

Fine, I'm in.

Oh, bless you, Aaron. *You're my favorite person ever*, I replied. *I can be over by 7.*

Bring food.

That was fair. I texted an assent, added a reminder to my schedule, and put my phone away. Time to get to work.

Lorna got in a few minutes later, and we spent an easy morning together in relative quiet. She checked her phone every ten minutes or so, laughing a little with each new message, and finally I had to know. "What are you looking at?"

"Mom took Carrie to the zoo today," she replied. "You've got to see this." Naturally, that meant *me* getting out of *my* chair to go and look at what she wanted me to see, but I didn't mind. I walked over to her desk and bent down to see her phone. A picture of Carrie wearing an otter hat and standing jubilant in front of the...

"Is that a sloth bear exhibit?" I asked, a bit incredulously, because *what?*

"Yeah. It's the closest thing they've got to actual sloths, which Carrie is obsessed with since her dad showed her baby sloth videos on YouTube." Lorna smiled indulgently. "About the only time she goes slow these days is when she's pretending to be a sloth. It's very cute, except when we're trying to get somewhere and she only wants to crawl on all fours."

"Every child is a mystery to be solved," I said. Lorna rolled her eyes.

"Thank you, Don Juan. Not the best misquote you've ever given me, I have to say."

"How about 'It's not about what it is, it's about what it can become.'"

"*The Lorax*. Not bad," Lorna complimented me. "I almost tied my tongue in a knot reading *Fox In Socks* last night."

"Was it the part with the poodle battle?" a voice asked from behind us. I whirled around and saw Jackson standing there, handsome and smiling in a dark suit and holding an elaborate bouquet tied with a little bow that he handed to Lorna. "That's the part that gets me. I have nephews," he confided.

"These are lovely," Lorna said. "I so rarely get gifts anymore."

"I got you a cupcake just yesterday!" I exclaimed.

"That was an apology present, it doesn't count."

"Oh, Eric," Jackson tsked. "Have you been naughty? Did you upset the queen?"

"The queen needs to learn how to let go," I said. "And you aren't supposed to be here for another half hour, Mr. Hughes."

Jackson's dark eyes sparkled as he stepped a little closer to me. He was a few inches shorter than me and about a decade older, but still good looking enough to make my breath catch a little. He had black, curly hair and Mediterranean bronze skin, exactly the kind of skin I envied because I would never be able to approximate it myself. He was gorgeous, and he knew it. "Beau moved things up a bit so we could have longer to go over the details of the latest incorporation. We're actually going out to lunch at The Kingfish Café, you should come with us."

Kingfish was one of my favorite restaurants, and not one I had the money or opportunity to go to very often. But I had too much to do to get things ready for Beau's weekly meeting with the other senior partners tomorrow morning. "I can't," I said, a little regretfully.

"Beau works you too hard," he said, setting a warm hand on my shoulder.

Or not hard enough. I struggled to repress my nascent blush and shrugged. "I like what I do."

"You must, to—"

"Jackson," Beau's voice was sterner than usual, especially for a client. It went straight to my knees, and I was glad I was already leaning against a desk. "Leave Eric alone."

Jackson grinned and held up his hands peaceably. "It's just small talk, sweetheart. You know there's no room in my heart for any man but you." He

batted his eyelashes coquettishly. "I was just inviting your assistant to lunch with us, I'm sure his perspective would come in handy." God, everything the man said could be considered innuendo. Usually I enjoyed it, but today I felt a little withdrawn for some reason. I didn't say anything, just stared at Beau, waiting.

Beau looked between the two of us, then pointed at Jackson and said, "You, out. I'll be with you in a minute." Then he gave me the smile I'd been hoping for and said, "I would ask you to come with us, but I know there's still a lot to do for tomorrow and I don't want to make you stay late."

"It's fine," I said. And it was, everything was fine. Go with, stay late... something slightly shameful in me wanted to spend as much time as possible with Beau before his dinner date tomorrow, because then he'd be spoken for, and it wouldn't be the same.

"Still." Beau pulled on his jacket and picked up his briefcase, then crossed over to me. I smelled his spicy cologne over the scent of Lorna's flowers, and I inhaled slow and deep, trying to be circumspect. "I know you like their food. I'll bring you back something."

"Thank you," I breathed. I heard what might have been a snicker from someone, but I was too wrapped up in maintaining my dignity to care. Beau touched my shoulder, the same one Jackson had briefly held, then left with his client.

"You're an idiot."

I shook my head, dispelling the haze in my mind, then frowned at Lorna. "What?"

"Oh no, I don't want to start another fight," she said, and then stood up. "I'm going to go put these in water."

"You are impossible!" I yelled after her.

"Takes one to know one!" she yelled back before disappearing around the corner.

I thought Lorna enjoyed being cryptic. I headed back to my desk and dove into the caseload up for discussion at tomorrow's meeting, getting Beau's contributions ready to go and making sure he had notes on what the other senior partners would be bringing up. Because all the rest of them were family, it wasn't unusual for them to discuss cases outside of work, and sometimes Beau got left behind when someone forgot to bring him up to speed. Personally, I

thought it was time the firm expanded, because they were working their staff pretty hard as it was, and it would probably do them some good to get some fresh blood into the upper echelons. Unfortunately, no one had asked for my opinion, so I just did my best to make sure that Beau wasn't going to be blindsided tomorrow.

The smell of fresh food finally roused me, and I looked up just as Beau set a takeaway container on my desk. "Oh my God." I leaned forward and inhaled deeply. "You got me gumbo?"

"There's cornbread in there, too," Beau said, the corners of his eyes crinkling just a bit. I suppose it was kind of funny to see me salivating over a Styrofoam box, but this was seriously good gumbo. If I ever actually went to New Orleans, I would probably eat myself to death.

"You are a god among men," I declared, popping open the box. Oh, wow... I shut my eyes for a second, just savoring.

"I'll be... in my office." Beau walked away, and when I broke out of my food haze, it was to see Jackson standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at me inscrutably. There was a hint of a smile on his face, but it wasn't the flirty kind I was used to.

"You're a lucky man," he told me quietly. I nodded because, yeah, just look at my lunch. He set a hand on my desk and bent forward. "Don't fuck this up," he murmured, then pulled back and grinned. "Take it easy, Eric. I'll talk to you later, Beau," he called out.

"Thanks, Jack." He left, and I stared after him blankly. *Fuck what up?* I wanted to ask Lorna what she thought, but she'd taken a late lunch to go and meet up with her family, so there went that hope. *Fuck up... eating lunch? Doing my job? Working with Beau?*

The last one made me shiver a bit. I wasn't going to fuck up what I had with Beau, that was like my number one priority. He counted on me to be an excellent personal assistant, and that was what I was going to be, prurient dreams be damned. I pulled the spare spoon I kept in my drawer out and dug into my gumbo decisively.

"Eric?"

"Mmpgh?" I swallowed too quickly, the food scraping my throat on the way down, which set me coughing. I rolled my chair back from the desk and covered my mouth, but the hacking wouldn't cease. Goddamn, that was *spicy*.

A firm hand patted my back, smoothing a circle between my shoulder blades. I coughed for another minute or so, gradually catching my breath, before I groaned. "Sorry," I whispered, my throat still a little raw.

"It's fine. Hang on." Beau left and came back a moment later with a glass of water, fresh from the dispenser in his office. I sipped gratefully and wiped my watering eyes on a napkin.

"Shit," I sighed, then backtracked. "Shoot. Is what I meant." I met Beau's eyes sheepishly. "Food went down the wrong tube. What were you going to say?"

"When you're done with your lunch—and don't rush, I don't want you to keel over," he added, "I've got notes from my meeting with Jackson that I need transcribed."

I smiled wryly. "Forget your iPad again?"

"Don't even mention that thing in my presence," Beau said, joking but not quite. He gestured toward the glass in my hand. "Do you want a little more?"

"Sure, but I can get it—"

"Eat," he told me, taking the glass. He refilled it and brought it back out, and I sat and ate and reflected on the weirdness that was my day so far. I ate fast but carefully, not wanting to disrupt things with another bout of coughing, then bagged up the dregs and threw them away. I forwarded my prep work for tomorrow to Beau's inbox, and then walked into his office.

"Where are the notes?" I asked.

"Here." He handed me a sheaf of loose papers and his iPad. "Would you mind putting them directly into the devil machine for me?"

"I can do it faster on my own computer," I said.

"But you could do it on my iPad in here."

I must have looked confused, because he continued, "I don't have any more client meetings this afternoon, and you've got the majority of your work done for the day. It'll be easier to heckle you about the Rockies if you're in here with me."

"Oh, ha-ha," I said, relaxing automatically and sitting in the chair across from his. "I'm sorry, who has the better record at this point, the Rockies or the Mariners?" I cupped my chin and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. "Oh,

right, it's the Rockies! It must have slipped my mind, with all this work my boss keeps piling on me."

"You're cruising for more work than you can handle if you're not careful," Beau warned, but his eyes were shining and his voice was light as he turned back to his computer.

"I think I can handle just about anything you can dish out," I said confidently.

"I will remember you said that."

Oh my God, I couldn't handle that tone of voice right now. I was too on edge; off my game just enough to feel every tremor like it was an earthquake. I crossed my legs and took refuge behind the iPad, discretion being the better part of my valor. I needed to get myself together, I really did. The sooner I got Beau and Aaron together, the sooner I could get over living the unrequited life.

We both got lost in work for a while, and eventually I was confident enough to converse like a normal person again, talking about his caseload, the meeting tomorrow, a little about Jackson...

"The way he tans is *disgusting*," I muttered as I proofed one of Beau's briefs. Technically, he could use someone else to do that, but I had mad skills and he knew it. "Where did he fly in from, anyway?"

"Brazil. He inherited a stake in a construction company down there from his grandfather, and business is booming right now. He wants to get the legal stuff out of the way before diving in, though."

"Right. World Cup, Olympics, urban redevelopment. Busy place."

"Are you a soccer fan?"

"They call it 'football,'" I said haughtily. "And yes, as a matter of fact, I do like it. One of my boyfriends in college was from Edinburgh. I had to put up with being dragged to obscure bars at obscene hours to watch matches for four months. I lost interest in him, but not in the game."

"Right." Beau fell silent for a moment, then changed the subject to American football, which was nice because we could really fight about that. We started off by arguing about the draft and somehow got to the point where I played him Eminem's song "The Monster" because it mentioned Russell Wilson.

"That's how you know you've arrived," I said once the song was done. "When you get written into verse, immortalized by a modern-day bard."

"I sincerely hope you're not comparing Eminem to Shakespeare," Beau replied skeptically.

"You scoff, but there's a lot of truth to that comparison. Who do you think more high school students can quote, Marshall Mathers or William Shakespeare?"

"If I let high schoolers define the basis of my self-worth, I'd be in my grave by now," Beau shot back.

I shook my head. "It must be a generational thing."

"It might be," Beau said with a sigh, looking uncomfortably solemn all of a sudden. "Eric, are you sure... about dinner tomorrow night, I mean?"

"Absolutely," I said instantly. I wasn't going to let him wriggle out of my help now. "No take backs. You're going to dinner and you're going to have a good time, I swear."

"But will you?"

Would I what? Have a good time helping him? "I already am," I replied with complete sincerity.

Beau didn't say anything, just stared at me for a long moment. I stared back, held willing captive by his bright blue eyes. It was a strange, fraught moment, and I felt like I might crawl out of my skin if I couldn't—

Ding. That was my phone, and it wasn't a message alert, it was a schedule notification. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already six-thirty. "Damn," I said. "I've got to go."

"No, that's fine." Beau wiped a hand over his face. It wasn't the tired gesture of yesterday, more like he was pushing the reset button. "I should, too. It's late."

"Yeah." I stood up and rolled my shoulders, feeling a satisfying crack between my shoulder blades. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Beau smiled softly. "Tomorrow. Goodnight, Eric."

"Night." I turned, grabbed my jacket and booked it out of there. I'd have to go with cheap and dirty food if I wanted to get to Aaron's on time. Unfortunately, his palette was similar to Beau's, hoity with a side of toity. So, pizza. Throw some spinach and prosciutto on it, and voila, insta-fancy.

I was still ten minutes late, but Aaron wasn't bothered. "Get in here," he said after opening his door to my knock. "I'm starving."

"I'm amazed you haven't starved without me," I said, coming inside and toeing off my shoes. The apartment didn't really bear much resemblance to the place I'd lived anymore, since all my stuff was gone and Aaron had gotten newer—read better—furniture, but it still sort of felt like home. The smell was familiar, at least.

"I can, in fact, feed myself," Aaron said. "And I plan to, right now." He took the pizza out of my hand and headed for the kitchen.

Before we'd eaten on barstools at the counter, but now Aaron had an actual dining room table, right where we used to have the Wii set up. We sat down and ate and talked about our day like real adults, and the rightness of this cemented in my mind. Aaron was a good match for Beau. He was mature, he was smart, he was moving up. One dramatic date and then they could go out like normal people.

"So," I said, wiping my fingers off and dropping my napkin on the table. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Aaron agreed. He looked... not excited, but not downcast. Pensive, I suppose. "I'm not actually sure why you need me for this."

I frowned. "Aren't you supposed to have a great memory? You're helping me save Beau from a downward spiral of familial hatred and interpersonal angst by being his date for a dinner with his parents. After which, I sincerely hope you go on a date for real, because he could use a boyfriend."

"You've been crushing on him for over a year," Aaron pointed out. "This is definitely something you could do. And if—" He held up a hand to forestall my inevitable arguments. "If your worry is that being his date for the evening is unprofessional, then you simply have to tell him that you're there as a personal favor, and then let things go back to normal."

"I can't," I said with a sigh. "I thought about it, but I can't." I wasn't even being facetious, I really had considered this option for all of, oh, a second. "The thing is, I don't think I'd be able to go back to normal that easy. I'm... I really like him."

Aaron stared at me through his dark-rimmed glasses, searching for something. "Yet you're throwing him at me."

"I'm not throwing anyone anywhere," I snapped. "Look, if you don't want to do this after all, fine, I'll get someone else. Just tell me so."

"I didn't say that," Aaron said evenly. "I like Beau. I'd be happy to go to dinner with him, even if his parents are there."

My spine wilted a little, and I fell back against the seat. “Great. Thanks.”

“Now I guess you want to look at my closet.”

“Yes!” That was enough of a motivator to get me onto my feet. “It’s been months since you let me look through your things, I’m afraid your argyle might have killed off the last of your button downs. The polos are probably breeding out of control.”

“Polo shirts are perfectly appropriate for my work,” Aaron said indignantly, but there was a bit of a smile lurking there too. This was an old conversation between us, but never tired. “The company gives them out—they have the logo and everything. I can’t just throw them away.”

“Astonishingly, you can,” I confided, taking his arm and leading him back to his room. “But at the very least you can relegate them to their own closet where they don’t give the rest of the clothes bad ideas. Now.” I threw open the closet doors and grinned. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Two hours later I had Aaron acceptably clothed, we’d finished off the rest of the beers in his fridge, and I’d decided the best thing for me was to sleep the buzz off at his place. I could wake up early, hurry back to my place to shower and change, and still make it into work before eight-thirty.

That assumed that the alarm in my phone was set right, which it wasn’t. Instead of waking up at six-thirty, I was prodded awake by Aaron at ten after eight.

“Eric.”

“Mmph.” I batted at his hand. “What?”

“Shouldn’t you be up already?”

“What?” I groped for my phone on the floor, stared at it long enough to make out the numbers, then levitated off the couch with a yell. “Shit! I’m late, shit, shit.” I stared down at my rumpled clothes. “I can’t wear these into the office.”

“Borrow some of mine,” Aaron advised. “I have to get going, lock up on your way out, okay?”

“We aren’t remotely the same size!” I exclaimed. I had four inches on Aaron, and that was just in one-dimension.

“Polos are stretchy, you know,” he said with an evil grin. “Bye, Eric.”

“Don’t forget about tonight!” I called after him. The door shut on my admonishment, and I ran a hand through my hair and leapt into action.

I made it to work by eight-fifty-four, not showered but clean-shaven and dressed in a dark green polo shirt that I’d bought Aaron as a joke for his last birthday, which just barely looked decent on me. My pants were my own, that couldn’t be helped, and so I sat down as fast as I could and hoped the wrinkles weren’t too noticeable. As for my hair, well... I’d done the best I could with what I had, but Aaron’s gel wasn’t being too kind to me. I looked more like a mad scientist than someone with artfully tousled bedhead.

“Where have you been?” Lorna hissed at me from across the hall.

“Don’t ask,” I said darkly. “Where’s Beau?” His door was open but he wasn’t inside.

“Off to a meeting.”

I frowned. “It’s not even nine yet, why are they already meeting?” The senior partner meeting tended towards a later start time thanks to Papa Bowman’s disinclination to miss his morning water aerobics class.

“Mr. Radcliffe crashed his car last night.”

My headache, the dregs of the hangover from last night that the coffee wasn’t helping me kick, surged in my brain. “Oh no.” Glen Radcliffe was the acting CEO of one of our major corporate clients, taking the position after his wife suffered a stroke earlier in the year. Papa Bowman had fought hard to get him the position, since he didn’t have the technical expertise his wife did, but a shakeup would have spelled bad news for the green energy company still finding its financial footing. He was being watched, though, and any erratic behavior on his part just gave his detractors more ammunition.

“He was drunk. Felix has gone to post his bail, but it’s all hands on deck trying to salvage the situation,” Lorna said. “He already has that DUI on his record, and now...”

“Now it’s really bad,” I agreed. “Did anyone get hurt?”

“No, thank God. But someone could have been. Beau’s been sent to corporate headquarters to meet with the VPs, he left fifteen minutes ago.”

“Damn.” What a rotten start to the day.

“He was surprised you weren’t in,” Lorna continued. “I think he’d been looking forward to seeing you.”

“Please don’t make me feel any worse right now,” I begged her. Surprisingly, she backed off.

Well. All I could do now was make sure the day didn’t live up to its epic suckage potential. I rescheduled all of Beau’s meetings, figuring he’d be gone for most of the day, and spent the rest of the morning answering phone calls, emails and generally doing damage control. The polo sleeves bit into my biceps, and the cotton felt itchy. Stupid bargain basement detergent, I’d always had to do my laundry separate from Aaron’s.

Lunch was sandwiches, ordered in by a compassionate Lorna. I got intermittent texts from Beau asking me to send along various files pertaining to Radcliffe, and I answered them as quickly as possible. That was the saving grace of my morning, the fact that I was still able to be useful. I didn’t even get to see Beau, and as the clock rolled on and the emergency didn’t go away, I started to get antsy. What if he couldn’t make the dinner tonight? Aaron would be put out, but there was no telling how his folks would take it.

At five ’o clock, I texted him.

Still on for dinner at 8?

A minute later, the reply came back:

I’ll be there. You?

No worries, I assured him. At least I wouldn’t have to call his mother and let her know he was cancelling.

“I’m off,” Lorna informed me. “I think the worst of it’s over now, and I’ve got to get home and prep things for tomorrow. You’re still coming, right?”

“Carrie’s birthday party, of course,” I said. I’d already had a present shipped to Beau’s house for him to bring after he hadn’t gotten back to me on the options I sent him. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good.” She came over and ruffled her hand through my stiff hair. “Do yourself a favor, Eric. Go home and wash this out. It looks a little odd.”

“Sure thing,” I said, but after she left I just settled further back into my chair with a sigh. To be honest, I didn’t really want to go home, itchy shirt notwithstanding. Home meant being alone, meant acknowledging the fact that I was sitting by myself while Beau was on a date with Aaron and his parents. A date that I had masterminded and set up. A date that I desperately wished I was going on, despite the awkward circumstances. I didn’t want to go home, but I

didn't feel like going to a club either. No, I'd stay and work for a while. There was plenty for me to do.

By seven-forty-five, I had organized all the paperclips by color—we had a surprising number of blue ones, they almost rivaled silver for color dominance. I had reorganized my files, cleaned every flat surface I could find—wouldn't the janitorial staff be surprised—and was now throwing Beau's stress ball at the wall and trying to catch it on the rebound. I was three for thirty so far. Meh, I'd never been that great at sports, despite my size.

My phone beeped. I glanced at it—a text from Beau.

Where are you?

I frowned and typed:

At work. Why?

There was a significant pause, and then I read: *A cab is on its way for you.*

Why?

Just take it.

Uh-oh, terse. And he was sending a cab for me... right now? Right before his dinner? This didn't bode well. *What's wrong?* I asked.

We'll discuss it later.

Oh, crap.

Sure enough, a cab pulled up outside of the office building five minutes later. I walked out to the driver's window a little diffidently.

"You Eric Vollan?" the guy asked me.

"Yes."

"Good. Hop in."

I swallowed and got into the cab. "Where are we going?"

"Canlis."

Of course. Because whatever I'd done required Beau to chew me out in person before heading in to dinner. Crap.

Beau was waiting outside the restaurant at ten past eight, looking more than a little flustered. I couldn't see Aaron—maybe he'd gone inside already? I got out of the cab and winced when Beau did a double take at the sight of me. I

could only imagine how bad I looked at this point, what with the way I'd been compulsively running my hands through my hair.

Beau paid the cabbie, then turned and looked at me. I wanted to sink into the pavement. "Hi?" I managed.

"I was surprised," Beau said at last, "to get here and see Aaron Goldman, of all people, waiting for me. When he told me what you'd worked out, I was genuinely shocked."

Shit. "You don't like him?" I asked, my heart sinking. If that was so, I'd put Aaron in an incredibly embarrassing situation.

Beau shook his head. "He's fine, but what shocked me was the fact that you somehow thought I'd want to see anyone other than *you* here tonight."

What. "What?"

"Obviously that's an assumption I shouldn't have made, but I swear I thought this lead-up was your way, convoluted as it was, of declaring yourself," Beau continued, sounding somewhere between frustrated and angry. "Not that you were going to foist me off onto one of your friends in an effort to keep me from—"

"No, no, there was no foisting!" I interjected. "Are you kidding me, no! I set you up with Aaron because I thought you guys would have a good time together, and he was interested and he's, you know, closer to you in terms of education and professional success. I didn't set you up with him because I wasn't interested!" Well, there went that declaration, fantastic.

Beau shut his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, all of the anger and most of the frustration was gone from his face. What was left was the calm, matter-of-fact expression that got my engine revving instantly. "All right," he said. "Clearly we've got a lot to work out, not the least of which is your abysmal sense of personal self-worth, but first things first. My parents have been sitting in there by themselves for the past half hour, which isn't going to endear them to anyone, and you..." He looked at me and sighed, then took off his suit jacket. It was light and well-fitted, and just slightly broader than my own shoulders. "Wear this."

"Wait, you want to introduce me to your parents?"

"You're damn right, I do," Beau said, a little of his southern drawl coming through. "Now put it on."

I swung the jacket over my shoulders and fastened the single button. "This has to look so weird."

"Not any weirder than you without it."

"Hey—"

Beau moved in and cut off my indignant protest with a brief kiss, barely more than a brush of his lips against mine. To say it left me breathless would have been a gross understatement. My body felt like it was catching on fire from the mouth down, and Beau grinned. "Your face is almost the same color as your hair," he murmured. "Relax. You handle every other part of my life just fine, you can handle this."

"And you *want* me to," I reiterated, just to make sure. "Tonight and everything... associated with it. You want me."

"And nobody else," Beau said, and then squared his shoulders. "All right, let's get this pain in the ass over with."

The hostess was kind enough not to give me a second glance as she led us to the table, but the same couldn't be said for Mr. and Mrs. Lester Montgomery. "Pinned like a bug" might have been an appropriate description, or "being set on fire by a magnifying glass on a hot summer day." Either way, Beau's father's frown deepened, and his mother, if she could have moved her face, would undoubtedly have been scowling. Beau kissed his mother's cheek, we sat and before any introductions could be made, she was off and running.

"Well." The Arctic was probably warmer than Mrs. Montgomery's voice. "I must say, this time you've outdone yourself, Beaudan. It isn't enough that you break my heart anew every year, you aren't even trying to pretend to be with someone any longer, are you?" Her tone turned a little tremulous, like she adjusted a dial in her throat. "All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, to do your duty to your family and continue the Montgomery name, and all you can do is throw my hopes and dreams back in my face!"

"Mother—"

"No, no, don't try to excuse your role in this sad situation. How dare you bring such a person here to dinner with us tonight? Do you delight in mocking me?"

"*Mother—*"

"I honestly think sometimes it would be better if we just never saw each other at all!"

"Mrs. Montgomery," I tried, but she wouldn't even look at me. So I went with something more drastic. I took Beau's hand in mine, brought it to my lips and kissed it. Then I set our joined hands on the table, and looked her straight in her widened eyes. "This isn't a trick," I said gently. "I promise. I've just had a very rough day, plus car trouble," in that I hadn't gotten to drive my own car here, "and the only thing that's kept me going has been the thought of meeting Beau's family tonight." Also not a lie, even if it hadn't been *me* that I'd been thinking about them meeting. "I sincerely apologize for my appearance, but I didn't want to make you wait any longer than absolutely necessary in order to go home and change." I reached my free hand across the table. "I'm Eric Vollan."

"Oh." A bit nonplussed, she allowed me to touch her fingertips, and then I shook Mr. Montgomery's hand. His grip was too hard, but I had the feeling that was more out of habit than extreme distaste. At least, I hoped so.

"Well." We paused long enough for Beau to order wine and starters—apparently, he knew what his parents liked—and then Mrs. Montgomery came back to me. "How long have you and my son known each other?"

"A little over two years," I said, still not letting go of Beau's hand. His thumb stroked softly across my knuckles, and I had to force myself not to dwell on it. "We met at work."

"Naturally," his mother sighed. "He works far too much."

"The price of success," I agreed with a smile. "He's the best lawyer the firm has, they keep him busy."

"Eric," Beau began, but I cut him off.

"Don't even try to tell me you're not, who's the one they send out to do damage control when everyone else is running around like chickens with their heads cut off? You."

"You should take more credit for your successes," his father added. He had a deep voice, a lot like Beau's, but much rougher. It was the first thing he'd said all night.

"And what is it that you do at the firm, Eric?" his mother asked.

"I'm a personal assistant."

"Executive assistant," Beau corrected. "He works directly for Peter Bowman, who owns the firm."

Oh I do, do I? I looked sidelong at Beau and he smiled at me, daring me to change the story.

“Not a lawyer,” his father grouched, but his mother fluttered her hand at her husband dismissively.

“Oh, Lester, not everyone has to be a banker or a lawyer,” she said. Both her husband and her son’s eyes widened with shock. I smiled. I was in now.

Over the course of dinner and two bottles of wine, I was grilled on everything from my family history, to my interactions with Beau, to my feelings about children. Beau grimaced but I jumped on that one, all ready with my phone to pull up a picture of Carrie. “She’s precious, isn’t she?” I asked, completely rhetorically because that much preciousness had to be obvious to everyone. “Her mother is a friend of ours—we’re going to her birthday party tomorrow.”

“Oh, damn,” Beau said suddenly. “I forgot to buy a present.”

“I did it for you, it should have been dropped off at your house by FedEx today, and it’s from both of us,” I informed him. “You’re welcome.”

“Well,” his mother—or Elizabeth, as she’d invited me to call her—said a moment later. “I have to admit I had my doubts, but there’s no way you could possibly pretend all of this. For the first time in more years than I care to count, I feel like I have a sliver of hope in my soul again.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Lizzie,” her husband said.

“It’s not drama!” she insisted. “It’s honesty! You might not be the sort of partner I always envisioned for my son,” she told me, “but you love him, and you’ve got a good heart. That has to count for something.”

“It certainly does,” Beau said dryly. “Mother, it’s getting late. Don’t you have a meeting with the garden society in the morning?”

“Yes, I suppose I do. It’s been lovely to meet you, Eric,” she extended her hand to me and smiled, and for the first time that night, I was able to see the resemblance between her fine, frozen features and Beau.

“You as well,” I replied. “I look forward to seeing you again, Elizabeth.”

Lester didn’t say anything, but he did pay for the meal on their way out, which was nice considering it had to cost in the several hundreds of dollars range. I sat back in my chair, bolted what was left in my wine glass, and then looked at Beau.

“Holy shit.”

“You’re telling me,” he said. “That’s the best dinner I’ve had with them in years. Imagine that, but without the effort to make conversation with you and a lot more expounding on my faults.”

“Your parents have some screwed-up priorities.” A little cautiously, I reached out and took his hand again. Beau twined our fingers together, making me smile. “So, I’m working for Papa Bowman now?”

“If we want to be able to have an open relationship, yes,” Beau said. He looked at me, and I could see heat and hunger in his bright eyes. “Which I certainly want. Two *years* you’ve been working with me, and I thought you might feel something, but I couldn’t take the first step. Not given my position as your boss.”

“I never wanted to be one of those... clichés,” I admitted. “Office worker falls for powerful, handsome boss, cue whips and chains and gold digger status.”

“No one would ever accuse you of being a gold digger,” Beau told me. “Not with your frustrating inability to accept gifts.”

“I told you, the Super Bowl tickets were just a bribe—”

“And correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think whips and chains are really your thing,” Beau continued. His eyes smoldered, and I felt my heart jump in my chest. “Are they?”

“N-not really,” I managed. “I mean, I can be convinced, but honestly I’ve mostly thought about...”

“What?” Beau asked. He lifted our joined hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to the soft underside of my wrist, just grazing the skin with his teeth.

“Desk,” I whispered. “Your office, your desk. I see you sitting there all the time and it just—it’s dumb, but it gets me going. That and when you tell me what to do, and when you wear your glasses, and I’m just going to shut up now before I freak you out any more.”

“You’d have to try a lot harder to freak me out,” Beau promised me. “That said, there’s no way we’re getting into anything at the office. Fraternalization aside, I don’t need those sorts of associations with the place I work, it would be too distracting.” He stood up and pulled me with him. “I do have a home office, however.”

“You want to take me home?”

“It’s a first step,” Beau said. We left the restaurant and walked over to where his car was parked. The gunmetal blue BMW coupe was an older model, no distracting new car smell, and I’d ridden in it a few times before. There was really no reason for it to work on me like an aphrodisiac, but from the second my butt hit the leather seat and Beau closed the door behind me, I was hard. It was as if all the tensions over the past few days, capped by tonight’s surprisingly successful dinner, had fallen away and left me weightless and carefree.

Beau looked over at me as he started the car and laughed. “You look way too happy.”

“There’s no such thing,” I said, scooting the seat back so I could stretch out my long legs. That put my lap on prominent display, and it was gratifying to see his gaze linger there for longer than it should have.

“Eyes on the road,” I reminded him as I rubbed the heel of my hand against my crotch. Oh man, that felt good. I wondered how Beau felt about getting a show.

“No.”

“Hmm? No what?” I’d barely fondled the zipper yet.

“No, you don’t get to touch yourself in my car.”

“Why not?” It wasn’t a whine, it wasn’t. My voice was too deep to whine. It was more of a... whoan. Or something. I couldn’t think.

“Three reasons. One, I don’t want to get into an accident trying to keep my eyes on you. Two, if I got into an accident, or if we were pulled over for indecent exposure, the mood killing would be the least of our problems. Three,” and here it was, the tone I loved, that I could barely wait for even though I knew I wasn’t going to like what he had to say, “for the rest of the night, that’s mine. Don’t touch it.”

Fuck. “Or what?” I asked thickly.

“Or else I’m not going to fuck you over my desk tonight, that’s what.”

My hands couldn’t have flown off my lap faster than if they’d had wings. “Got it. No touching.” Even though I ached, even though I honestly could have wiggled my hips the wrong way and gotten a little more delectable pressure, thus following the letter of the law but not the spirit. Everything in me, from the

way my heart pounded, to the surge of blood through my veins that left my ears feeling a little fuzzy, hammered home that I wanted to do this Beau's way.

"Perfect," Beau said. He sounded a little hoarse, and a furtive look told me that I wasn't alone in feeling restricted right now. Then I realized I didn't have to be furtive, and looked openly. "We're very close to my house," he added after a moment, squirming a little in his seat. I licked my lips and grinned at him.

"That's good. How do you feel about blowjobs in cars that aren't moving?"

"Christ Almighty," Beau swore. For most people it wouldn't have been swearing, but I knew him better than that, and he didn't tend to invoke the Lord lightly. I smirked and settled back into my seat.

"Is that a yes?"

"No," he replied, and then a beat later said, "At least, not tonight."

Right, because tonight, desk, fucking... all very good things, but despite my height I was pretty flexible, and I was sure if I twisted the right way I could—"Not both?"

"I'm over forty," Beau said. "Like it or not, that does entail some limitations."

"I bet we could get around them."

"Later, Eric."

"There's Viagra, there's tantric sex—my mom could write a book about tantric sex, and oh, shit." I covered my face with my hand and groaned. "I can't fucking believe I just brought my mom into this conversation. Talk about killing the mood." Sure enough, my cock started to soften under the pervasive image of my mother and *any* kind of sex. "Damn it."

"I'm sure we can get it back," Beau said. "Once the car is parked."

Sure enough, we barely made it through the front door before Beau had me pressed against the wall, one hand gripping the back of my neck while the other one framed my face, holding me steady as we kissed. Kissed, sucked face, devoured each other—kissing was a sweet word, but it didn't really encompass the urgency in our movements, the way I couldn't keep my hands from spanning his back, broad and warm and strong, so strong. I didn't get together with a lot of guys who were bigger than me, but Beau was. He held me firm, rocked against me like he couldn't stand not to be touching me with every part of his body, and I knew that this was the closest I'd ever come to absolute bliss.

And we weren't even out of our clothes yet.

"Office," I said between deep, sucking kisses on his collarbone. I knew I couldn't leave hickeys above the collar, but below seemed to be fair game. "Where's it?"

"First door on the left," he said distractedly. "Across from the bathroom."

"I want to go to there." Beau raised his head and looked at me blankly. "No? Seriously? Tina Fey, '30 Rock,' nothing?"

"You can educate me on popular culture later this weekend," Beau said with a frustrated little growl. "If," he added a bit more cautiously, "you want to stay."

"Do you want me to stay?"

Beau rolled his eyes. "I'm feelin' you up in my foyer, talking about having sex with you in my office after both of us endured a dinner with my parents, Eric. I don't think any of that points to something other than serious for us. I want you to stay. Rihanna," he added before I could say anything.

"You're so incredible, I can barely stand you sometimes," I told him honestly. "Let's go to your office."

Actually, first we stopped by the bedroom for supplies and almost, *almost* got waylaid by the bed. It was a big bed, way too big for one person, and it looked lonely there by itself in the middle of the room. Lonely and soft, like we could sink into it, like I could just be surrounded by covers and Beau and die happy. *Later*, I promised it, *we'll despoil you properly*.

We hit another little snag once we got to the office, although "snag" didn't really carry the right connotations. More like "big sexy jealous fit," and I loved it.

His desk here was even nicer than the one at work, obviously an antique, made of mahogany and with an embossed leather inlay. It was uncluttered, just the way Beau liked his things to be. I wondered if it would hold my weight, but Beau didn't seem to have any doubts as he lifted me up—actually lifted me—and set me down on it. He helped me out of his jacket and then got started on the polo. "Where'n God's name did you get this thing?" he murmured as his lips traced the line of my jaw.

"Mmm... from Aaron."

Beau pulled back to glare at me. "Why're you wearing Aaron's clothes?"

“Do you know your accent gets thicker when you’re turned on?”

“*Eric.*”

“I went over to his apartment last night,” I said, slowly undoing Beau’s tie as I talked. “To get him ready for you.” I unbuttoned his shirt, slowly, taking my time to look and touch. His chest hair was the same silver color that I loved, crinkled and gorgeous, and his nipples were just begging to be played with. “Because otherwise he would have shown up tonight looking like me, and,” I chuckled, “I didn’t want that for you.” I kissed his collarbone and the divot at the base of his throat as I pulled his shirt out of his pants. “I drank too many beers, slept on his couch, missed my alarm and had to borrow something of his for work. That polo was the closest to fitting.” I brushed my fingers across his bare stomach, and then trailed them down to his belt buckle. “And then you got a fashion disaster anyway, because you somehow ended up with me.” I glanced up at him, a little nervous. “What happened with Aaron?”

“He showed up,” Beau said, pressing our bare chests together. He was so warm, it made me sigh. “We talked for a few minutes. Figured out what was going on, I thanked him for his time, he told me there were no hard feelings, and then I texted you. I didn’t want it to be anyone but you with me tonight.” He slipped his hand inside my pants and gripped my cock through my boxers, making me bite my lip to keep from whimpering. “I just want you.”

“Me too. You. Me too, for you... oh, *fuck!*” In one smooth motion, Beau had jerked me forward and pulled my pants down past my hips, and now he was getting down on his knees and oh my God, this sort of thing just didn’t happen to me, there was no way Beau Montgomery was about to suck my cock, because my life had never been so—

His lips closed around me. I shut my eyes and held onto the desk with both hands, gripped it hard enough to bite into my skin, anything to keep me from coming right then and there. Then I had to open my eyes, because there was no way I wanted to miss watching this. He wrapped one hand around the base of my cock, the other one teasing between my legs as he slid his mouth down my shaft, his tongue pressing and licking. When he pulled off with a faint *pop*, I was almost relieved, because I was really close.

“Lube,” he said, holding out a hand. I dazedly looked around for the bottle he’d brought in, handed it to him and watched with fascination as he slicked up his fingers. Usually I liked to prep myself, I knew what I could take and it was just easier, but Beau was special. I wanted him in me, any part of him I could

get, and his hands... I'd spent hours staring at his hands. Days, probably, over the total length of our relationship. They were gorgeous, and I wanted them.

The first finger entered me, and oh, it was perfect. Not too slow and hesitant, like some blushing virgin who didn't know what he was getting into, and not fast and furious either, like someone getting right down to business. He fucked me smoothly, stretching me, spreading the lube and teasing my prostate and sucking my cock all at once. This time, I did have to keep my eyes shut because I was so close I could feel my body fighting to break free and orgasm. *No, I insisted, not yet. Not yet not yetnotyetnotnotnot...*

"Please," I begged, at some point, it could have been seconds; it could have been half an hour later. "Please, Beau, I need to come."

"Not until I'm in you," he said. His voice was a gravelly husk, raw from taking my cock, raw with want. He pulled his fingers out—fingers? When had they multiplied?—and let go of me, and I almost screamed with frustrated desire.

"Don't touch it," Beau warned me as my hand twitched downward. "That's mine, remember? I'll take care of it." He grabbed a condom and held it out to me. "You can touch mine, though."

"Oh, thank God." I went to drop down, but he stopped me. "If you fuck me right now, I'm not going to last long," I warned him.

"You think I am?"

"And I really, really want to give you a blowjob." Did I ever want to, holy shit. Beau's cock was about as long as mine, but it was thicker, rigid and hard, and I wanted it in my mouth so badly I was salivating.

"Later," he promised me. "Later, Eric." And later would have to do.

He felt like velvet under my fingertips, warm and smooth. I stroked him a few times, then a few more times, and then he growled and took the condom back, tore it open, and rolled it on himself. He turned me around, pressed my body down until my chest was flush with the leather, then leaned over me. His cock was right there, *right there*, and I tried to squirm back, but he held me still with his weight. Beau kissed the base of my skull, then the back of my neck, a moment of tenderness that I hadn't expected. "You ready?" he asked me.

"Yeah," I said, all my smart-assery gone as I contemplated the fact that the man I'd been hopelessly in love with for the past two years was about to fulfill one of my most enduring fantasies. "I'm ready."

He pressed into my body, and we made the same desperate noise as he slid home. I felt so full, and my ass throbbed a bit as I adjusted to his size, but my cock was resolutely hard. He held still until my breathing evened out, then started to move. Slow at first, then quicker, harder. Beau was careful to hold my hips steady so my erection didn't bang into the wooden drawer in front of it, but he pummeled me despite that. I fucking loved every moment of it, every pull, every thrust. I clawed onto the far side of the desk and held there, saying God knows what stupid, porny things, as I got closer and closer to the edge. I wasn't going to last, I couldn't, even without being able to touch myself, I couldn't, and I must have been begging because then Beau's hand was there, closing around me, jerking me in time with the movement of his cock inside of me, and—

That was it. Done. Fucked so good I saw the white light, an orgasm so hard that I trembled like a colt as it washed through me. Beau came as well, slamming in deep and staying there, groaning in my ear, holding me, kissing me and touching me. He stayed inside of me as the swell receded, stayed on top of me, both of us slick with sweat. We laid there for a few minutes, just catching our breath and basking in the afterglow, before I remembered that I was on a desk, and it was kind of hard.

“Bed?” I asked weakly.

Beau laughed quietly and pulled back. “Bed,” he agreed.

His bed was just as soft as I'd imagined, just as cozy and welcoming. Stress and sex made me sleepy, and we barely had time to do more than wipe ourselves off and lay down before we fell asleep. I woke up once in the middle of the night, the kind of shocked, jerky awakening that you only got in unfamiliar surroundings. *Where was I again? Who had I...?*

“Mmm, Eric.” Beau slung his arm around my waist and stroked my hip. “Relax.”

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly, turning to face him. “I forgot where I was for a second.”

“S'fine, I understand,” he said. Even in the darkness, I could see his grin. “I can remind you, if you like.”

My cock woke up right along with the rest of me. “Uh, yeah. That'd be great.”

Round Two was less intense, but much sweeter. It also came with a shower,

which we both needed by that point. I slept better after that, and in the morning, we got dressed—Beau's clothes fit me much better—and ate cold pizza at his kitchen bar for breakfast.

I was definitely in love.

Not even Lorna's extremely loud, excessively triumphant "*I knew it!*" when we arrived at Carrie's birthday party could diminish my good mood. Of course, it didn't hurt that I'd ordered Carrie a light-up, song-playing, bubble-blowing princess wand for her birthday. Her parents could look forward to listening to those tunes for months, which was probably about as long as it would take Lorna to stop crowing.

There were logistics to figure out, roles to be established, and hurdles to overcome. As happy as I was with how things had turned out, I knew that in some ways, we didn't have an easy path ahead of us.

"Here," Beau said suddenly, jolting me out of my reverie. "Eat this." He pushed a bite of chocolate cake into my mouth, and I smiled even as my eyes rolled back in my head, because damn that was delicious.

I had Beau. He had me. We'd figure out the rest.

The End

Author Bio

Cari Z. is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She's been published with Dreamspinner, Less Than Three and Storm Moon Press among others, but her stories for the Goodreads M/M group events have been some of her favorite writing projects. This is her third year picking up a prompt, and it just gets more fun each time. Cari hopes that you enjoy reading what she's put out there as much as she enjoyed writing it in the first place. Follow her blog, twitter or Facebook for info on upcoming projects and recent works.

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