



*Missing
Piece*

A Love's Landscapes Story
by
Riina Y.T.



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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

MISSING PIECE

By Riina Y.T.

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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MISSING PIECE

By Riina Y.T.

Photo Description

The photograph shows a close-up of two young men from behind. Both are wearing white tank tops. One of them is holding the other close to his chest, kissing the back of his neck.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He'd lost everything dear to him in one devastating moment. His family turned their backs on him; his friends no longer took his calls. It was the one moment that he was totally true to himself, the moment he told them that he was in love with another man.

With all of that loss you'd think the universe would be at least a little nice to him... no, the man he loved so dearly and risked everything for was on his couch with the twink from downstairs.

Is it bad that I had a hard time holding in my elation? I have wanted him from the moment I saw him. Could it finally be my time? Could he ever really want me?

Please give us our HEA.

Sincerely,

Raevyn

P.S. Contemporary, please. Some angst is good, but not necessary. I'd like them to work for their love, just not too hard. :)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: businessmen, friends to lovers, slow burn/UST, cookie addiction, sweet romance, hurt/comfort, angst

Content Warning: infidelity/cheating of secondary character

Word Count: 65,680

Dedication

Raevyn, big hugs and a story *just* for you! :)

We've only known each other for a very short time, but I can tell you are doing an amazing job for the M/M Romance community and this wonderful event. I appreciate your help on my other writing, and I hope you will have a little fun with this one.

More hugs!

MISSING PIECE

By Riina Y.T.

Chapter One

Untouchable

With an inward groan, Mattia let himself sink into the rather uncomfortable metal chair behind the small glass table, as he gave the slowly filling conference room a quick, all-around glance. He should have gotten here the day before; the early flight had been a lot more hectic, the traffic terrible, and everything just far more exhausting than he had anticipated.

At last, some room to breathe. Today, he decided, would be a good day for a change, despite the irritating start. Mattia wanted to leave those recent cumulative *bad* days behind him; he'd had enough of downs lately; he *needed* positive, wanted *exciting*.

Unintentionally, Mattia's gaze locked on a young woman with short honey-blonde hair, wearing a black suit and white blouse, standing near the window with a cell phone pressed to her ear. A gentle smile played on her lipstick-red lips. Mattia imagined her making one last call to her husband, perhaps telling him how much she would miss him this weekend, probably wishing him a good day at work, saying she can't wait until they are reunited. Maybe she isn't married; instead, she might be calling her family. Her mother perhaps, living in another state, Texas maybe, wishing her a happy birthday, or calling to see if she was doing okay. Mattia couldn't help but remember the last phone call he made to his mother. How he wished that one call, and the many unanswered that followed, would have made him smile a warm smile like hers; instead, it only brought him tears.

I just want to forget. Everything.

The lady finished her phone call, which probably was nothing like he pictured. She most likely just checked in on some last minute changes with a client or something along those lines. After a long moment of bittersweet memories from the past, Mattia's eyes caught sight of a brunet mop of unruly curls, and his stomach tensed, the feeling unfamiliar and far from comfortable. Mattia studied the man's wavy, hazelnut-colored, somewhat perfectly styled hair. If Mattia had to guess, he probably used pomade along the hairline, to give it that sexy, sophisticated, half-slicked-back look.

All of a sudden, nearly forgotten images of Leo, hot summer days, and the freedom of being sixteen years old appeared before his mind's eye. For no reason at all, his lips curved into a thoughtful smile.

Leo.

With a closer look, Mattia quickly noted that the rest of the man looked quite familiar as well, the soft and gentle features of his face were similar to Leo's, even his skin was as fair and appeared to be just as smooth. Mattia could tell he looked quite delicate, yet definitely masculine. His body must be slim, perhaps strong at the same time. Well, he couldn't really see what was going on underneath the man's dark suit, plus he was seated and—Mattia scolded himself, he really shouldn't be staring at anyone, especially not at this very moment.

It couldn't be Leo.

Impossible.

What were the odds to ever run into Leo again, not to mention out here in Philadelphia of all places?

Mattia dismissed those ridiculous thoughts and returned all of his attention to the people in charge of this weekend. Honey & Sugar, the company he last worked with developing one of his most successful projects to date, hosted a large conference and trade show from Friday afternoon through Monday evening at a ritzy hotel in downtown Philadelphia.

He gave a curt nod toward his easy-going business partner of one year, Mr. Fisher. Next to him stood the rather strict head of the creative division, Paul Sanders, and his friendly assistants, Donna and Clark, whom he'd miss working with the most. They had been highly pleasing clients, and it was rather sad to see their partnership come to an end.

The presentation he had planned for today would *kick ass*, he was certain. This would also be the perfect crowd to find a new project he could lose himself in. After all, he had quite a large array of recently developed applications and software to show off. Mattia hoped his good reputation would precede him. As a self-employed freelancer, he could only invest so much time in each project.

Many of the companies that came to him often had a certain deadline he wouldn't always be able to meet, hence he couldn't take on every job he liked. Some were just too complex, too time consuming; it would be impossible for him to carry them out by himself.

Mattia often thought of expanding, finding a business partner maybe, or starting his own company.

One day he would really like that.

“Morning Leo, taking notes already?”

The familiar voice, rich and deep, tore him out of his daydreams. *Gee*, he hadn't realized he'd been drifting off again. The conference had already begun, but he failed to concentrate on anything; the hotel coffee was way too weak and tasted like hot water over gravel. *Yuck*. Perhaps he should get his hands on a snack or better coffee soon, before that taste made him sick. Maybe he could ask Miguel if he had any gum on him. The dark-haired man who sneaked up behind him, and was now seated comfortably next to Leo, nudged his shoulder.

Leo turned and forced a smile. “Hey, Miguel.” He greeted his colleague as chipper as he could muster. For some odd reason, he felt anything but awake, and his usual cheerfulness wasn't anywhere to be found today. *Ugh*. Talk about bad days.

Miguel leaned in closer. “D’you wanna get together after dinner tonight?” he whispered, as close as he dared without touching, a seductive smile playing on his full lips. His hand rested on Leo’s thigh, feeling warm and oddly soothing.

Oh, he wants us to get together again.

Leo considered the handsome Puerto Rican, with his expressive eyes and neatly trimmed beard. *Mh-hm*. Miguel sure was gorgeous, sort of his type as well, so it really didn't make a lot of sense that Leo hadn't been anticipating spending the night, any night, with Miguel recently. He was nice enough company for one night of *no-strings-attached* distraction. But, to be honest, Leo knew very little of the man, other than his position in the company they shared and what *position* he preferred in the bedroom. Come to think of it, Leo wasn't even sure how old Miguel was.

Ah, what the hell.

“Yeah, of course,” Leo assured Miguel with a small smile. He wondered briefly how he would get through today without his typical amount of strong coffee and sugar. What he'd give for a Mars Bar or some chocolate cookies. Hell, a handful of Smarties would do right now. But the thought of that caramel had his mouth watering. Having a serious sugar addiction, most days Leo would get cranky if he didn't have his fill. Leo was surprised he could be awake, but then, he wasn't really sure he even left the bed this morning. This might be a dream for all he knew.

Thinking about Miguel's offer, considering this was not a dream, maybe getting together wasn't all that bad an idea. A few shared hours together sounded better than being by himself the entire weekend, after all. Hotels tended to make Leo feel a little uneasy. God knew why.

Miguel nodded, satisfied, and beamed at him with a wicked grin. "Maybe we can have a few drinks at the bar after dinner. I heard they serve a *dirty* martini." He punctuated his last words with a squeeze of Leo's thigh.

What really got Leo's attention were those distracting deep-brown eyes. The way they glowed right back at Leo felt soothing, just like the man's touch. Miguel's eyes, he had to admit, really were beautiful. Leo could drown in them. They were a good shade darker than his own, and while Leo had a lot of green in the mix, Miguel's were just dark brown like sixty percent cacao-chocolate.

"Martinis sure sound good," agreed Leo. His heart felt a little lighter at the prospect of someone's company, after all. He remembered the night they met, during Leo's second Christmas party with MetalWarez. With Miguel being relatively new at the time and in marketing, while Leo was with the department for basic-preliminary development, they hadn't really crossed paths before. Miguel's obvious interest, as he'd brought him a martini and a plate with a few pieces of sushi, had flattered Leo.

Since then, they had been hooking up once a month, give or take, for almost a year now. It was something that hadn't happened before with anyone else, and it wasn't so much because he *liked* Miguel. Sure, Leo liked him all right, but it was just so convenient to have someone you could call up when you felt like it. They were both on the same page on that, and Leo simply didn't do relationships, never had. Random sex encounters were quite enough for him to satisfy his needs whenever he felt like he wanted closer contact with another human being. In his eyes, most guys were simply not worth the hassle, and no one ever got his heart beating faster. Leo was probably just a bit too messed up in the *love* department.

There once had been someone. Someone mysterious and interesting, someone who had pushed all his buttons without trying. It was all kinds of ridiculous to think he was still in love with a guy he never even got a chance to kiss. Leo had only been a kid back then, and yet, the other boy had been all Leo could think of for years afterward. He'd been much too hung up over pointless wishes, fruitless hopes, and dreams he knew would never come true.

What did that say about him? Exactly! He was all kinds of messed up in regards to love, and he didn't feel like trying much anymore. Leo shook his

head as if it would actually stop his brain from thinking any further about that. He hadn't thought about *him* in a long time. Leo didn't want to go down that road again.

"I take consulting very seriously as there are many very important features to consider depending on device features, offline functioning, discoverability, speed, installation, maintenance, platform independence, and of course, development costs and user interfaces."

The confident voice echoing from the small podium up front drew Leo's attention back to the conference and the reason he was here. Leo was supposed to watch, pay attention, and gather as much information on everyone and everything as he could. Lifting his head in the direction of the speaker, he saw who that gorgeous voice belonged to. There was no way Leo could miss the man's obvious attractiveness. The gelled back, short, midnight-black hair, his tall and lean posture and, *oh*, did he mention the incredibly sexy voice?

The man looked striking in his neat, blue, pinstriped suit. His gaze appeared to be piercing, but that sweet, confident smile gave him a somewhat likable touch. Leo felt like melting inside.

Geez, he hadn't seen anyone that gorgeous in a very long time, not outside TV land, at least. If Leo wanted to keep his job, he'd have to do his best and try hard to listen to what the man up front was delivering. It might just be the guy they were looking for. Who knew?

Leo had been working with MetalWarez for the last two years, give or take a few months. He looked forward to continuing for a while longer, if possible. The trade show tomorrow would be perfect to show off some of their recent products, and in addition to that, they were hoping to discover a possible business partner for one of their future products.

The speaker's deep, manly voice sounded somewhat familiar, but Leo couldn't put his finger on it. He wished he had caught the man's name. Now, he might have to wait until they handed out papers, or he got a closer look at him. Leo sat too far in the back to read his name tag.

Leo sighed, watching the handsome man as he continued his speech, operating the PowerPoint presentation all the while. Besides his good looks, he also seemed quite competent and sounded confident. This might actually be a rather fruitful conference after all.

Just, pay attention, Leo.

“To summarize, native apps, hybrid apps, or web apps are all ways to cater to the needs of the mobile user. There is no unique best solution: each of these has their strengths and weaknesses.”

Mattia pressed the little button on his remote and paused long enough for the slide to move on while taking another short moment to breathe in and out. His stomach was fluttering a little, but the satisfied looks on the conference attendees calmed his nerves whenever he caught their smiles.

“The choice of one versus the other depends on each company’s unique needs.”

He paused long enough for his final words to sink in as he waited for questions he knew were coming. Mattia answered them all with his brightest, most reassuring smile, adding a good amount of confidence.

Shit, my cheeks are already hurting.

The only thing that had kept him slightly off balance was that curly-haired stranger’s eyes on him. It wasn’t a look of disapproval, judgment, or anything indecent. He seemed to be genuinely interested, considering Mattia’s services for his company, perhaps? It felt as if he watched Mattia’s every move, though, as if his gaze was suddenly glued to him.

Stop looking at him, man.

But he looks so familiar, I can’t help it.

As he hoped, his well-thought-out presentation earned Mattia satisfied and approving looks, welcoming smiles, and a round of applause. He would have to make sure to hand out pamphlets and business cards and thank everyone personally later. Maybe Mattia would be lucky today and someone would consider working with him in the future. He looked forward to doing business with many of the participating companies from all across the country. Many of them probably had small branches in the area, or perhaps, they could meet somewhere in between to discuss their interest in him. He’d done that before. Mattia had also done many Skype conferences in the past. It seemed to be quite a trend lately and always went smoothly for him and everyone involved.

Mattia had to be realistic, though, since he wasn’t able to do magic, and he didn’t know code that couldn’t easily be figured out. Most of his business contacts were within driving distance to his home and office in Chicago. After all, developers were scattered all around the country, and he wasn’t anyone special.

At half past two, the conference took a late lunch break, and people started to scatter in all directions. Some formed clusters here and there, getting themselves a snack and coffee, but many headed out for the restroom or fresh air.

Mattia took a quick look around, and instantly he spotted the curly-haired guy he'd seen earlier. He appeared to be quite popular, being surrounded by two tall Asian businessmen in sleek suits and three rather chatty women, all trying to engage him in conversation. The poor fellow seemed to be undecided which of them he should answer first or perhaps whether or not he should excuse himself.

Mattia almost felt sorry for him. He knew how tiring those kinds of gatherings could be.

The morning had been good, but now he really needed a break for fresh air and decent coffee. Mattia nodded to a short, gray-haired man handing Mattia his business card. Making his way toward the exit, he waved his good-bye to the friendly couple he'd given his business card to earlier, and as fast as he dared, without appearing to be in a hurry, disappeared through the glass doors. From there, he headed straight for the stairs and outside toward the nearby Starbucks one block away.

As soon as he'd satisfied his caffeine needs, Mattia slowly strolled back to the building, and once inside, headed directly for the conference room.

Thank God for decent, non-hotel coffee.

Cradling his silver Starbucks tumbler, still half-filled with the delicious hot brew, he immediately spotted the brunet man from earlier, now seated behind one of the many tables in the far back of the room. Mattia smiled, watching him fuss with papers, an engrossed look on his face.

Why was that man so intriguing?

Mattia never felt quite so drawn to any other man like that. When he'd met his boyfriend, Richard, they hadn't hit it off right from the start, but eventually grew fond of each other. It had been all that he knew, really, and this was so badly unsettling that he wanted to observe the man's every move.

Mattia was in a happy relationship and therefore definitely not *looking*, so why did he feel like he couldn't take his eyes off this guy?

And why did that guy have to remind him so much of Leo?

After studying the stranger for a few long moments, the guy eventually looked up, as if he sensed Mattia's curious gaze on him. Their eyes met, and in that instant, a strange, unfamiliar fuzziness began to boil low in his belly. Mattia immediately turned around, certain he was flushed, and he was just in time to see the telltale smirk on his colleague's face. Mattia groaned inwardly. Had she been watching him, watching the cute stranger?

"What's with the look, hun? And who is that pretty guy over there?" Her voice, as she spoke, rose and fell in a musical way that always made him cringe a little inside.

As expected, Shirley didn't beat about the bush, and despite him being someone who enjoyed keeping most things private, he found it extremely easy to talk to her. They had hit it off from the day they met. Her lively persona kept their work environment light and fresh, and a few times, it saved him from drowning in charts, numbers and code. Mattia loved his software and programming, but even he needed a reminder, every now and then, that there was the possibility of working yourself to death.

"What guy?" Mattia tried to come across as nonchalant as he knew how, encouraging her with subtle hand movements to walk away. She wouldn't budge.

"Oh, don't try to fool me. You've been checking him out all day," Shirley said in a chiding tone, moving closer to where he stood.

Crap. She knew him too well already. They'd only met a few months ago, when Shirley replaced Harald Stone, who had been his closest contact during his last project with Honey & Sugar. She went out of her way to assist him with tasks she wasn't even meant to know about. Mattia *almost* considered her a friend. But because they would soon go their separate ways, having successfully completed the application development just a few weeks ago, he didn't want to get too attached to her.

"I haven't," Mattia insisted. "And I really don't know who he is."

"Hm. Interesting." She eyed him closely then looked over his shoulder to study *Curly Hair* once again before nudging his shoulder, a wicked smile on her full, lipstick-red lips. "I approve of this one. He is pretty cute."

"What are you talking about, Shirley?" Mattia muttered, "I wasn't looking. I am in a serious relationship. You know that."

"Pah. Richard. That douche." She rolled her faded-green eyes dramatically, like she so often did. "Seriously Mattia, you can do so much better than him."

“Shirley! For chrissake. Richard is great,” he hissed under his breath. “How often do I have to tell you that I love him?”

Shirley made a noise that told him she was unimpressed.

“Just because he had a bad day when we all got together doesn’t mean he’s always like that.” Mattia sighed. It was probably useless to convince her that Richard could be nice and loving.

“Whatever, Mattia.” She shook her beautiful hair a little, pointing at the man in question. “Take cutie over there for example, I bet he’s a really sweet kid. You deserve someone who treats you nice, hun,” she encouraged with a pat on his shoulder.

He knew she only meant well, but he really did love Richard.

Mattia took a chance and looked over his shoulder to see the cute stranger’s face again. Just a quick look. Won’t hurt right?

Yeah, he is cute, all right.

But he was definitely no teenager. “Kid?” Mattia regarded her. “He’s gotta be at least twenty something. Twenty-four, maybe? Definitely not a kid. And Richard does treat me nice,” he complained, still trying to get Shirley to move and stop talking about that guy or Richard.

Mattia wanted to pout and, more than anything, just be finished with today. Somehow, this scene was irritating the hell out of him. Not only was the urge to check on *Curly Hair* too strong, Shirley also began to slightly annoy him. She always found a way to remind him of that day all three of them went out to dinner, when Richard had been rather unfriendly and acted all spoiled and made a drama out of everything. It hadn’t been his best move, Mattia had to agree.

Shirley just loved to bring it up again and again and tell him that he deserved someone better, someone who would cheer him up and fix his grumpy moments, instead of enhancing his moodiness with spoiled actions or ruin what should have been a fun night out. Her words, not his. As if Richard always behaved like that. He didn’t, really. Only sometimes. And it hadn’t been all *that* bad; everyone went home with clean clothes and a smile, more or less. Richard just could be a little... complicated.

“No, seriously, Mattia, he *is* pretty. Just look at those lovely, chestnut-brown locks, the porcelain skin, and those cheekbones!” She swooned. “He totally gives off that *boy-next-door* vibe, don’t you think? Not like you, Mattia dear.” She gave a loud, mocking sigh, and he rolled his eyes.

“Don’t give me that look! You act more thirty-six than twenty-six, Mister. Always so grumpy. You know that doesn’t do you any favors.” Shirley grinned and punched him for emphasis.

“Okay, okay. Enough of that.” He put an arm around Shirley’s slender shoulder and tugged her toward the door. “We have about twenty minutes until the last round. Let’s get some fresh air, shall we?”

“Don’t you wanna ask cutie over there to go with you, instead?” she whispered teasingly, and Mattia thought he felt his stomach drop at the thought of them—*Curly Hair* and him—talking.

What a strange day.

“Maybe you should go and talk to him, Shirl.” He squeezed her a little and finally got her moving. “If he is obviously your type, you might hit it off. Who knows?”

Mattia thought Shirley was one of the prettiest and sweetest women he’d had the pleasure to meet. Tall and curvy in all the right places, always dressed fashionably, with shoulder-length, wavy, butterscotch-colored hair, and always a smile on her lips. She was charming and caring, bubbly, and just a bit feisty. A little too much for him, he had to admit at times, as he preferred quiet and conservative over lively and happy-go-lucky. But she was a wonderful person to be with.

Mattia was certain they would make a pretty pair, *Curly Hair* and her, as they appeared to both have the same energetic and charming aura.

“Puh-leeze, darling.” Shirley slipped out from his hold while turning her body toward him, her girly curves almost touching him in places he’d rather not have them touch. She gave him one more of her overly dramatic eye rolls and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow instead, pulling him along towards the glass doors. “Just so you know, *Pretty Guy* so checked *you* out, not me.”

Huh? Had he really?

With one final look over his shoulder, he saw the cute stranger watching them walk away.

Chapter Two

Memories of a Long Ago Summer

“We are looking forward to hearing from you again.”

Leo let out a deep breath as he watched yet another satisfied visitor walk away with a handful of pamphlets. It was only midday, but Leo felt exhausted to the bone; he just wanted to sit down for a while, somewhere tucked away from everyone's eyes. Leo's cheeks were already hurting from having to smile all morning. He would give anything right now for the bottle of aspirin that stood on his nightstand in his hotel room.

The trade show had been in full swing since the early morning and, so far, a big success. The booth Leo and his colleagues were hosting still buzzed with visitors. He hardly had any time to take a breath or gather his thoughts for a moment or two. Of course, it thrilled Leo that he could contribute to their success, but he'd like it very much if he could get out of here in one piece, preferably sane.

Just when Leo thought he could sneak out for a moment and have one of his colleagues cover for him while he took his break, Leo caught sight of a tall, handsome, raven-haired man walking straight toward his company's stand.

Oh, it's him.

It had totally slipped his mind to check the man's name yesterday after the conference. The evening before was too busy, with everyone needing something from him, and pulling him here and there before he could get away for his evening with Miguel. And on top of everything else, Leo had hardly managed to get a good night's sleep. Something had been nagging at the back of his mind, and it drove him crazy not knowing what it was that kept him awake.

Watching the stranger's features as he approached, Leo stood there frozen to the spot behind his tall white table. There was a confident, self-assured air about the man; surely he'd remember seeing someone as breathtaking as him. Try as he might, Leo just couldn't shake that feeling that he knew the guy from somewhere other than yesterday's conference.

With each step the man took, his heart pounded faster. The closer he came, the lower Leo's gaze fell, as if it would make him invisible. Something in the man's eyes made him want to crawl under the table and disappear.

“Leo?”

The gravelly voice stopped him from completely making a fool of himself by ignoring the visitor. It would only earn him an earful from his colleagues.

Leo swallowed hard.

He lifted his head when the man spoke, “Leo? It’s you, right?”

When Leo looked up at the slightly taller man’s face to make eye contact, his eyes collided with the deepest pools of pale gray-blue he’d ever seen. That very moment Leo’s stomach dropped low into his belly.

Oh shit.

He *really* did know that face, that strong jawline and... those mysterious gray-blue eyes. They reminded him of the ocean right before a storm. Leo once knew someone with the same intimidating eyes. Now that he thought about it, it was amazing how much the guy looked like Mattia. How could he not have realized it earlier? But, no, it couldn’t possibly be him. *The universe doesn’t work that way, right?*

“I thought it couldn’t be you, but it is.” The guy shook his head as if he didn’t believe what or who he was seeing was real. “It’s you, Leo, isn’t it?”

Leo started. The handsome stranger gave him a warm, funny smile. It irritated him slightly, yet felt somewhat comforting, calming even. Leo had watched the man during the conference the day before, most of all, wondering why he appeared to be so familiar. He’d never been to Philadelphia before; they couldn’t have met anywhere else; that would have been pretty crazy, right? Talk about coincidences.

Just how did the man know his name?

This is starting to freak me out a little.

“I couldn’t sleep until I figured out where I know you from. And I know it sounds insane, but I am pretty sure it’s *you*,” he said with firm insistence. The man lowered his gaze and rubbed a hand across his temple, looking at Leo intently.

Leo concentrated and studied the stranger before him. The man’s gray-blue eyes locked on his own, as if he tried to make him *see* something telepathically. Not moving an inch from behind the tall white table, Leo admired his strong, masculine features. His clothing didn’t give too much away, but he imagined that underneath that business suit the man must be well built, with a muscular chest and well-defined torso.

Leo loved how his skin seemed to shimmer an interesting shade of olive under the artificial lights. Definitely Italian or Spanish heritage, he thought. There was no denying it, he was drop-dead gorgeous from up-close, and Leo just couldn't shake that feeling of familiarity. It was irritating as hell.

"Oklahoma? Summer 2004. Your grandma." The man before him sighed. "Don't you... remember me?"

Shit. Oklahoma.

He'd only been to Oklahoma one time in his life.

That could only mean one thing. No way. That was impossible!

But then, suddenly, it all came back to him in a rush. *Mattia*. The guy with the icy-cold gaze of a polar bear and a heart as warm as the summer-like sun. Tall and lean body and hair black like a raven's. He now wore it short and sophisticated, but in his memory, it went down to his shoulders, unruly, and full of wild curls. A lot like it was right now, only much longer.

Leo caught his breath, and his vision blurred for a short moment. It was really him. *Mattia*. The most irritating and intoxicating guy Leo had ever come across. The boy who now was a man, whom he'd tried to forget so badly it almost worked. Apparently, Leo hadn't managed to erase *Mattia* from his memories completely; instead, those images had only been pushed far, far back.

"Tia." Leo's voice came out in a whisper. "Huh. It's been a while."

Leo could never forget his first and only crush. *Never*. At some point it had become too difficult to remember, so he just had to *forget*.

And just look at him now!

"You do remember."

Mattia smiled, obviously pleased. Leo liked how the simple words lit up *Mattia's* face like a fireworks display, causing his eyes to glitter like snow melting in the sun, rather than icicles ready to stab you in the heart. The hard wall Leo had built around his memory was momentarily gone, and his look of satisfaction made Leo feel weak-kneed. With his hands reaching for the white table in front of him, Leo gripped it hard, trying not to tremble as all kinds of emotions overcame him.

He is still so damn beautiful.

Leo felt blinded, his heart racing fast as if the revelation just made *Mattia* all the more stunning and breathtaking. He let out a nervous chuckle and had to

look away for a moment. It was ridiculous how the guy could affect him now that he knew it was his old friend. Just like back then, during their last week together, Leo felt dizzy just from standing too close. It had totally thrown him last evening, as they passed each other in the restaurant hallway, and their arms brushed by accident. Miguel had pulled and hurried Leo along, but he'd looked up anyway and gazed right into those deep, cold eyes. He almost tripped over his own feet. Now it all made sense. Mattia used to have that effect on him when they first met.

Mattia.

Geez, he'd seriously thought he would never see him again.

Leo never fully understood what made him want to be around that guy so much that he hadn't cared about anything else but a single chance to see and talk to him. It had been foolish all those years ago, but his heart seemed to have taken over at the time, and it probably would again if given the chance to befriend Mattia this second time around.

Leo shouldn't have liked Mattia that much; he never should have hoped and dreamed and fantasized. But he had, and Leo knew now, he still would. All the old memories came rushing back, filling his head with both the good and the bad that had happened, leaving him dizzy and just a little breathless.

They were silent for long moments and just stared at each other. Leo felt awkward, and tried to think of something to say, like, *how have you been?* Or, *what are you doing here?* But Leo had seen him yesterday, and from the way he'd held that presentation in front of all those companies, it was obvious that Mattia had been doing very well; and from what he heard, it was also obvious just what he was doing here—making business contacts—as simple as that.

It was Mattia who pulled him out of his thoughts like he used to when Leo would fall into the bad habit of daydreaming or plotting out all kinds of plans as they sat by the lake.

"I almost didn't recognize you without your baggy pants and colorful hair," Mattia said with a shaky laugh.

Really?

Leo wanted to roll his eyes. He thought the ten years that passed since they'd seen each other might have a little more to do with it. He could hardly contain a snicker. Leo used to be all skater-boy and rebellious, never wearing anything other than brown baggy pants or ripped blue jeans. His closet

consisted of all sorts of crazy T-shirts with cartoon characters or funny quotes. Back then, he also had blue and purple streaks in his hair, which he always straightened with his grandma's flat iron. How he had hated those curls! And, oh boy, there used to be that ridiculous piercing in his nose!

"Well, *you* certainly don't look much like you used to ten years ago," Leo replied with a bittersweet smile.

Sometimes Leo missed those carefree days.

"So, what happened to your style?" Mattia asked curiously, running a hand through his thick hair. Leo couldn't help but watch the slender digits disappear in his black strands. They were so dark and silky. What would it feel like to brush his own fingers through them?

Leo swallowed hard, his mouth going suddenly very dry.

"College happened, and I guess I grew up." He shrugged. "Had to eventually, you know, to make a living, support myself and all that." The words may have left his lips a little unsteadily, despite making a great effort to appear casually calm and relaxed. As a rule, he never managed nonchalant when he was nervous, and today wasn't an exception.

Mattia nodded thoughtfully, and Leo couldn't help but smile just looking at him. It felt great to see him again after all, and maybe just a little less awkward with each minute that passed. Maybe. He couldn't fully wrap his brain around the fact that they were practically standing across from each other, ten years later.

"I'm sorry about your grandma." Mattia regarded him with a sincere smile. "I never got the chance to tell you after you left."

"Thanks." Leo gave him an appreciative smile. For a moment, he remembered the last time he'd seen her. They hadn't been that close since they only saw each other once a year, but Leo remembered her as a loving woman who always did her best to make him feel happy, welcome, and safe. She had been a lot like his mother, whom he loved and adored to bits. Sadly, his grandma passed away the winter of the same year he spent the summer in Oklahoma, while his parents went through a divorce. That summer he also met Mattia.

Their eyes locked over the table, and Mattia shook his head, a gentle smile on his lips. "Man, I can't believe it." His voice was warm and soothing. "It's so good to see you, Leo."

Huh, now *that* was a surprise.

Despite everything, Leo didn't quite understand why Mattia was smiling at him as if he had just found his long lost kitten. He looked genuinely pleased. Well, if that wasn't just a *little* weird. Back then, for days, the guy hadn't spared him as much as a second look, always giving Leo the cold shoulder and avoiding him like the plague. He blew hot and cold like nobody he had ever met before or since then.

One day, when he finally gave in to Leo's persistence, they instantly hit it off and then spent four extraordinary weeks together, doing all kinds of stuff, like playing video games or basketball. They often went fishing and swimming at a nearby river, and sometimes just watched TV, while his grandma napped. Most of the time, Leo would ride his beat-up skateboard while Mattia rode on his cool, silver mountain bike next to him. It had been four pretty amazing and eventful weeks.

When Leo kept quiet for a long while, wondering just where they would go from here, Mattia broke the silence once again.

"You disappeared one day, and then you were just gone." He cleared his throat. "I didn't even know your last name, or where your family lived." There was a strange eagerness evident in his voice.

Yeah well, you wanted me gone, remember?

Leo shook his head; it didn't matter now. "My mother. I stayed with my mother after I returned home." His throat was so dry, he barely got out the words. "Virginia. I grew up in Virginia."

Why did his voice feel so shaky?

"Well..." Leo began, hoping he could get away for a while to gather his wits. "I was just about to take my lunch break, so if you'll excuse me," he said, fussing with the pamphlets in front of him as he turned to his colleague, a tall, slim and quite beautiful blonde woman in a fitted, white suit, giving him her brightest smile. "Kelly dear, would you please take over for me? I need a few minutes outside."

Air, I need air.

"Of course, Leo. I was wondering if you weren't taking your break at all."

She patted his shoulder and turned to Mattia who was still a stranger to her, beaming him the same thousand watt smile. "How may I help you, sir?"

“Uh. Thanks. I’m good. If you’ll excuse me.”

Leo heard the stumbled apologetic voice fade into the background as he wove his way through the throng of people, heading for the staircase at the far end of the ground floor.

“Wait. Leo! Just wait.” Mattia sounded a little breathless and looked somewhat nervous as he came up beside Leo, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him. Leo stared up at him and, for a long moment, forgot where he was. That intense icy gaze made him shiver, and it threw him right back to that one summer ten years ago.

That summer they had shared a lot of laughs and wonderful afternoons in each other’s company. Friends. They had been really good friends for four weeks. It was ridiculous how much those days had meant to Leo.

He remembered it clearly as if it happened yesterday. Leo had been intrigued by the guy from the moment he’d laid eyes on him from across the street of his grandma’s house. That day, when he spotted the tall boy with the long raven hair, taking off his red T-shirt, Leo had picked up his skateboard and headed for their front lawn. Standing there uninvited, Leo then watched the boy intently from the other side of the neat, white picket fence. The boy was taller than Leo, but not by much, and Leo guessed he was also probably a little older than him. The boy’s black, wavy hair reached his shoulders, and his skin was a good shade darker than Leo’s. And those eyes were absolutely breathtaking and so intense; he’d never experienced a look from eyes like those.

The unknown boy stood a few feet away from where Leo was, kneeling down in the freshly mown grass and petting a beautiful black Labrador retriever. Leo kicked his skateboard and caught it in his hand, their eyes never unlocking, not even for a second.

“You better get away from my house, stranger, or my dog will eat you.”

The handsome raven-haired boy across from him glared at Leo, and at that moment he fell hard and fast. Leo wanted to get to know him, wanted to be friends. Worse yet, he wanted to kiss him. It had been a funny feeling, low in his stomach, a tingling on his skin, and for a moment that stretched too long, he thought he was going to throw up.

He had thought about kissing a boy before, many times in fact, but Leo was certain he wouldn’t get to kiss that boy any time soon, and that was fine. Leo

only wanted to be friends, get to know him, and explore those weird feelings, ideas, and possibilities.

Somewhat excited and motivated, Leo chuckled, rolled his eyes at the two—dog and boy—in the grass beyond the picket fence. Then he rode away on his skateboard.

For the next ten days, the same scenario repeated itself. Every day, Leo would observe the house across the street, and whenever he caught sight of the handsome boy and his dog, he would grab his skateboard, dash toward the house, and watch them until he was told to leave. Again and again. The first few times, Leo went away with a smile, and perhaps a bit of regret. Soon, he'd sworn, he wouldn't give up that easily any longer.

Leo had promised himself he'd get it right, that they would become friends. Being alone with his grandma hadn't made for the most thrilling summer vacation, and he was dying for company around his own age. But, he only wanted the mysterious boy from next door.

One morning, not too early, after Leo had a quick breakfast and talked to his grandma for a little while, he heard someone screaming, laughing perhaps, and it sounded a lot like it had been coming from across the street. Not many people lived close enough for them to be heard from a distance.

Leo had grabbed his skateboard, dashed out the front door, and immediately spotted his mystery boy and his dog running around in their garden, the boy throwing a small red ball. When Leo reached the house, the kid and dog stopped their game, and their usual staring contest began.

Eventually, Leo couldn't take it any longer and asked, "What's your dog's name?"

"What do you care?" the boy replied defensively, sitting in the grass and studying him curiously.

Leo took a step toward the white fence, placed both hands on the fancy wood, and leaned forward, studying both the boy and his dog closely.

"He looks like a Rex," Leo said cheerfully, giving them his brightest smile.

"Jupiter." The handsome boy rolled his eyes, and said firmly, "His name is Jupiter."

"Cool." Leo grinned, excited that he got the boy to talk to him. "You and Jupiter wanna come throw some balls with me?"

The boy crossed his denim-clad legs and regarded Leo for a long, quiet moment before he answered, "Not really."

His voice sounded rather disinterested, and Leo didn't like it one bit. He really wanted to hang out with the kid. It'd been a while since he had anyone fun to be around, and he was becoming restless in his grandmother's house all day.

"Oh, come on. I'm bored," Leo pleaded. He reached for his skateboard and placed it on the ground so that he could sit down on it. The raven-haired boy stared at him for a long moment and watched him closely through the bars of the fence before he eventually broke eye contact.

He looked over Leo's shoulder and back at him. "You live across the street? I haven't seen you around before," he asked rather curiously, his voice sounding friendlier with every word. Thinking that maybe he would get his new friend soon, Leo felt oddly cheerful.

"Just for the summer," Leo answered. He looked around the neighborhood, noticing that it was strangely quiet and mind-numbingly boring so he jumped off his board and walked up to the fence again, staring down at the boy and his dog. "I'm staying with my grandma until school starts."

The cute boy nodded, but looked up at him from where he sat in the grass, cross-legged and still petting Jupiter, who lay curled up next to him.

"Do you know if there is a skate park anywhere?"

Leo smiled to himself, thinking they could take turns on his board, and if the kid didn't know how to skate, Leo could teach him.

"No idea." The boy shrugged. "We just moved here this past Christmas."

Oh well, he could think of at least sixty-four other things they could be doing instead. "Never mind." Leo chuckled and leaned further across the fence. "Let's find some place to hang out then," he said brightly, and pointed at the black dog. "And bring Juup."

"His name is Jupiter," the boy muttered, which made Leo smile even brighter. Unexpectedly, the kid then nudged the dog. Jupiter quickly jumped to his feet and sniffed at a squeaky toy duck lying in the grass. It looked a lot like they were going to play, after all. Leo thought he was going to burst with excitement. He'd never played with such a big dog.

"I like Juup better," Leo exclaimed with a smirk.

The boy rolled his eyes and stood up, smiling at Leo, and nudging his dog to come along. Leo reached for the animal with the tender eyes and soft-looking fur, patting Jupiter on his rump and smiling at the mad wagging of his tail when he joined them on their first mission together.

Suddenly, everything changed as fast as it began. One week before Leo was about to leave Oklahoma to return to live with his mother, Mattia suddenly gave him the cold shoulder and went straight back to ignoring him. First, he'd say something like, "Sorry I can't hang out today", then the next day he told Leo outright to leave him alone. He said that he was busy and didn't want to waste his free time with him anymore.

The upset look on his face had bothered Leo, and it hurt to be sent away like that, after they had had so much fun during the previous weeks. Two days later, he'd almost gotten his new friend to come out from hiding, but then his father had called Mattia back inside, and that had been the end of it. Leo only saw him one last time—the day he was leaving and came to say good-bye.

Leo could tell something had been bothering Mattia, and for whatever reason, he chose to be an ass. He accepted it and tried not to let Mattia's frustrated last words get to him.

But they did, and the fierce anger in his friend's usually so cool, gray-blue eyes had hurt.

"Don't ever come near me again. Don't. Don't even look at me. I don't want to see you again, Leo. Just go!"

Even today, those words still echoed in his mind, and memories of a time that appeared to have never happened continued to haunt him, all these years later. Leo had tried, but had never completely gotten over it.

He had genuinely liked Mattia.

Images of a sixteen-year-old Mattia faded when irritating, strange noises became louder, and Leo's head was swimming, feeling like freshly squeezed mush. For a moment, he thought someone was moving him, shoving and pushing him gently back and forth, carefully stirring him awake. Had he been sleeping?

"Leo?"

The deep, gravelly voice made his stomach churn. He blinked a couple of times, but his eyes were just so heavy, it seemed better to keep them shut. Feeling soft fabric beneath his fingers, and something firm hitting his back, Leo

realized he was indeed being moved. In fact, Mattia's hand still lingered on his shoulder. The strong fingers holding on to him made Leo feel a little shivery.

“Can you hear me, Leo?”

A soft, unexpected pinch to his side encouraged him to force his eyes open. *Why is it so bright in here?* When his sight finally adjusted, Leo was greeted by a pair of pale-gray-blue eyes, twinkling slightly blue in the light, and a worried look on Mattia's face.

Crap. Leo let out a low groan. His brain was disturbingly foggy, and it felt a lot like someone had wiped his memory clean. *How did I get here?*

Leo took a look around and started when he found himself sitting on a large, red satin couch in the hotel lobby. For long moments, he wondered why he was on a sofa in the middle of the frigging hotel lobby when he'd been... oh God, what had he been doing? Leo couldn't remember a thing.

What just happened?

“Good God, Leo,” Mattia said, with a note of relief. “You scared the crap out of me.”

Leo couldn't remember anything except those sad gray-blue eyes and Mattia staring angrily at him when he was sixteen years old.

“Are you feeling all right? You're still as white as a sheet.” Mattia considered him. “Didn't you eat anything?” he asked, concerned, and his expression told Leo that he was truthfully worried.

“Did I pass out?” Leo said in a small, panicky voice. “Oh God, I did, didn't I?”

Dammit, he should have eaten something a long time ago.

“Yeah. I thought you had a seizure or a heart attack, or something.” Mattia glared at him as if he had lost consciousness for fun. Leo couldn't suppress a low chuckle, studying the worried look on Mattia's face, his full lips pursing together, and those dangerous eyes unblinking. It was sorta cute.

“You think that's funny?” Mattia growled at him. His face was glazed for a split second, and then he frowned. Fury flashed through his normally calm and pleasant demeanor, but Leo wouldn't be intimidated by that.

“No. I'm sorry,” Leo said sincerely. “Thank you, for eh, rescuing me?” He beamed an amused smile at Mattia, knowing very well there wasn't anything to

be amused at, but he just couldn't help it. For a moment, he forgot all about the embarrassment he should be feeling right now.

"You can send Mr. Watt a *thank you card*," Mattia suggested with a smirk, all of the anger from a moment ago seeming to have left him as well. "Or better yet, you can buy something from his booth." Mattia winked at him, and Leo liked how it made his eyes crinkle.

Watt? Leo couldn't remember meeting anyone by that name. The slight confusion must have been evident on his face, because a heartbeat later, Mattia cleared that up as well.

"The kind man who helped me carry you," he answered Leo's unvoiced question.

Oh.

He had passed out for real, hadn't he?

Mattia reached in the chest pocket of his navy blue suit and pulled out a business card, which Leo guessed had Mr. Watt's details on it. For long moments, Leo admired Mattia's tall, lean body, acknowledging how incredibly good he looked in a suit, especially in that velvety-soft, shiny fabric which would probably feel terribly nice to cuddle up against. Naked. *Mh-hm.*

"Uh. Yeah, right." Leo dismissed those thoughts as fast as possible. "I will say my thanks for certain," he croaked, and then shoved the business card into the pocket of his gray slacks. When he looked back at Mattia, those gray-blue eyes filled with concern, Leo felt momentarily taken aback.

Then, slowly, the memories of the day returned one by one, and Leo recalled where he was, and that he'd talked to Mattia before he must have lost consciousness. Quickly, he felt the embarrassment return full force. How disconcerting to pass out in front of all those businessmen and women. That could have only happened to him.

"May I take you to lunch?"

Mattia's deep voice interrupted his thoughts, sounding almost cheerful which startled Leo. Ever since Mattia had come up to him earlier, something about him had baffled him. Maybe it was just the frustrating memory of how things ended between them the last time.

"I don't know. We aren't really friends or anything," Leo replied with a gloomy sigh.

Don't you remember what your last words were to me?

“It’s just lunch, Leo,” Mattia pointed out. “I think you need to eat something, and I am starving, myself,” he said matter-of-factly, holding his hand out to Leo. “So, let’s go.”

Leo considered him for a moment or two. He didn’t want to have lunch with Mattia, not right now at least. Knowing that he had to eat, Leo eventually gave in and nodded. Mattia’s company might not be that bad. After all, they had a lot to talk about.

“Okay,” he whispered with a sigh of irritation, taking the offered hand, letting Mattia reluctantly pull him off the sofa. He followed Mattia’s lead, almost shoulder to shoulder as they moved off.

If nothing else, Leo could get outside into the welcome fresh air so he could clear his mind.

Chapter Three

Second Chances

“Room service,” Mattia called out a second time, followed by another knock. He tried to smile casually when he finally heard movement behind the closed door. Holding up two plastic bags of Chinese takeout boxes made him feel rather silly. Maybe he should have gotten pizza instead. Or better yet, stayed in his room.

After today's quick and quiet lunch with Leo, they had gone their separate ways. He'd hoped they would meet again at the official dinner party at six o'clock in one of the many ballrooms, only Leo was missing. So, here he was now, two hours later, with some randomly chosen takeout, hoping Leo would actually be in his room, preferably alone and awake.

The door cracked open.

“I haven't ordered... Oh, Mattia?” Leo's eyes went wide as he saw him. Clutching his white bathrobe tightly against his chest, Leo made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded just a bit funny. He let his gaze travel quickly up and down Mattia's frame, then suddenly burst out laughing. “Boy, this feels like a pretty lousy porn scene.”

Mattia rolled his eyes, but he didn't feel like commenting on that. He already had difficulties remembering why this had been a good idea in the first place; he didn't need to think about porn or anything like that.

“What are you doing here?”

“You didn't come to dinner tonight, so I brought you something.”

Leo chuckled, “Are you spying on me?” he teased softly, lifting an eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest to make sure the robe wouldn't fall open.

Mattia forced his eyes away from looking at Leo's fingers where they gripped the soft robe, tightly. Catching the guy straight out of the shower hadn't been his intention. Mattia hadn't even considered the possibility. All he wanted was to see Leo, and maybe get a chance to apologize for being an ass all those years ago. Each time he had thought of bringing it up during lunch, he just chickened out. Looking at Leo made him feel like he was sixteen again and just a little lost and discouraged. He wanted to make it right, and eventually make Leo understand why he had done what he did.

Mattia coughed awkwardly. “Not really, just checked with the hotel staff and your company. Nobody had seen you so—I worried a little.”

“You did what?” Leo asked with a hint of surprise that kinda stung Mattia. Did he really come across as such a jerk? Did others see him as cold-hearted, like his father had called him?

His mother even accused him of being selfish and arrogant, and Richard sometimes teased him about not being able to show real emotion. He never wanted anyone to think of him like that. Maybe he wasn't used to expressing himself openly, but that didn't mean he had never cared about anyone. In fact, Mattia cared a lot about the people he loved. Even if they didn't love him back anymore.

“Do I look like I'm joking?” Mattia tried to sound playful. “I never joke.”

He smiled, hoping to make light of the situation, even though it was most definitely not one of his specialties. He never thought of himself as cold-hearted, though, and it hurt whenever someone else did. It wasn't his fault that he didn't give a damn about every person he met.

Still, he did care and worry about his family, whether they loved him or not, and he always gave a damn about the few friends he had, or used to have. Most people simply mistook his reserved behavior for him being an ass. He wasn't really, and only very few could see through the icy wall he involuntarily presented to the world.

“I know.” Leo laughed wholeheartedly, wagging his eyebrows. “I think that does count as spying on me, nonetheless.”

Leo spoke rather teasingly, in a quiet way, with a beautiful smile that reached his eyes. Mattia somehow liked the sound of his voice just then. Leo seemed to get him, he always had. Despite the short time they spent together when they were young, in the beginning, nothing Mattia said or did could offend or annoy him. How things ended, of course, that's another story.

Back then, he felt mostly perplexed by people's reactions to him. All the other kids found him pretty snobby and didn't want to have anything to do with him. As Mattia got older, he learned quickly to treasure and acknowledge the few people who seemed to genuinely like him. It wasn't easy for him to let someone in, especially if he'd just met that person. Most of the time, Mattia didn't even get the chance to know someone well enough for them to see his personality behind the mask. Nobody was drawn to him like they were to

Shirley, for example. She was the kind of person everyone loved and adored. Mattia was not.

“It’s not spying if one has good intentions, then it’s called caring,” Mattia said with a swift smile he hoped would go unnoticed. “So, can I come in?”

Leo just shook his head and moved back. “Sure, come on in.” He clutched his robe again and waved for Mattia to move inside. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right with you.”

Now who sounds like a bad porn actor?

Mattia chuckled, watching Leo disappear into the bathroom, the door swiftly closing behind him. He let himself further in, taking stock of what he saw. The room was quite large, a cozy looking queen-sized bed in the center. Boring white hotel sheets but *a lot* of pillows. Did he have more than two pillows in his room? Mattia didn’t think so. The beige curtains were drawn, and the otherwise dark space was lit by only two small lamps, one on each side of the bed.

When he spotted a silver tray, probably left behind by actual room service, Mattia picked it up with a grin, set it on a small wooden table close to one side of the wall, and unpacked their takeout dinner onto it. *Perfect*. Slipping out of his shoes, Mattia crawled into the bed and made himself comfortable, taking the tray of food with him.

“Sorry, I didn’t get anything to drink, since I don’t know what you like,” Mattia called into the room, once he heard the bathroom door crack open, and the unmistakable noises of someone opening and closing cupboards could be heard. He picked up the remote control and quickly found something that looked good enough to entertain him until Leo was finished.

“No problem, I’ve got ginger ale and water,” Leo shouted back, his voice muffled by the distance. “If you’d like something else, we’ll have to call the actual room service,” Leo chuckled.

Leo popped his head around the corner of the open door in the suite to where, Mattia guessed, was an adjoining room. He probably kept his clothes and suitcase there, since everything was tidy and neat here in the room where Mattia sat. He told Leo he’d like a ginger ale, and waited patiently, while watching the latest tennis news on the sports channel. Not that he paid much attention to it. His heart was beating unexpectedly fast, and he couldn’t stop from fidgeting.

When the noises in the other room quieted, Mattia turned in time to see Leo come through the doorway, two drinks and paper towels in hand. His hair was still wet and wavy, making Mattia think of warm summer days and vanilla ice cream by the beach. He didn't even try holding back that smile.

"You look mighty comfortable there." Leo's lips curved into a smile.

He noted Leo had slipped into a pair of black tracksuit bottoms and a white T-shirt, showing a black-and-white print on its front. Mattia squinted his eyes and made out the face of a man in a large black square, some stars and anchors and, well, that was all he could see.

"I am." Mattia couldn't help but grin, patting the spot beside him in invitation. "Food's getting cold."

Leo handed him a tall glass and set his own drink on top of the bedside table. Mattia watched Leo carefully crawl into bed with him, a bright smile plastered on Leo's face. He really had the easiest smile Mattia had ever seen. When they were both sixteen, it had surprised him just how much Leo could, and would, smile at him. That smile was always carefree and full of life. Mattia wasn't one of the funny guys; he had never wanted to make others laugh on purpose, telling jokes and such. It just wasn't his thing, but he appreciated it in Leo.

The moment he watched Leo walk out of his life, he'd realized how different Leo had always made him feel. Normal and accepted. For the first time, Mattia had felt free and unrestrained, like Leo didn't see him the way everyone else did.

Chapter Four

Forgive and Forget

With a content smile, Leo sat back against the soft hotel pillow and took in the scene before him. Mattia was stretched out next to him on the bed, hands behind his head, and his jeans-clad legs half-covered by the thick white blanket. Leo would have to be a fool not to notice just how gorgeous Mattia looked in jeans and a plain sweater, one as black as his raven hair. It somehow brought out his unique gray-blue eyes. Leo also noted how relaxed Mattia appeared, and the thought of them being together again, maybe even managing a future friendship, or more, warmed his heart. He had dreamed of a second chance for a long time.

When they were kids, there had been no obvious sign from Mattia, whatsoever, that would indicate that he might like Leo in the same way Leo liked and adored Mattia.

Even now, Mattia gave off the very same “*Don't touch me*” vibe while, at the same time, his eyes would soften whenever he looked at Leo. It made Leo feel welcome and liked now, not like that one day, long ago, when Mattia sent him away. As the years passed, Leo had forgiven him because he couldn't hold a grudge if he tried; he was too fond of the idiot.

The uneasiness he had felt in Mattia's company earlier today seemed to have faded, and what had kept him on edge all afternoon was the constant thought nagging him about whether or not there could finally be more between them. The few hours he'd spent with Mattia made it obvious to Leo that he was still completely and utterly drawn to the handsome man. Leo wanted him, in whatever way possible.

Could Mattia see them together, as more than friends, this time around?

When they were teenagers, Mattia had fascinated him in a way nobody else had. Everyone he met simply had to measure up to Mattia, only nobody ever did. Not on any level, and certainly not where it counted. Mattia somehow managed to crawl under his skin that summer.

Would Mattia now be able to return the feelings Leo had for him?

What would he do, if I told him?

Leo gazed at Mattia, his lips forming a smile he couldn't hold back, yet he felt uneasy and frightened at the possibility that they would never get a chance to be more. That he would never get his desired kiss, his friendship and love. Leo took a deep breath. He wanted more, so much more. It would slowly drive him crazy, being that close without knowing if he even had the slightest chance. For all he knew, Mattia could be as straight as they come.

Maybe he should finally find out...

"Tia," Leo whispered, carefully, afraid to startle his friend who seemed to be engrossed in watching some show Leo hadn't paid any attention to at all. The adorable, sleepy look on Mattia's face, as he turned and acknowledged Leo, tugged at his poor, lovesick heart. "Why are you doing this?" he finally asked.

He studied Mattia's surprised expression as Mattia reached for the pillow, adjusting it under his head, so he could look at Leo from a more comfortable angle, he guessed. Due to their lounging on the bed, Mattia's previously perfectly groomed raven hair appeared to be rather disheveled now, and that just made him look all the more adorable. Mattia's eyes softened, and Leo smiled, feeling a little more relaxed. Mattia would probably hurt him if he ever said that out loud.

"Doing what?" Mattia gave him a puzzled look, sounding as if he was trying to feign innocence, but Leo was almost certain he knew what Leo was getting at. He *really* did look adorable, though, all mussed, cozy, and serene in bed, framed by pillows and blankets. Leo's chest began to swell and his heart ache just a little more. How he wished he could freeze that moment in time, even if all he could do was to look at Mattia for all eternity.

He blinked a few times, trying not to be overly sentimental.

"This." He waved a hand toward the tray that held the now empty Chinese noodle boxes. "Bringing me food, sitting on my bed, and watching TV. Just... *This*," he emphasized. "All this... friendly, stuff?" Leo asked, a little baffled himself, hoping Mattia would note that there was no judgment in his words, only pure curiosity.

Mattia squinted at him, and something told Leo that perhaps Mattia wasn't sure, himself, why he was doing it. Was it weird that the thought of that alone made him feel good? Maybe Mattia subconsciously liked him more than he thought? But, they hadn't seen each other in years, so surely Leo didn't mean anything to him anymore, if he ever actually had.

“Well, you fainted on me today, Leo,” Mattia said with a hint of concern. “I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

Mattia's words made Leo feel unexpectedly warm and fuzzy inside. Did he mean it?

The thought that he might be able to reach the guy somewhere deep inside felt pretty damn good.

“And I appreciate it. I really do.” Leo watched Mattia closely, searching his face for any sign of... he didn't know what. “It's just...” He sighed and chewed on his bottom lip. “I don't know.”

Leo had only gotten to know Mattia over the course of four weeks that one summer, but he knew Mattia wasn't likely to just show up unannounced at anyone's door. He wasn't the outgoing kind. Leo had always liked that about him. It made him a little mysterious and safe to be friends with. Like a scared, stray kitten, wanting nothing to do with you, but it would always come back for warmth and food.

It had been almost some sort of challenge, trying to coax the boy with the cold eyes into being his friend. Leo had always enjoyed a good challenge, and something about Mattia back then told him it would be a rewarding experience. As it turned out, his gut feeling had been right. Mattia was all kinds of awesome, fast becoming the best person to hang out with.

Now, seeing how Mattia had practically made himself at home in Leo's hotel room was completely unexpected. Sure, they hung out in his grandma's house, but they were all grown up now—adults. That they would fall back into their old friendship so easily was too good to be true.

Leo felt frustrated; why couldn't he say what was on his mind?

His chest felt suddenly so tight, it was utterly painful. With their eyes locked, Mattia spoke with concern, “I'm sorry, Leo. I didn't realize.” He averted his gaze, directing all his attention at the TV they both had been ignoring for the last ten minutes or so. “I must be bothering you.”

He's getting it all wrong.

“No, not at all.” Leo studied him, watching his profile, unsure of how to word what he was feeling. He reached out and touched the back of Mattia's hand, the slightly chilled skin feeling nice and exciting under his fingers.

“It's just, I guess, a little weird is all.”

It suddenly tingled where his fingertips met Mattia's skin, and Leo sighed. He could feel the goose bumps rising on his neck. Mattia turned back to him, lifting his head completely off the pillow as he moved. With a better view, looking directly at Leo, he asked, "Weird?"

Then he sat up straight, slipping his arm from beneath Leo's touch. The confusion on his face was unmistakable.

Gee, Leo knew calling it weird might have been a bit *weird* in itself, but right then he just had no idea how to express his thoughts clearly. All afternoon, he'd been wondering when, or if, they would manage to see each other again to talk properly. After today's ridiculous events, especially the slight fact that he had fainted out in public for the world to witness, Leo hadn't been too motivated to look Mattia in the eye over the conference dinner, so he had skipped the whole affair.

Their brief lunch together had been the most awkward experience Leo could remember, well, right after fainting in front of his biggest crush. And now? They were having a lovely evening together, no doubt about that. Even the worst takeout tasted better in Mattia's silent, but comfortable, company. Leo wasn't sure what to make of all this.

Until now, they hadn't talked about how their friendship had ended that summer. Leo couldn't deny that Mattia's rejection had hurt, but he wouldn't let it stand in the way between them now. He could *forgive and forget* if it meant they would have a chance at a friendship again. Still, a part of him would at least like to know what had caused Mattia's sudden change of heart back then.

Leo felt pretty self-conscious now, as he finally dared to ask, "Well, you do remember how our summer ended, right?"

It had been nagging at the back of his mind all this time. He propped himself up on one elbow and steadied his upper body by reaching around with his other hand, resting it merely inches away from Mattia.

"I do." Mattia nodded, his expression changing from puzzled to wary and something between sadness and embarrassment, perhaps. It was hard to tell, really, but Leo could see that it actually mattered to him, and that alone tugged at his heart.

Leo could hardly breathe.

"What..." He swallowed a huge lump in his throat. "What happened that last day?"

There. He said it. Now, did he honestly want to know the answer? Whatever Mattia's reply was, Leo knew it wouldn't change a thing, and somehow, that was okay. It had been ten years, after all.

"It's complicated, Leo." Mattia sighed, tore his gaze from Leo's and let his head fall onto the pillow. He let out a low groan that tugged even more at Leo's heart, before speaking again. "I'm... really, so sorry for what I said to you. It wasn't right and I've wanted to apologize ever since I realized you'd left for good."

Leo nodded, even though he knew Mattia wasn't looking at him, instead, he stared at the ceiling. Leo's throat felt dry; his heart pounded hard within the confines of his chest. After a long moment of silence, Leo cleared his throat, but all he managed to get out was a weak, "Okay."

Funny, it looked like he wouldn't be getting any answers after all now, would he?

Maybe it was for the best. The past couldn't be changed, and Mattia must have had his reasons. If not, he'd just been a dumb teenager, and that was okay too. Leo had had those moments himself, those times when he'd said or done things he'd regretted afterward, especially toward his mom, who never deserved any of his preteen stupidity.

"Is that it?" Leo tried to sound as nonchalant as he could. "Your apology, I mean."

He didn't want Mattia to hear the confusion he still felt. Perhaps it really didn't matter. If Mattia held any regret whatsoever, it would be enough, and Leo would accept whatever apology he'd get. He just couldn't hold a grudge.

"Yes," Mattia told him firmly and turned to look at him again. Their eyes met, breathtaking gray-blue collided with odd brown, and whatever pain Leo had felt inside slowly dissolved. "I can repeat it as often as you like, Leo. I really mean it," he said, his eyes glittering with what appeared to be unshed tears. "I'm sorry, and I hope you can forgive me."

"I already did." Leo gave him a small smile. "It was a lifetime ago. I'm glad if we can move on."

"Move on. Yes, I'd like that." Mattia mirrored his smile, and he was sure it was a hundred percent more breathtaking than his own. He absentmindedly licked those plump lips that Leo wanted to brush his thumb over. "I'd really like that."

Mattia didn't smile as often as Leo, but whenever he did, it was the most beautiful sight in the world. Leo loved the way a simple smile could make Mattia's face appear all warm and gentle, and his eyes look so molten gray-blue.

After all these years, Leo couldn't believe they had finally met again. He had given up any hope a long time ago. He'd done all he could to forget about Mattia, the beautiful, quiet boy he fell in love with over one random summer.

It scared the shit out of him, just how much he wanted to hold on to Mattia this time. Keep him in his life. And worse, how badly he wanted to reach out and touch that silky, tan skin, wrap his fingers around his firm bicep, and just *feel*.

Leo would probably never be one of the few people Mattia loved, but that didn't stop him from feeling the terrifying need to become friends with him again. It was probably going to be better if they would take it slow, one moment at a time.

Only one thing was crystal clear: letting Mattia just walk out of his life, after all this time, was simply not an option.

Chapter Five

Life is Like a Puzzle

Mattia tore his gaze from his MacBook Air and tiredly rubbed his eyes, stifled a yawn, and kicked back his rolling chair. God, it had been a long day, and the afternoon just seemed to have passed in the blink of an eye. Mattia swiveled around and looked out the third floor window of his office building. The way the bright, colorful city lights from outside illuminated the room never failed to amaze him. All those intense greens and yellows, beautiful oranges and reds—he loved the city life, especially on a rainy day like today. Chicago's North Side was quite different from his hometown in Ohio. Most of all, Mattia appreciated the liveliness of the area.

A long yawn escaped him. “Uh. Crap.” He hadn't noticed the time passing that fast today. Mattia rubbed his eyes once more and stretched in his chair, trying to decide whether he'd get the rest of the macaroni salad from the fridge, or head down the street to that new Indian restaurant, he'd been planning to check out every day since it had opened. He hadn't gotten around to doing just that yet.

Mattia turned around when the smartphone next to his MacBook *pinged* with a reminder to pick up Shirley's clothes from the dry cleaner. Mattia quickly dismissed it; he'd already gotten them this morning after meeting a potential client at the nearby coffee shop. Shirley was moving to New York soon, since she had been promoted, and Mattia had promised her to help wherever he could, considering it a small payback for everything she had done the past six months.

Just as he was about to get up to fill his empty stomach, Mattia remembered he had one last email to reply to before he could call it a night.

Shit, the guy from T&W is still waiting for my quote. Good thing he'd already worked it out and only needed to send the file. It would only take five minutes at the most.

As expected, the trade show had brought a few interested companies and possible clients his way, hence, the emails, telephone calls and appointment scheduling kept him occupied all week. The guy he was seeing tomorrow morning promised to offer a pretty interesting deal, and Mattia looked forward

to getting all the details on that project. It was a hybrid app for an interactive cookbook that would play videos, like the tutorials found on YouTube these days. The book, or rather the person in the video, would actually talk to you, instead of you having to read the recipe the old-fashioned way. Mattia had to be honest, it sounded pretty interesting.

It was just a shame that Leo's company hadn't gotten in touch with him at all. He would have loved to have had the chance to work for them. But then again, they seemed to only manufacture and sell cutlery, cookware, and coffee machines, so Mattia wondered what they could need an app for, seeing as they already maintained an online shopping application.

Well, that talking cookbook thing would probably be quite fun to do.

A persistent meow caught Mattia's attention, and he looked down to find Prince rubbing just as persistently against his leg. "Are you hungry, little man?" He purred back mockingly and reached down to scratch his beloved cat behind its ears, earning him another loud meow.

"Give me a second." Mattia attached the files needed to his email draft. "Just let me get this out here," he said absentmindedly and clicked *send*.

With a louder and more persistent meow, Prince jumped up into his lap and started pawing the metal-framed display of the MacBook.

"Your highness? What can I do for you?" Mattia asked his cat, teasingly poking his belly.

"Meow."

Mattia chuckled. "Are you telling me it's time to be done already?"

Prince meowed again.

"You are right, buddy, it's too late to still be working, isn't it?"

Mattia yawned and closed his applications. "Let's get some food then, shall we?"

Prince followed him around the office and to the small makeshift kitchenette where he kept his cat's favorite saucy dish. He poured the intense-smelling *CAPTAIN'S CATCH™ With Crab in Sauce* into Prince's silver food bowl and served his furry friend.

As they had so often this week, Mattia's thoughts drifted back to Leo while he watched his cat munch on its dinner. He couldn't believe how easily Leo had forgiven him, and he hadn't even explained anything yet. He'd really wanted

to, but he'd chickened out at the last minute. Mattia was afraid if he knew the truth, Leo would turn his back on him like everyone else. Of course, Mattia was thankful that they had gotten it all sorted out and all—he just didn't know how to do this “friends stuff” right. And he *really* wanted to get it right this time.

The few friends he had were from his neighborhood back in Oklahoma. Maybe a handful of kids he grew up with couldn't be called friends, but they were the closest he'd ever gotten to having friends, and they used to be there for him. But since his coming out, none of them wanted anything to do with him anymore. It had been two years, but sometimes the loss still hurt. After moving to Chicago, Mattia had also soon lost touch with everyone he knew from college. For the past year, Mattia hadn't had any contact with anyone who hadn't been business-related, other than Richard. Not that he minded much. Richard was all that he needed, and besides, Shirley had kept him occupied more than any friend ever had.

Mattia wondered whether *he* should take that first step and get in touch with Leo. It was like a blessing having run into him at that trade show; he couldn't just *not* do anything about it.

Maybe he could send him an email. Although he'd much rather call him instead, Mattia didn't have the courage to pick up his phone and dial his number. He had never been the kind of person who was comfortable calling someone, unless it was business-related. Mattia could talk business; he just didn't do personal too well. He knew that there was no reason to feel nervous, but he couldn't help it.

Mattia didn't even know if Leo honestly wanted to do anything together. They had parted after the trade show with a friendly “*see you around*” and “*yeah, please call me*”, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, did it?

Leo had left quite the impression on him. Mattia couldn't deny that he'd been instantly attracted to the boy and his rebellious attitude. From the start, he'd been truly impressed by his persistence and that incredibly cool “*I don't care what you think, but I am going to be your friend*” thing he'd been doing for two solid weeks until Mattia caved and eventually gave in to Leo's game. They had then quickly become good friends. Leo had probably been the only person, besides Richard, that Mattia had let in.

The first couple of days had been quite difficult and a bit challenging. Dealing with someone as energetic and exciting as Leo up close had been quite a new experience for him. There had never been a younger or older sibling, and

when he hadn't been by himself, Mattia spent most of his time with Jupiter, his Labrador retriever. Sport clubs had been out of the picture too, since he never felt athletically inclined whatsoever. Being outdoors, doing stupid boy's stuff with Leo all summer had been exhausting at times, but also inspiring and mood-boosting. It had freed his mind and made him see how much fun he could be having if he just gave others a chance.

Mattia used to think he was better off alone, but Leo had shown him how much fun having a good friend could be.

A persistent knock on his office door, followed by the bell, took him back to the here and now.

Huh, who could it be this late?

Mattia gave Prince a pat on his small head and moved across the room. He opened the door and was startled to look into a familiar face. There he stood, his old friend, the man he had just been thinking about, dressed neatly in a brown suit, matching messenger bag slung around his shoulder, and pretty wavy hair, damp and slightly disheveled.

“Leo? What a surprise to see you!”

Sure, they'd exchanged business cards, but he hadn't expected to see Leo again so soon, especially not showing up out of the blue on his doorstep two weeks later.

Leo beamed him a smile. “I think I owe you dinner,” he said, holding up a pizza carton and plastic bag. Leo shook his head slightly, as if to get that errant curl of brown hair out of his eyes.

Mattia felt that Leo didn't owe him anything.

When Mattia did things for others, he never wanted something in return.

“Can I come in?” Leo asked, a mischievous expression on his rather pale face. Mattia wondered briefly if he ever got a tan in the summer. Surely in a warmer place like Hawaii, for example, he wouldn't be that pale all the time. Mattia liked that look on him, though.

“Of course.”

Gesturing for him to come inside, Mattia watched Leo walk through the threshold, heading straight for the black leather sofa in the corner of his office. Leo dropped his slightly wet messenger bag onto one of the two matching armchairs when Mattia joined him, collecting two glasses and paper towels

from the cupboard to their left. With a smile, Leo removed two cans of ginger ale from the plastic bag and opened the pizza box.

A satisfied Prince walked around the table a couple of times before he decided to jump onto the chair with Leo. With a loud meow, the cat made himself comfortable on his guest's lap and almost instantly began to purr.

"Whoa. Hello there, little friend." Leo grinned at the cat, a little surprised by the sudden assault, but obviously extremely pleased, judging by the way he was petting and ruffling Prince's fur.

"God, she is adorable," Leo squealed delightedly, smiling at Mattia while petting the cat laying on his knees.

"You'd better watch what you're saying. You've got one dangerous *man* in your lap." He laughed as he corrected Leo, "Pleased to introduce you to Prince."

"Royalty, huh? I can see how that fits." Leo chuckled. "*He* is gorgeous."

Their gazes met, and Mattia thought he really liked how Leo's eyes crinkled when he smiled—and it was as if Leo constantly wore a genuine smile on his lips. He was one of the most cheerful people Mattia had ever met. Mattia admired the chocolaty brown of Leo's irises sparkling with life and the way his lips would *always* form the loveliest smile. Just like he had that summer, Leo could be hypnotizing whenever he held your attention.

"I didn't peg you for a cat person, Tia. I remember Jupiter and how much you adored that naughty bastard."

Mattia felt a little shiver go down his spine whenever he heard Leo call him by that nickname, one only he had ever come up with. Hearing it now evoked all sorts of memories. Thinking about Jupiter, too, who passed away a few years back, made him feel a little melancholy.

"After Jupiter passed away, I didn't have the heart to replace him. The big city also isn't the best place for a large dog, especially not living in a small apartment and with the hours I work," Mattia said with a hint of regret. "But I absolutely *love* Prince. He is extremely spoiled and does as he pleases, but maybe that's exactly what makes him so lovable." Mattia chuckled.

"I can imagine." Leo scratched Prince's head, gazing down at the feline on his lap. "You are quite a handful, aren't you?"

Prince appeared to be content where he was, which surprised Mattia a little, considering his cat only ever enjoyed his company. Prince and Richard had

never been successful at bonding. The little devil honestly hated his boyfriend and loved to hand out scratches and bite marks wherever, and whenever, he could. Sometimes, it was funny to watch Richard frequently piss off Prince on purpose, which would always earn him a growl and either a hole in his shirt, or bite mark on his shoes. Mattia cheered for the small feline, though. Their fights weren't always fair, considering the difference in size, but nevertheless, Prince always strutted away as the winner.

"Mmm. Leo, where did you get that pizza?" Mattia asked with a mouthful. "It's really *good*. You could stop by more often."

Mattia tried to be as playful as he knew how to be. He wouldn't mind seeing Leo more often, with or without pizza.

"Maybe I could."

The lightness in Leo's voice didn't surprise him, and neither did his statement. Unlike Mattia, he was known for his outgoing, playful attitude, something he'd always admired about Leo.

Mattia shook his head. "I was kidding, Leo." He didn't want him to think he needed the excuse of bringing him pizza just to hang out, and probably his office wasn't the best of places for their bonding. Maybe he should invite him to lunch this weekend. They could do Thai or Indian.

"I wasn't," Leo said after swallowing his bite of pizza. "Actually, I'm here to talk some business with you."

"Is that so?" Mattia asked curiously, leaning back in the chair.

"My bosses were quite impressed with your presentation at the conference, and we would like to present you with one of our current developments. It's something new and innovative, and we have a pretty decent company working for us. All we need is to find someone competent to give us the needed app for it."

Mattia nodded, interested in hearing more.

Leo went on, "Good thing is we are not under time pressure just yet, so I could show you all we've got up until now, and you'd have enough time to get accustomed to the product, if you were willing to work with us."

"Sure thing. Please show me." Mattia grinned excitedly. "I'm curious."

Mattia was glad that he hadn't decided on what would be his next big project yet. The idea that there might be a chance to work with Leo on

something thrilled him. There were still two small side projects he currently had running, but they were almost finished, and Mattia was more than ready for something big again. He didn't have any hard feelings about ditching the talking cookbook thing, not for anything Leo wanted, although the guy from *Waterfall and Rhonda's* might be okay with rescheduling. Maybe Mattia could work with them once Leo's application was successfully finished.

All of that aside, Mattia felt oddly disappointed that Leo only came to talk about a possible business deal, and not to get together over pizza.

Mattia studied Leo closely as he explained what this project would involve, and he was impressed by how thoroughly they had thought it out, as well as by Leo's competence in making a smooth presentation.

"...As you can imagine, the process will involve various tests with the actual steam cooker that we will also provide. We will also need you to update the software every now and then, therefore this deal will entail further contracts, shorter in duration, of course, where we will ask you for your services. You just have to ensure that you can be available whenever we would need such an update."

Mmm. Mattia really liked that prospect of extending their business deal whenever updates were needed. Leo's proposal would take a lot of Mattia's time, and he was happy to contract for it.

Closing the notepad in his lap, Leo gazed at him with a nervous smile. "So, Mr. D'Amore, what do you say?" he asked hopefully.

"It's definitely interesting." Mattia laughed. "I'd be honored to be of help to you and your company."

An application that would literally cook for you? Well, why not? He'd just heard about a talking cookbook, why not an app that tells you when and how to add each ingredient. He was all for innovation and making people's lives easier.

"Are you mocking me?" Leo stared at him with an arched eyebrow and a teasing smile, clutching a notepad to his chest.

Mattia just shook his head. "Of course not," he said, leaning back in his chair, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It is a grand idea, a little, uh, different, but definitely interesting."

"Geez, Tia. You really grew up didn't you?" Leo laughed, and shook his head. "I will need to learn how to read you again."

Mattia rolled his eyes at his friend and awkwardly searched for something to say to divert the attention away from him.

“Let me get my tablet. I’ll show you some of my stuff.”

When he was about to get up to get said tablet from his table, the office door flew open and a cheerful woman strolled inside like she owned the place—two cups of coffee in a brown paper tray in one hand, a black-and-gold leather purse in the other.

“Boy, oh boy, you won’t believe the guy at the coffee shop—”

Shirley stopped mid-sentence on one of her rants that Mattia was sure would be about how annoying the barista next door could be, chatting her up whenever she went there, which was too often. Old news. Mattia thought the kid looked pretty sweet and seemed like a decent guy. He had no idea why she fussed about him all the time. Mattia’d told her to just let the barista buy her coffee, if nothing else.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had company.”

Mattia could hear the smirk in her voice. Without looking at his former colleague, he guessed she most likely recognized Leo from the conference, and God knows what thoughts were playing in her head at that very moment. He hadn’t felt the need to fill her in on his and Leo’s relationship from ten years ago, and definitely had not anticipated this kind of get-together anytime soon, if at all.

“We are talking business, if you don’t mind. He’s pretty interested in my services.”

“Oh, I am sure he is, sweetie.” She chuckled.

“Shirl, what have I told you about calling me names at work? Please,” Mattia said with a grimace. He never understood why some people felt the need to address others with ridiculous names. Shirley did it all the time.

“All right, all right.” Shirley waved her hand through the air. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, *Mattia*.”

She came over and set the cups of coffee in the center of the glass table and crouched down next to Mattia on the *too-small-for-two-people* chair. He nudged her side, hoping to make her get up, though she annoyingly refused. Instead, she smiled and held out her hand for Leo to shake.

“Shirley Temple—pleased to meet you. And no, my mother was not a big fan of black-and-white movies. Well, she recently got into those weird *Marvel* films, but that’s about it. God knows how they came up with that name.”

The amusement in Leo's face was unmistakable; the guy couldn't hold back any emotion if he tried.

"Leo Brooks—the pleasure is all mine." He beamed a smile at her, and as always, it looked good on him. Mattia could tell Shirley was already smitten with him, but who wouldn't be? The guy could cheer up the dead with one look and one look only.

Shirley turned to Mattia, a teasing smile tugging on her lips. "I'll be on my way then. Please enjoy the coffee, Leo." She smiled at Leo and winked at Mattia as she got to her feet and rounded the sofa.

"Oh no, Shirley, please. I'd feel terrible accepting that."

"I insist." She beamed at Leo. "I shouldn't be consuming caffeine at this time of the night anyway." She then returned all her attention to Mattia. "And I will talk to you tonight, mister."

"Sure, Shirl," Mattia said dismissively. "Don't forget the stuff I picked up for you from the dry cleaners. It's on the table."

Mattia watched her out of the corner of his eye.

"Ah yes, thank you, hun."

She winked at Mattia and blew him a kiss.

"Enjoy it while it lasts. There'll be no next time, *sweetheart*."

Mattia rolled his eyes at her, but Shirley just chuckled, oblivious to his glare, and left without another word. Geez, that woman was exhausting. But, he could hardly say no to her, she had worked many hours overtime just to help him finish his work by the deadline. He had been so grateful for every second she invested in their project, and she always knew what she was doing. A real talent.

Chapter Six

I Try to Walk Away

“She seems great,” Leo said low-voiced, absently gathering his writing utensils that lay scattered on the small glass table. A black tail wagged back and forth between his legs and the furniture he sat on. A weak smile crept onto his lips when the cat meowed. Prince was a real cutie; he’d love to see more of the little cat.

“Oh yeah, Shirley’s wonderful.” Mattia coughed awkwardly. “I could show you my latest projects now if you like? Some were pretty fun, but most are quite basic, fashion shop’s apps and a bunch of random games I assisted developing—”

“Actually, I think I should go,” Leo said apologetically, and gathered the rest of his things, stuffing them unceremoniously into his brown messenger bag. “It’s getting kinda late.”

Just what had he been thinking, coming here, proposing a business deal in the hopes of setting another date for lunch or dinner. A real date. Yeah, right... So not going to happen. Of course, Mattia had to be taken, and of course, he was straight. Of fucking course. All those years he’d hoped and wished and dreamed of a reunion, *of fucking course*, it always ended differently in his head. Leo should have known better than to get his hopes up.

“Oh, right,” Mattia said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to keep you here all night.”

Mattia regarded him, his face reflecting confusion and disappointment, maybe. Leo still hoped they could discuss their business deal in greater detail next week. After all, the business part was just as important to him as Mattia’s friendship. Well, not exactly of the same value but still important. And they could still be friends, even if Mattia couldn’t love him.

Leo only wished it wouldn’t sting so much.

“Do you mind waiting for me? I’ll walk you out.”

Mattia’s deep voice broke through his thoughts. He closed his bag, secured the lock into place, and lifted his head to look at Mattia. A sudden chill ran down his spine.

Everything will be fine, you’ll see.

Leo forced a smile, trying to calm himself. "You don't have to do that. It's only three floors down to the garage," he said mockingly.

"I know." Mattia rolled his eyes at him. "I planned on going home as well, so please allow me to see you to your car."

You should walk away while you can.

"All right." Leo shrugged. "Whatever."

Coward. Can't turn your back on the man, can you?

Leo really had to cut the crap right now. Sounding so pissed off would be rude to Mattia. Leo had absolutely no right to be upset.

"Thank you for the pizza, Leo." Mattia collected the empty pizza box and cleared the table of everything else while Leo washed his hands and headed for the door. "And for considering me to work on your new product."

The happy sound in Mattia's voice made Leo feel guilty; the guy really seemed to have enjoyed their lousy pizza while talking over business. He wasn't being fair by throwing a hissy fit just because Mattia obviously had a wonderful girlfriend.

And you don't do boyfriends anyway, remember?

But only because they weren't Mattia, he thought grumpily. To be honest, Leo didn't know whether he could be anyone's boyfriend, but he'd be more than willing to try for Mattia if given the chance.

Walking up to him, Leo waited until Mattia's eyes met his. Looking at that pool of pale blue and gray, Leo felt a sudden kick to his stomach. *For heaven's sake. This man will be the death of me.*

"No need to thank me, Tia. I had to eat anyway." Leo winked at him. "And I think you're quite brilliant, Mattia Luca D'Amore," he whispered, aching with the desire to reach out and touch the man, badly. "It'll be a pleasure to work with you."

"And with you," Mattia croaked. "I will be thrilled if your bosses agree with you."

Quickly, Mattia averted his eyes and looked around the small office space, searching for something. Or someone? Mattia grimaced as he spotted the black cat curled up in a ball on his rolling chair and headed for him.

"Oh don't worry, they already agreed," Leo said. "I meant it, you *are* brilliant. I just needed to confirm with you that you're willing to work for us."

For a long moment, time seemed to stand still, as Leo watched Mattia listen to him with one ear as he spoke sweet nothings to his cat while trying to gather the ball of fur in his arms. Prince resisted a bit and meowed his complaint of being disturbed in his napping.

Leo shook his head. Gods they were adorable together.

Then, Mattia summoned a black leash out of thin air and fastened it on Prince when he wasn't looking. Mattia gathered the cat in his arms and threw a quick look out of the window, even though he most likely couldn't make out anything from where he stood. It wouldn't be very helpful anyway, as it was already dark as night out there.

"You think it's still raining outside?" Mattia eventually asked, smiling triumphantly while petting the little cat in his arms.

"No, I don't think so." Leo looked at him questioningly. "Why?"

"Good." Mattia picked up a black silk scarf that matched his hair and the cat's fur. It was adorably funny in a way. Leo watched him wind it around his neck one-handed, Prince dangling and protesting off his other. "He's *not* very fond of the rain, as you can imagine," Mattia said with a chuckle.

Having slipped on his brown blazer, Leo now stood by the door all dressed up and ready to go. "What are you doing?" he barked at him incredulously. "Oh God, don't tell me you are taking your cat on a walk?"

"Of course not." Mattia laughed. "But I have to get him home *somehow*. I don't like to put him in a box, and I'd really hate for him to run away."

"Yeah, but being treated like a dog?" Leo gave him an amused smile. "It doesn't look like Prince is enjoying it much."

"He will be fine once we are outside." Mattia hugged his cat affectionately, which earned him a low growl from the small animal. It made Leo laugh as he walked up to them both. He couldn't express how much he enjoyed this scene, if he tried.

"You are not doing this every day, are you?" Leo asked curiously, as he patted Prince's head and scratched him behind the ears. The sudden urge to ruffle Mattia's slicked-back hair was hard to control, but he had to. Standing this close, the intriguing scent of Mattia's cologne tickled his nose.

"It's not a regular thing, I assure you." He shook his head and smiled a small smile. "I would be crazy to deal with this scenario on a daily basis. I just had to take him to the vet today to get his regular vaccinations."

“Good.” Leo chuckled and beamed him a wide grin. “I thought I might have to worry about your wellbeing, Mr. D’Amore.”

For a moment, Leo was transfixed by the beauty of the vision before him when Mattia laughed and said, “Thank God, I haven’t gone that crazy yet.”

He felt himself getting lost in those eyes again. They appeared to be darker just now, but still pale and mostly blue under the dim light. Mattia still wore a fond smile that showed his tiny dimples just slightly. They didn’t often appear on his handsome face. Leo wondered briefly why.

“Hey, since it is Saturday tomorrow, I thought we could have lunch together.” Leo sounded a bit too croaky to his own ears. Mattia smiled at him nonetheless, and he took it as reassurance. “You could show me your latest projects, and we catch up on everything else.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” Mattia nodded and gestured for Leo to go ahead. “How about one o’clock at Devil Dawgs? You know how to get there?” He opened the door with his free hand and led the way.

“Absolutely. I love that place.”

Devil Dawgs was located close to his office and home. They had kick-ass steak burgers, the craziest and most awesome hot dogs, and delicious fresh-cut fries. Real devil’s food. He hadn’t gone there often, but it was well known and recommended by his friends.

“Don’t tell anyone.” Mattia’s gravelly voice rang off the walls in the empty hallway. The unexpected strength it carried made Leo stop dead in his tracks, causing Mattia to almost bump into him. Their shoulders brushed as they both turned toward each other; Leo grinned.

Mattia leaned in, whispering close to Leo’s ear, “Sometimes, when I have that persistent night craving... that’s the place I go.”

Leo laughed wholeheartedly, the sound of his cheerful voice vibrating off the walls in the corridor.

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

A sudden warmth filled Leo’s chest, realizing they were now officially friends again, even if they hadn’t carved it into stone. They also had a lunch date and, perhaps, a regular place to hang out.

Chapter Seven

Day by Day

“What are you listening to?” Mattia asked curiously when the sound from Leo’s video chat window came to life. He could hear an odd piano tune playing faintly in the background, something a lot like Mozart or Bach.

On the other side of the computer screen, Leo shuffled about at his desk. “Huh?” He gave Mattia a puzzled look, before quickly gazing around as if he’d expected to find someone standing behind him in the dark of his living room.

“Oh that. It’s nothing...” Leo trailed off when he caught his eye. “I’ll turn it off. Just a sec,” he added hurriedly and turned to get up. Mattia watched the computer screen, smiling to himself as he studied his friend fumbling with the stereo.

They were well into their second month of working with MetalWarez’s cooking app. Their last meeting with Andrew Summers, the head of Product Management/New Product Categories, went astoundingly well. As Mattia had learned, Leo was in charge of all preliminary development for consumer goods, and boy, was he ever convincing in what he did! Mattia thought it fascinating to watch Leo work and talk with his colleagues.

He was smart and a born businessman. Leo also looked extremely good in his suits. Gone was the wild boy with the colorful hair and skateboard.

Sometimes, Mattia felt a funny sensation while thinking about the visible changes in Leo. For many years, that particular image of this cute rebel who used to play with him back then had remained in the back of his head. Just thinking about Leo had been encouraging enough for him to try new things like talking to people and being more open. Mattia had hoped that one day, maybe, he would find someone like Leo again, someone who made him feel alive and excited about life.

Richard was a good boyfriend, who made him feel safe and part of something important, but Mattia never could recreate what he’d had with Leo. Richard and Leo were simply too different in so many ways.

Years before he’d met Richard, thoughts of Leo had continued to inspire him for a long time, especially when he hadn’t felt like being part of whatever social gathering his parents pushed him into. Leo had been some sort of hero,

someone Mattia had looked up to. Despite the fact that he was only a teenager himself, Mattia had always admired Leo's easiness and joy for life.

Leo was everything he was not.

The first thing Mattia noticed tonight was Leo's thick black-rimmed glasses. He hadn't seen him wear any kind of glasses before. It suited him, he decided. Leo had his hair pulled back into a tight ponytail, a few errant curls falling over the dark frames. Leo also wore what he'd call a rather fashionable, black T-shirt with rhinestones, the image of a music band, he guessed, in black-and-white adorned its front.

Mattia liked that casual, homey look on Leo. He briefly wondered why those little things mattered, or why he even took note of details that shouldn't concern him even as a friend. *Or especially as only a friend.* Mattia didn't feel like pondering it much, instead, he couldn't help but tease his friend a little.

"That dorky hairstyle looks good on you."

"What? No. It's not dorky!" Leo complained with a playful grin on his lips. "It's... Well, it's *not* dorky."

Despite his efforts to keep a straight face, Leo ended up laughing, his eyes beaming and crinkling in the corners. Mattia couldn't help but return the smile. As always, it was just so easy to talk to him.

"Oh, wait until you hear this. I've got a fabulous story to tell!" Leo began and quickly fell into his rambling. Even through the small screen he could see the glittering smile on his friend's face.

"You just won't believe what happened today," Leo exclaimed with great enthusiasm.

He then told Mattia all about the quirky client that had been ringing him up on almost a regular basis for two weeks now, confiding in him on all of his canary's illnesses, his neighbor's overflowing mail box, and other strange but funny things. It was great to just listen to Leo talk. Just like when they were young, Mattia still liked the sound of his voice a lot. The sounds Leo made were indescribable—always warm and rich but not deep or gravelly like his own. Yet unmistakably manly, just in a light, sweet way that made him think of apples and honey.

To assure that their app development would be successful, MetalWarez basically sent Leo on weekly meetings with Mattia. They would usually spend the entire day at his office and break for lunch down at one of the many

restaurants in the area. So far, all their meetings proved to be quite productive and highly enjoyable as well. Mattia felt blessed. Being able to work with Leo in such close a relationship made even the times he had to have other people's input more pleasant. Working with strangers had never been one of his most anticipated tasks. Working with Leo, on the other hand, fast became the one thing he looked forward to the most.

More often than not, he needed Leo to verify their current status, and they had to discuss the application's evolvement on a regular basis to keep bugs at bay. It was always best to eliminate them as soon as possible and have only a few changes within each update. At least, that had worked best for him in the past. Basically, it was inevitable that they maintained close contact via regular phone calls and email. It had been Leo's idea that they also use Skype on days when they were at home, which turned out to be more often than he'd have thought. They always had a lot of business-related topics to discuss in detail, and it kept Mattia quite busy, taking up more time and effort than most of his previous projects. They both wanted to make sure the application would meet everyone's expectations; and a few late night Skype sessions with his friend definitely didn't hurt.

After Mattia listened to stories of Leo's wonderful day, and a lot of other topics as well, they ended up discussing the application's latest version in greater detail. Once again, time slipped away like sand between his fingers.

He's just as restless and bubbly as back then, Mattia mused. It was obvious that they were quite the opposite in so many ways. It made him wonder just how they could be friends. He feared that one day Leo and his cheerfulness would drive him crazy. Mattia was sure his opposite, guarded personality and inability to joke around the same way Leo could, would eventually drive him away, just like it drove away almost anyone else.

Anyone except Richard, he thought. Richard seemed to be the only person who loved him for who he was. His parents certainly never did. Mattia's heart still ached, just thinking about his last phone call with his father all those months ago.

Will it ever stop hurting?

Thoughts of Richard brought him back to the here and now, as he remembered their plans for tonight. Mattia glanced at the right corner of his computer screen and realized they had just chatted away for almost two hours.

"Gonna have to sign out now, Leo." Mattia gave the camera a rueful smile. "Maybe we can catch up more this weekend. I'll have a new build by then as

well, and we could maybe do some more tests before our meeting with Mr. Summers next week.”

Leo nodded. “Sure.” A wide smile spread across his lips. “We’ve got to do some actual cooking with that thing, you know?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing all week?” Mattia laughed and shook his head. “We’ll talk tomorrow then.”

“Goodnight, Tia.”

Warmth pooled in his chest, and he looked forward to their next chat, phone call, or lunch. He waved stupidly into the camera and watched the small window go black. Leo was the first to cut the connection. Mattia stared into his computer screen for a while, not moving, only thinking, pondering their unexpected close friendship.

When he heard the familiar sound of a key in the door, Mattia quickly closed down Skype and maximized a random icon on his task bar. A second later the calendar opened and filled the screen as Richard’s voice echoed through the apartment.

“Honey, I’m back. Where are you?”

Mattia got up to greet his boyfriend. Richard moved fast, threw his arms around Mattia and squeezed him tight. A rough tug on his short hair and an almost equally rough kiss to his neck followed. Mattia loved being able to let go and sink into the other man’s strong and tight embrace. It never failed to make him feel safe and loved in a way he hadn’t experienced with anyone else. Then again, Richard had been the only person he’d been serious with, ever since he knew what he wanted.

“Mmh. I didn’t expect you here so early.” Mattia gasped when Richard bit his neck. The same lips then quickly closed over his own and kissed him firmly and most thoroughly. “Didn’t your meeting go well?” he asked a little breathlessly, once he got the chance to gasp for air.

“Everything’s fine, babe.” Richard’s baritone voice sent shivers down Mattia’s spine, and Richard’s arms engulfed him further. “It’s Saturday, and you were still working, weren’t you?” Richard firmly tugged him close, holding him against his body possessively.

“So?” Mattia breathed, wanting those lips on his again. “You had a meeting. Why can’t I work too?” Talking never seemed to go over well with Richard; they were better at communicating without words, it seemed. Mattia grinned,

squirming in his boyfriend's tight hold. He didn't feel like talking much right now anyway.

"Fine, whatever." Richard dismissed him with a shake of his head. With a tight grip on his waist, he maneuvered Mattia far away from his desk and toward the living room. "Let's move this to the bedroom, shall we?"

That was fine with Mattia; he couldn't wait to have Richard's exquisite body spread out on his satin sheets, his muscled torso all to himself, preferably hovering close over Mattia, or pressing Richard's hard body into the mattress instead.

Letting go of Mattia's arm, Richard then reached into his slacks. A moment later, he pulled out a plastic bag with what looked a lot like dried sardines in it. "Where is that little monster of yours?"

"Don't call him that," Mattia said in a chiding tone. He hated the way Richard treated Prince. Why couldn't they just get along? Leo seemed to get along just fine with his little friend.

"Whatever." Richard moved around the room until he found Prince lurking underneath a barstool by the small cocktail bar he'd built in a corner of his large living room. Mattia watched his boyfriend pour the sardines into a small glass bowl sitting on the bar table, which had been holding snacks just the other day. Richard beckoned for Prince to follow him. Mattia was surprised to see that once Richard had the black cat's attention, he drew Prince out of his hiding place with very little effort, and quickly got him all the way into his bedroom.

"Richard! I told you not to lock him away all the time."

"Don't worry, honey, he'll be fine." Richard dropped his voice and walked up to him. "We'll be fast, and everyone will be happy. You'll see." Strong hands gathered him in a tight embrace, firm arms encircled his waist, and Mattia loved the way he was crushed against the other man's muscled chest.

"I thought you wanted the bedroom?" he said a little breathlessly. His head was spinning with anticipation, and his entire body would begin to tremble any second now. It just wasn't natural how crazy that man drove him.

"Changed my mind." Richard's deep eyes, as he glared down at him, were determined, but otherwise always hard to read. "You are so sexy sprawled out on that couch, or thrown over it while I fuck your ass," he rasped before leaning down to kiss him hard and skillfully.

"You left your fancy leather shoes in my bedroom yesterday, remember? You might wanna check on them for bite marks, *honey*."

Mattia chuckled at Richard's growl. They both knew he wouldn't stop ravaging him just to save his shoes from Mattia's devil cat, he'd just get a new pair if they were ruined.

Chapter Eight

What If I Told You, It Won't Suffice?

Soothing, warm steam rose and slowly filled the small shower stall, the ocean-fresh scent of his shower gel bathing his senses, evoking recent memories to the forefront of his mind. Leo closed his eyes, pressing them shut tightly as he enjoyed the *oh so hot* water raining down on him from the faucet, burning his skin until it would soon be too tender and almost numb. Shower-time would always be his favorite time of the day.

"We can go down that slope closer to the water, if you want. Maybe throw those birds some of your cookies," offered Mattia, smiling at him with a mellow expression. The sun was shining down on both of them with comfortable heat, and the gentle breeze felt refreshing and just plain good. It was a wonderful afternoon after a long day of work in the best company he could wish for.

"My cookies?" Leo gaped at his friend, clutching the half-empty bag of his favorite, dark chocolate treat. "They're not to be shared with anyone."

Mattia grinned, shaking his head as he reached out to touch Leo's shoulder, resting his hand just there. "You'll leave one for me, won't you?" he asked, the sound of his voice making Leo shiver as if caught by a sudden chill. Naturally, he let Mattia be his guide toward the sea, reveling in the comforting feeling of the warm sand under his bare feet.

"I don't know." Leo smiled to himself. "Maybe." Soft snickering filled his ears, soothing, calming warmth expanded within his chest, and Mattia's hand never let go of his.

A small groan of pleasure escaped his lips as he relished the wonderful feeling of the tight muscles in his neck loosening up some more. His heart ached a little, the memories too bittersweet to fully enjoy. Leo's shoulders, neck, and arms were already super sensitive, stinging from the hot water that continued to wash down his body. *So good.* Eventually, he reached around and turned the silver handle behind him, moving it by instinct until the heat subsided, and the water turned cooler. Reduced in intensity, it now trickled down on him in a gentle flow like the lightest spring rain, still warm enough and feeling incredibly good on his tender skin.

Squeezing a big dollop of shampoo into his palm, Leo reached up to wash his hair. He gathered the wet, longish strands with his soaped hands, relaxing

further as he massaged his scalp, inhaling the comforting scent of summer and sunshine, honey, and flowers. Thoughts from one summer so long ago filled his mind, images of their adventures out in the woods, down by that secluded lake...

"Come on, Leo. You can't keep a damn squirrel in your pocket!" exclaimed Mattia. "You're being ridiculous."

"Of course I can." Leo grinned, his hands covering the long brown trench coat he'd borrowed from his grandma, cradling the captured, tiny animal in his pocket. "Once I have it tamed, it'll love being my pet. You'll see, Tia. And you will be green with envy."

Mattia shook his gorgeous silky curls, his raven hair glinting in the late afternoon sun, and threw his hand in the air. "I wonder why I even bother wasting my time with you, Leo. Seriously, let the poor thing go!"

"I'll care for it. You'll see." Leo soothed his friend, "I'll be his mommy. Wouldn't that be nice?" He threw Mattia a confident smile. "I won't abandon it now. It'll be eaten by a cat in no time if I put it back there!"

"Maybe its real mother will show up..." Mattia shrugged, randomly picking up sticks on their way back home, leaving the river bank where they had found the small, neglected animal behind them. The sun was about to set soon, and Leo needed to find a ride into town.

"Its mother hasn't come back all day, and it's hurting. I'll take it to the vet, have them look at it, okay?" Holding the coat close to his chest, Leo picked up his pace and hurried along the dirt road. Mr. Jackson could give him a lift, he thought. He was another neighbor and a friend of his grandma's. She hadn't been doing so well and needed someone who could drive her to the doctor more often lately.

Once Mattia caught up with him, they walked side by side through the bushes along the muddy road. "Sure," he muttered.

Leo cast his friend a quick glance, bumped his shoulder with Mattia's, and grinned. "Cheer up, man. We'll get the kid fixed and care for it, okay? Then we'll see who else needs saving."

"You are insane." Mattia shook his head, Leo watching his long black hair fall into his eyes as he did so. His friend turned to look at him, just a quick glance before he returned his gaze ahead of them. "But I like that, Leo, let's save the world. Together."

Leo smiled to himself, feeling happier than he could remember at that point. The way Mattia's cheeks reddened when their eyes met and his lips formed a genuine smile just then felt strangely good. He didn't want to return home to his boring city after the summer was over.

In his memory, Mattia laughed, the sound warm and tranquilizing as it echoed through his mind.

Leo made quick work of getting himself dry, and dressed in something comfortable. Throwing on his favorite white sweatshirt and gray khakis, before grabbing the book he'd been reading last night off his bed, he headed for the living room. Plopping down on his sofa, he planned on spending a lazy, work-free Saturday.

A sunbeam angled through the slowly darkening living room, and Leo watched the tiny particles of dust float through the air, wondering when he'd last eaten anything other than the small apple he'd snatched off the counter a long time ago. Besides coffee, he hadn't consumed anything satisfying. Again. Leo rose to his feet, closing the fantasy novel he'd been *trying* to read for the last couple of hours. He'd been stuck in the middle of a chapter for God knows how long.

Just as Leo made his way into his small kitchen in search of something edible, thoughts of Mattia and that pretty blonde from the other day made him lose his appetite. Leo dropped the pack of cheese and closed the fridge behind him. Maybe he'd just make some more coffee, instead. Losing his appetite so quickly didn't help; he knew his eating habits were bad and a far cry from healthy. Thankfully, nobody was around to scold him like his mother always did.

His thoughts didn't stay on his eating habits very long, instead bouncing straight back to Mattia. It had been foolish to think a handsome man like Mattia wouldn't be taken and dating a beautiful woman, of course. The truth hurt, but Mattia would be well-suited with a stunning, *female* partner. He deserved to have a wonderful life, a real family, wife and kids and Prince, of course.

Mattia would never be able to look at Leo the same way.

I couldn't give him all those things he deserves.

The familiar sound of an incoming text message drew Leo's attention to his messenger bag. With a few steps, he closed the distance between the dining table and kitchen. All attempts at eating or making more coffee long forgotten,

he withdrew his smartphone from his bag's front pocket and clicked through the touch screen until he saw the message that read:

L@DD? You game?

After their first lunch together at Devil Dawgs, it had fast become some sort of custom for the two of them to ask each other out to lunch.

A sudden thrill of excitement rushed through him, and despite knowing very well that he shouldn't be keen on having lunch with Mattia again, nevertheless, he was literally psyched. The knowledge that Mattia was probably in a serious relationship might be jumping off the walls of his brain, but his heart didn't understand; it wouldn't just stop beating for someone simply because it wasn't right.

Feelings didn't *do* logical, did they?

Despite feeling like a lovesick teenager, Leo wouldn't pass on a chance to hang out with the man. Not for anything in the world. With a smile he couldn't suppress, Leo swiftly typed his reply.

Sure! On my way ;)

Within a second another text message came flying in, reading nothing but a smiley.

:)

He shook his head, a sudden bittersweet taste spreading on his tongue. Mattia wasn't making it easy for him. If he only knew how much his unexpected, adorable friendliness hurt. Nothing in this world could convince Leo to do anything about it, though. He'd be okay, eventually.

Leo considered the weather for a moment before taking the short distance between the dining table and bedroom in strides. Eagerly, he pulled out a black-and-white striped T-shirt from under a pile of freshly washed clothes and grabbed his dark-blue leather jacket from the closet, just in case. It appeared to be sunny outside, but the weather had been rather unpredictable lately. A jacket definitely wouldn't hurt. Remembering Mattia's words of appreciation toward the jacket Leo was so fond of had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Less than thirty minutes later, he met Mattia at Devil Dawgs. When he arrived, Mattia waved him over to one of the long wooden benches in front of the small brick building. You couldn't call it a restaurant, because really, they had only a tiny standing space inside and a row of worn benches and tables

with weathered red-and-white sun umbrellas out front. It wasn't shabby by any means, but definitely of the fast-food variety, where people met after work for a beer and nachos or grabbed a quick lunch before a stroll through the city.

"Glad you could make it!" Mattia said with an honest smile that melted Leo's insides. He rose and made space on the brown bench, Leo squeezing in beside him without a second thought. Only when his knee bumped against Mattia's, and their shoulders brushed, did he realize it would have been smarter to sit across from his friend instead.

"Sure," Leo replied nonchalantly, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. There was no way he could keep a serious face in the other man's company. As always, Mattia looked casually stunning, with his dark hair neatly styled, perhaps with gel, and his white, tooth-flashing smile. His clothes were definitely more laid-back than what Mattia usually wore, yet they still appeared stylish. White button-down shirt and dark jeans never failed to impress.

Leo startled when Mattia touched his arm, and brushed along his fingers to draw his attention downward, moving to slide a filled glass toward Leo. Looking from Mattia to the table and back, he grinned. *Ginger ale.*

"I ordered it less than five minutes ago," Mattia said, patting his arm. "Should be freezing cold without being watery yet." He winked.

"Thanks."

Even though Mattia's hand wasn't resting on his arm, and the heat of his brief touch was long gone, Leo felt like he had been *burned*. On the inside and out. He tried to take off his jacket with grace, but in the confined space he ended up bumping arms and elbows with Mattia, who tried avoiding getting punched too close to his face.

"Food's here!" Mattia exclaimed excitedly, still chuckling in amusement at Leo's embarrassing attempt to undress. "I hope you're hungry, Leo."

Leo grunted unhappily, but Mattia ignored him. The guy always made him eat *tons* of food!

The smiling waitress, a twenty-something brunette with black-rimmed glasses, put down plates filled with burgers, hot dogs, nachos and fries. Leo was in awe; Mattia even ordered food just in time! *But who's going to eat all of this?*

"How many people are we expecting?" Leo asked mockingly, nudging Mattia in the ribs.

“Just you and me.”

The way Mattia said it, his voice all dark and smooth, caused Leo's heart to ache. *I wish it was just you and me, always.*

For a moment, Leo watched his friend rearrange plates, first piling Leo's with a saucy burger and a few scoops of fries, before picking up two hot dogs and nachos for himself.

“Eat up,” Mattia said with a wave of his hand.

“Thanks.” Leo smiled appreciatively. “I'll try.”

“We'll get dessert too.” Mattia winked.

Leo laughed. Of course Mattia would get dessert.

“Not sure I'll have any room left!”

“You're not getting out of dessert, Leo.” Mattia nudged him playfully. “I know you like their cookies-and-cream milkshake.”

Leo groaned inwardly. There was no way he'd be fitting a milkshake into his stomach after all of this.

Mattia being straight was probably the only thing that made their close proximity bearable. Knowing he could never return his interest kept Leo from letting his feelings get too out of hand. Or at least he tried his damn best keeping them at bay. Leo told himself he could eventually live with the unanswered longing, the constant ache in his chest, if it meant they got to be friends.

Seeing that Mattia appeared relaxed when they were together, and almost chatty from time to time, made their friendship all the more enjoyable and important. He felt like Mattia really did need him, even if it was just as a friend.

Half-way through their feast, Mattia brought up the one thing he could rant about non-stop. Bluetooth.

“Did you have any time to test-run the latest update yet? I emailed you the current build yesterday before I left the office. Version 4.0.1 seems quite stable, and all recent bugs should be eliminated. I even fixed the Bluetooth issue. I swear to God, one day...” he trailed off long enough to munch on a handful of fries.

“Bluetooth sucks, doesn't it?”

Leo couldn't hold in the chuckle, but he tried to smother it by taking a long gulp of his ginger ale. Of course, he had no idea what was so troublesome with implementing Bluetooth modules, but Mattia seemed to be vexed by the topic. Leo lost count of how many times he had been going on about it. It was amusing.

"That's one way to put it," Mattia said, with a shake of his head. "You would *not* believe just how many arguments it caused in the last two years alone. People fully believe any device that has a little Bluetooth sticker somewhere can *easily* be paired with whatever device that, supposedly, supports Bluetooth. It's just not that simple, *baby*."

It was priceless how Mattia could lose himself in something like that. The way Mattia would rant about things such as Bluetooth and USB connectors, Wi-Fi troubleshooting, or his cat was unbelievably endearing; it was rather fascinating as well. The fact that Mattia knew all kinds of shit like that amazed him every single time. There had been many times recently when Mattia made Leo laugh and admire him for the things he knew. Just like right now.

Working together with Mattia on his company's cooking application was a true blessing. Leo found he could lose hours just talking with the man. Mattia was a quiet person, but once drawn into conversation, he had so many interesting thoughts that would always lead to endless discussions.

Sometimes it seemed as if the years apart had never been. Other times, it was like he was meeting an entirely new man compared to that shy and reserved boy Leo met that summer so long ago.

Mattia's friendship felt too good, and meant too damn much already, so Leo wouldn't willingly want to jeopardize, or even end it, just because his love would never be returned.

Chapter Nine

Even the Bad Songs Don't Sound So Bad

Leo invited him to go sailing on Lake Michigan. On his very *own* boat! Mattia had never been sailing before. He'd also never known anyone who owned a sailboat. Leo did. Apparently, it had been a graduation gift from his father, whom he never spoke of. Mattia understood that there could be a time when it just didn't feel good anymore to talk, or even think, about people you'd once thought loved you. It hurt, finding out they didn't feel that way anymore, or perhaps, never really had.

Sure, love was a mystery, but the thing Mattia never understood was how parents could simply stop loving their children. Leo had once mentioned his parents' divorce, and he'd made it clear that his father didn't mean anything to him, so that topic was off the table, and that was fine with Mattia. Not that he liked to think of Leo and either of his parents having an unhappy relationship, but the less they spoke about Leo's family, the less he would have to talk, or think, about his own. Something he avoided at all costs.

Once he arrived at Leo's apartment, his friend was already waiting outside for him.

"I made us a mixed CD!" Leo exclaimed enthusiastically, waving a small square plastic case in front of Mattia's face, so close he thought Leo might accidentally smack his nose with that thing.

"Great," Mattia said, less enthusiastically than he'd meant to, causing him to cringe inwardly. For a moment, he thought the CD had actually touched his chin, so he quickly took a big step back.

"It'll be fun to listen to while we're out on the water," Leo said with a melancholy smile, stepping to the side. "It's beautiful to watch the city skyline go by, but it can also get a little *lonely*."

Leo emphasized the word *lonely*, and Mattia's stomach sank when their eyes met, the unexpected emotion in Leo's gaze startling him. The brief gloom he thought he saw in his usually bright brown eyes was gone as quickly as it appeared. Leo was back to his cheerful blabbering in no time and filled the ride across town with his endless chatter.

Mattia followed Leo as he walked onto the boat, the wood creaking a little under his feet. He was stunned when he first laid eyes on Leo's precious

sailboat; it was simply amazing. It was big and white, with deep brown wood flooring, a bright, navy blue sail, and just plain beautiful. He imagined early mornings on the water, coffee and a book in hand, maybe even doing work on his tablet. Mattia envied him a little. He had no idea how much it cost Leo to keep it safe in storage, but he guessed it would be worth the price. Maybe Leo's father even covered those costs. Hopefully. He might ask him sometime, but right then it hadn't seemed to be the right time to broach that subject again. Perhaps there would never be a right time, after all.

They'd passed a few people Leo seemed to be familiar with on the way from the parking lot down to the pier. There weren't many other boats anywhere nearby, Mattia noted, only a couple of much bigger boats to their left and a handful similar to Leo's in size to the other side.

"Did you name it?" Mattia asked once they were on deck. "Your boat, I mean." He hadn't seen a name on the side visible from the land.

Leo just laughed in response and finished doing whatever was needed for them to get ready. Mattia watched with rapt interest as Leo moved about back and forth, the brown wood creaking under his feet.

Didn't people name their boats? Mattia wasn't familiar with rituals and such, but he'd seen all kinds of ships and boats with a name.

"So, you didn't?" he asked, feeling a little embarrassed when Leo didn't appear as if he'd be giving him a proper reply.

Leo turned toward him and grinned mischievously.

"It's a secret," he smirked. "Maybe one day I'll let you in on it."

With a wink, Leo turned to set up the CD player but didn't start any of the mysterious music he'd brought along. After they put down their bags, Leo made quick work of getting them into motion, startling Mattia by suddenly bringing up his father. Mattia listened carefully, eager to learn more about his friend.

"I thought by accepting his gracious gift I'd make him angry," Leo exclaimed, a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I mean, look at it!" he almost shouted, eyes wide and sparkling with admiration. "It's *beautiful!* It must have cost him a fortune."

Leo sighed, leaning back against the railing. "Some part of me, the little monster part I guess, took over my rational thinking and really wanted him to pay—something, anything, really."

"I can see that." Mattia nodded. "I'd probably feel the same."

"Later, I found out he seriously thought he could buy my love with a boat, after years of neglecting his only son." Leo laughed humorlessly. "Well, he'd thought wrong." He let out a low grunt. "Getting me a boat doesn't make him suddenly Dad of the Year. I'm still puzzled how he knew I like sailboats, but well, it would've been a waste not to keep it."

"So you just kept it?" Mattia asked with a grin, maybe with a little understanding of what it was like for Leo to grow up with a father who didn't show his love, as he had experienced that feeling firsthand last year. But then, all through his childhood and teenage years, Mattia's parents had always been there for him. He guessed Leo hadn't had that privilege. So maybe he didn't understand after all.

"I did." Leo grinned. "Anyway, it was the least he could have done, you know, contributing a little to my happiness with a new toy." Leo waved his hand around from one side of the boat to the other and back. "And I do *love* my toy."

Despite his grin, Leo didn't sound all that cheerful; rather, he sounded saddened by the memory of his father. Mattia briefly wondered whether Leo thought about his lost father as often as Mattia thought about his. Feeling little confidence in comforting his friend, Mattia gazed around quickly as if to find something to distract them. His palms were suddenly sweaty, and he had no clue what to say or do!

"Wait until you see the skyline at night. It's magnificent!" Leo eventually continued, sounding a little more cheerful again, while messing with the buttons of the small battery-powered CD player that sat on the wooden planks between them. "I have the perfect song for when the sun is going to set."

A thought occurred to Mattia—he'd brought something that was guaranteed to cheer Leo up, even just a little. Mattia opened his backpack, which he'd bought specifically for their outing because he hadn't owned a backpack since college, and pulled out a plastic bag filled with tiny brown cookies.

"Here, have some," Mattia offered with a smile, handing them to Leo just as the first song began to fill the quiet evening air.

"How did you know that's what I needed?" Leo asked with a chuckle. When his eyes met Leo's, that adorable grin grew even wider.

Mattia laughed. "You looked like you could use some sugar."

Sugar. The magic ingredient. In fact, Leo always welcomed anything sweet, especially cookies. Mattia had noticed quickly that he wasn't a big eater, but he knew Leo loved chocolate chip cookies more than anything. He was absolutely not exaggerating! Mattia made sure to always have them close by when he could.

"Thanks!" Leo exclaimed and took the bag of chocolate chip cookies. "The perfect distraction. You know me well, mister!" Leo laughed, and it was infectious.

Mattia watched Leo dig in, his eyes sparkling, and a satisfied smile on his lips. He was glad he'd baked them last night when Richard had been hogging his TV, engrossed in some nonsense show Mattia had no interest in. Instead, he got out his grandma's recipe and turned on the oven. It wasn't his best talent, but one he enjoyed doing every now and then—and Leo enjoyed the results.

After a few of Leo's more lighthearted stories from the previous days, they fell into companionable silence. Except for the music in the background, and despite being close to the city, everything around them was quiet and seemed peaceful. The last rays of warm sunshine found their way through the white clouds, blue-green water surrounding them, and the occasional boat passing by. Mattia could even see a lighthouse in the distance—white with a red roof and just plain beautiful.

"Hey, can we get closer to that?" he asked, walking up to Leo and pointing toward the lighthouse.

"Sure!" Leo beamed an excited smile at him, causing Mattia to hold his breath in awe. The way his brown eyes sparkled and the wind made his curls fall into his eyes was simply breathtaking. Heat quickly rose to his face, and Mattia had to look away. He shouldn't be affected by his friend's good looks. There was absolutely no reason for his palms to get all sweaty and his heart to beat that fast—his admiration was definitely starting to go too far.

Taking a cautious step to the side, Mattia returned his attention to *scenery watching*. This had to take his mind off of things he didn't want to contemplate. Leo appeared to be content with letting Mattia fall back into silence, making sure they would be sailing in the right direction.

Most of the songs Leo had put together, he noticed, were rather unusual and some even just plain weird. Mattia wasn't even able to honestly tell what languages some of them were. A few songs were only instrumentals and were his favorites, so far. Once again, this showed that the guy was full of surprises.

Sometimes, Mattia couldn't help but wonder where Leo came up with all those things, and he was grateful for not having to find out. It was fun to enjoy his friend's creative, interesting, and sometimes weird side.

There was one song in particular, though, that Mattia really liked. It was something upbeat, full of energy, gripping during the chorus with a raspy male voice singing about hope and love and a bright, laughter-filled future. Somehow it motivated Mattia, touching him in a way he couldn't explain. Closing his eyes, he could see endless green forests, countless colorful birds and sunshine. A lot of sunshine.

Then, suddenly, loud foreign sounds tore him from his thoughts. An obnoxious voice, female perhaps, made his skin crawl for a short moment, before a rather upbeat, silly melody made Mattia want to laugh out loud. Leo had seriously accomplished the weirdest mix tape in history. And who still listened to music CDs anyway?

A wide smile spread on his lips. He had to admit, even the bad songs don't sound so bad.

Chapter Ten

I Could Have Been Like All the Others

“What do you say about dinner at that Italian place downtown?” Mattia asked as they walked down the narrow hallway leading from his office toward the elevator.

“Sounds great,” Leo replied, his stomach growling loud enough for Mattia to hear. “I think I’m starving!” He laughed and Mattia joined in.

They had been working all day in Mattia’s office, running some more tests here and there, and discussing the final touches on the recent updates. Mattia already had the schedule for the following two weeks ready. It had been a very productive day, and dinner with Mattia sounded nice. He briefly wondered whether he should invite Shirley along; Leo had been looking forward to getting to know her better. After all, he thought, if they were an item the three of them could go out sometimes.

Once they arrived at Mattia’s awesome apartment—Leo totally loved all its space and comfy but stylish furniture, and that view of the city was simply breathtaking, even from only the fifth floor—a tall, tanned, dark-haired man stood in Mattia’s kitchen, stark naked, sipping on a glass of what appeared to be red wine. When he spoke in his deep baritone voice, greeting Mattia with a sultry, “*Hey babe, you’re back! Would you like some wine?*” Leo thought he might drop dead that very moment, and somehow he wished he had. The guy hadn’t even acknowledged him in any way and probably never heard of the words “decent” or “manners”.

He could only watch, horror-stricken, as Mattia took the distance between the door and his naked boyfriend in a few strides, *shushing* him and moving him into the bedroom, ordering him to get dressed, because they would be going out to eat, and he really would like it if he could be fast. Never had Leo heard Mattia speak with such dominance. The man was still full of surprises. The embarrassed look on his face, cheeks flushed, brows furrowed, when he came back to Leo, apologizing for his boyfriend’s behavior, had almost been heartbreaking.

“I’m sorry about that,” Mattia said when he brought them both a glass of wine. Bumping his shoulder with Leo’s, Mattia then asked, “Everything okay?”

Leo shook his head, unable to form any words; he could only gasp before throwing down half the glass of amber liquid.

"I thought... I thought you and Shirley were an item," Leo eventually managed, then emptied the glass in one more go.

Mattia laughed awkwardly. Leo shuddered at the bitter taste of what probably was very good and very expensive wine trickling down his throat. Leo wished he could have drowned in whiskey instead. A whole bottle, preferably. He'd later apologize for not enjoying the wine in a proper manner.

"I'm sorry, Leo. I should have told you." Mattia regarded him as they both sat on his couch, waiting for Richard to emerge from the bedroom, preferably dressed this time. "I didn't know how you'd take it."

"You were afraid to tell me that you're seeing a man? Is that it?" Leo had difficulty keeping his voice under control, watching Mattia closely. Leo didn't like the way Mattia's expression darkened.

Why would Mattia be afraid to tell him?

This is ridiculous.

Leo knew he should have said something as well, told Mattia that he, too, liked men. Maybe even that he liked him, but no, he couldn't have done that. Leo didn't want to take a chance and make Mattia feel awkward now. Leo didn't want to risk that they wouldn't be hanging out as friends anymore. Mattia already had a man, and found his love; he didn't want to get in the way by saying something like "*Hey, but I think I really, really like you too, Mattia. And I was first!*"

Leo would've been a fool to think Mattia would ditch anyone for him; he knew Mattia wouldn't do anything like that. He just *knew*. And what kind of monster would that make him, wanting Mattia to leave his boyfriend only because Leo wanted him too. No, he would never do that.

So Leo kept his mouth shut.

Dinner would have been great if it weren't for the foul mood everyone seemed to have been in during the course of the drive, and the meal. They had amazing pizza at that restaurant Leo knew from previous visits, and normally he would have eaten every slice with a smile on his face, only that night he didn't taste a thing.

It was ridiculous, of course. He had no right to feel hurt and *victimized* by Mattia's sudden revelation that he'd had a boyfriend for months. It wouldn't

have changed much if Leo had known his friend was actually dating a man, but being kept in the dark deeply hurt. And even more so now, knowing the man he'd been in love with for years could have been his for the taking if fate had wanted them to be together.

But fate didn't, and he hated it.

Mattia wasn't straight, but still, he loved someone else instead.

It was like a punch to the gut.

Feeling absolutely miserable, Leo gave them both disapproving looks that might or might not have caused Mattia to feel very uncomfortable, and drink more than he normally would, or should. Richard didn't miss the obvious tension between the three of them, and for whatever reason, the guy had behaved like the last idiot. All night, he'd been complaining about the soup being too hot, the pizza not crisp enough, the pepperoni too thick, and the wine to be just *unbelievable*. The guy's rich baritone voice gave Leo the creeps every time he opened his mouth.

When he came back from the restroom, the man even dared to *order* Mattia to drive him home, simply because he wasn't able to deal with this *shit* any longer. Only Mattia couldn't play his chauffeur that night, for he'd been drinking too much wine and the gin and tonic that he'd been sharing with Leo.

Selfishly satisfied after Richard was sent home by taxi, he and Mattia continued their dinner and quickly fell into their usual comfortable conversations about this and that, work and whatnot.

"Listen, Leo." Mattia suddenly brought up the one topic Leo so badly wanted to forget. "I just want to say that I'm so sorry about the whole, well, *thing*."

"What *exactly* are you apologizing for?" Leo felt a sudden anger build up inside again, fast and furious, bubbling up to the surface. For once, he couldn't control his tongue and said what was on his mind. "That you kept your boyfriend a secret *for months*? Or that he treated you and me like, I don't know, like being nice would've caused him diarrhea or something?"

Mattia cringed at his odd choice of words, he guessed, making Leo feel bad for saying anything at all.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Once the words were out, Leo was reminded that he *still* kept certain things a secret himself. It was definitely not his place to be upset now, was it?

“No. You’re right, I had no honest reason to keep it a secret, and he did treat you badly tonight. It wasn’t right,” Mattia spoke quietly and with downcast eyes. “He tends to do that. I don’t know why he acts all screwed up sometimes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for something you have no control over.” Leo reached for Mattia’s hand, which fisted the edge of the silky, red tablecloth. “It’s absolutely not your fault,” he added in a rather low voice, giving his friend’s hand a gentle squeeze. Mattia turned his gaze to the half-empty glass of gin and tonic and nodded.

“It’s like he hates seeing me with anyone,” Mattia almost whispered. “And, you know, I don’t have any other friends, really. He was like that too when we were out with Shirley.”

Leo wasn’t sure how to go on from here; he wanted to come clean and spill his secrets too. More than anything, he wanted to say or do something that would make Mattia feel better about everything. *Comfort*. Leo wanted to give him comfort, but he didn’t know how.

“He’s good to you, right?” At Leo’s words, Mattia lifted his head, and their eyes met. “On any other day, I mean,” he added, hoping to convey his concern. It was something Leo had to know, and he was counting on his friend to tell him the truth. He’d kill the guy if he always treated Mattia like shit, or worse.

Mattia nodded, looking down to the table as if he were ashamed of something, opening and folding the red napkin. “Yeah, he’s treating me nice. I’m sure he loves me too, you know. We haven’t talked about it, but I’d really like for us to get married.” Mattia sighed. “He’s just a bit out of his mind when we’re with friends. I honestly don’t know what his problem is with that...”

Mattia slipped his hand from underneath Leo’s and reached for the glass in front of them. “The next day, he acts like nothing ever happened.” He cast a glance at Leo before taking a long drink.

It was Leo’s turn to nod and look away. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t find the words, any words. *Love*. They were in love. Of course they were, but the thoughts of marriage and losing Mattia to another man, just when he found out that they could have been so much more... God, it made his heart ache more than he’d ever experienced.

“What I meant, before, Leo—I didn’t tell you about, you know, because, well, my family didn’t really throw me a party when they found out about me and Richard.”

They looked at each other, and Leo could see the pain and sadness in his friend's eyes. Could the ache his family caused Mattia possibly hurt Leo more than the thought of never being able to call Mattia his?

Leo's head was spinning when Mattia continued, "They hate me, Leo. They really do. Dad said he never wants me to set foot in their house again and... and Mom, she just broke down crying her eyes out. I never heard from either of them again."

Mattia looked him right in the eyes, the pain still visible, and the impact of his words felt as if they could rip Leo's own chest apart. The thought that his mother would disapprove of him loving a man was unimaginable. His mother loved him dearly, with all his gay bits, and he wished Mattia could have the same.

"Oh, Tia," Leo whispered. "I'm so sorry." He reached for Mattia's hand again, glad that he didn't pull away.

"It's been almost one year, Leo. Can you believe it? Because I can't. They're my parents. I knew they wouldn't be thrilled, but I can't believe that they abandoned me. They won't talk to me. They refuse to see me..." Mattia let out a low groan, startling Leo, as he'd become too focused on watching his friend's pained expression, the way his eyes sparkled with dampness, and his brows furrowed.

When they looked at each other, and their eyes locked, Leo's heart began to race when Mattia continued, "And I was just too scared to think you'd freak out too, that you would leave me again and... well, I just couldn't lose you." Mattia took a deep breath. "You're really important to me, Leo."

"I'm not going anywhere, Tia. I promise."

After a long pause, Leo eventually managed to bring up a more pleasant topic, and they ended up discussing some more work-related issues, while he desperately tried to digest everything he'd just learned. He pondered whether Mattia would have opened up about all this without the intake of quite a nice amount of alcohol, and whether he'd regret saying anything the next day. Mattia might have opened up to him more recently, during their days together at work and on their outings, but he still kept a lot of things close to his heart and wouldn't talk so directly about certain things.

Leo wished it was because he trusted Leo with his secrets and feelings, and maybe he should trust in Mattia more as well. Something inside him just told Leo to wait, and so he would.

They shared tiramisu and another gin and tonic before eventually calling it a night. Since they both drank more than they should have, the kind waiter called them a taxi as well. Leo felt stupidly pleased that Mattia hadn't gone home with Richard, but stayed for another couple of hours with him, instead.

Once back at home, Leo was restless, unable to fall asleep for what seemed hours. He couldn't stop his thoughts from going back to Mattia. Leo had no right to feel jealous, or even hurt, but he still did. He wasn't proud of himself for being so *extremely* jealous of Mattia's relationship with Richard.

Leo sat cross-legged on his white leather couch, loving how the cool texture underneath his bare legs always felt so smooth. The piece of furniture was the only *fancy* thing in his apartment, and besides his sailboat, the only place where he normally could fully *let go*.

Let go of everything and simply *be*.

Not that the rest of his furniture was garbage; he took his time decorating each room with care and love, but his couch would always be special. It was silly, of course, to feel any attachment to a piece of wood and leather, but he loved his couch. He'd paid for it with his first hard-earned money. Leo had always dreamed of having a very comfortable couch right in the center of his living area, where he'd be able to drop down after a long day of work, relax, and forget about everything and everyone for a while.

Leo had done just that for the past year. He'd enjoyed many hours of reading and daydreaming to *Vivaldi's Four Seasons*, following the Doctor through time and space, and assisting Henry Townshend find a way out of his apartment, Room 302, in *Silent Hill Four*.

Leo wasn't having the best of times right now, though. Flipping through his smartphone's image gallery with a frown, he quickly realized he wouldn't get any peace of mind like this. Yet, he couldn't stop his finger from sliding across the small display over and over again.

Next up was a photograph of Mattia on Leo's boat. It showed him sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, a cup of coffee and an opened computer magazine in his hands. His lean body was wrapped up in white shorts and a pale gray V-neck T-shirt, which showed smooth, tanned skin and his *gorgeous* collarbones. Leo bit his lower lip, hard.

Wherever they went, Leo always snapped a picture of either Mattia alone, or both of them together. Every day, Leo would save them on his hard drive; he wanted to have enough backup in case his phone was broken or stolen.

Admittedly, Leo was a little obsessed with his photos, but he liked them a lot. He wasn't that obsessed with Mattia, really; Leo just enjoyed their times together. Mattia was a good friend, and he wanted to keep those memories, preferably in pixels, as well as the mental images.

There was a photograph of them by the Navy Pier having one of those swirly vanilla and strawberry ice cream cones with sprinkles. Then another of his favorites—Mattia standing by a wooden bench, next to a hot dog vendor, happily munching on his lunch—was taken there as well, as many others were. Whenever they went down to the Navy Pier, Mattia would indulge in all kinds of foods. It was almost obscene how much Leo had actually eaten in his friend's company. Dippin' Dots, mixed nuts, donuts, hot dogs, fries, pretzels—dipped in gooey cheese for lunch, or a cinnamon sugar one for dessert—you name it.

Leo once snapped a picture of Mattia crouching down in the mud, helping a little girl who'd tripped close to where they were walking over one of the many bridges downtown. The day had been chilly, and the streets were still wet from the rain that morning. The lights reflecting in the puddles around them looked pretty cool in the photograph. Of course, Leo would have helped, instead of taking photos, if he'd have been needed. Mattia managed fine by himself, though, and the girl was really brave for her five or six years. There were hardly any tears. Her mother also quickly caught up with them. It had been a scene he didn't want to forget.

When he saw the next picture—Mattia in red-and-black-checked shorts and a casual, white T-shirt, while pushing a shopping cart across the parking lot—Leo let out a frustrated sigh and threw the phone toward the far end of the couch. With a loud plop, it fell off the edge and hit the hard floor below.

So, okay, maybe he was still falling for the guy, harder than Leo had ever thought possible. The way Mattia made him feel was exciting and *wonderful* and so addicting. He always knew he would care a lot for Mattia if he'd just get the chance to be closer, but what he was feeling right now went beyond his wildest imagination. He was dangerously in love with Mattia; there was no doubt about it. And it was as painful as it could be, because Mattia would never be his.

Chapter Eleven

Our Lives Will Go On

Mattia watched the buildings pass by, one after the other, enjoying the warm summer sun beating down on him and steadily heating up his white Chevy. Today's destination was on a familiar road; who would have thought that he and Leo had been living in the same city for two years? While Mattia lived in Chicago's West Side, Leo resided all the way in North Side. Talk about coincidences. The distance between their apartments was merely a twenty minute ride.

Exactly four months had passed since they reunited at the trade fair in Philadelphia, and it had been almost three weeks since he and Leo went anywhere together. Sure, they talked on the phone and exchanged emails, but they hadn't had any of their lunches or trips down to the Navy Pier.

Lately, Mattia spent most of his free evenings with extra work or his boyfriend. He encountered a few overly persistent bugs in the app which called for more rounds of testing in order not to fall behind schedule at any point. Richard had been around more frequently and had bugged Mattia to join him for some of his business dinners, which Mattia always dreaded. There was just so much social gathering he could deal with. Richard owned an art gallery and was quite popular with everybody of distinction. Mattia hadn't been in the mood to be his boyfriend's accessory at the last gallery opening; he'd much rather have finished the last test-runs on his app.

And as if to pay Mattia back for his lack of time, Leo then canceled their plans for brunch the other day and the following dinner invitations. Three times. He hadn't given it much thought, since they both were a bit busier than before, he guessed. But now he was missing his time with Leo, a lot.

Mattia planned on surprising Leo and take him out to lunch to that Italian place they both liked. He didn't understand why it bothered him so much that Leo had been canceling. Today, he wouldn't take no for an answer. It was Sunday, and he remembered Leo mentioning not having any plans this weekend. Mattia hoped like hell he'd be home after all, or it might complicate things a little.

Once Mattia reached Leo's apartment complex, he brought his car to a halt but didn't turn off the engine. He was rather surprised when he spotted Leo

outside, talking and laughing with two men and a woman. They appeared to be in college, with their bright, colorful tees, shorts, and wild hairstyles. The woman had long, cherry-red hair and a lot of tattoos on her arms and legs. She wore nothing but a black bikini top, combined with a very short, fluttery, white skirt.

Mattia hoped they wouldn't see him as he watched Leo throw the tall blond guy—wearing sunglasses and a smug smile—one of those bright colorful blowup beach balls. Leo then walked around the vehicle and high-fived the other, slightly shorter, dark haired guy.

Leo looked extremely happy.

It was a great scene; everyone appeared to be overly excited, as they all laughed and joked until they finally got into the large truck. Mattia guessed they were probably heading for a day at the beach. It made Mattia's stomach churn a little, and he felt ridiculous for his jealousy.

Only because you, grumpy old man, don't have many friends, but that doesn't mean that Leo couldn't.

Mattia knew the tiny voice in his head was right. But, maybe, he just didn't enjoy seeing Leo play around with other people, instead of him.

Now you sound like Richard.

When the last door closed, he decided to stick around until they left, only to make sure his appearance would go unnoticed. Just as he thought the car would move, the driver's door flung open, and Leo jumped out, heading for the building. Maybe he forgot something.

Please don't let him see me.

Mattia's wish wasn't granted, and Leo suddenly headed straight for his car instead. Mattia turned off the engine as he watched him walk around the front to reach the driver's side and, a second later, knocked on the window of his Chevy. Mattia sighed and reluctantly let down his window.

Looking up into Leo's deep brown eyes, his stomach twisted uncomfortably.

"Hey," he mumbled, feeling a bit ashamed for being caught watching Leo and his friends from the car.

Leo gave him a weak, "Hey you," in return, then studied him closely. "Didn't expect to see you here today."

Leo's face clouded over, and Mattia didn't like how his voice sounded unusually heavy with emotion and a lot more like "*what the hell are you doing here*" instead of the cheerful greeting he usually received.

What had he done to Leo?

He was missing something here, and Mattia felt rather confused and not very happy about it.

"Thought I'd surprise you." Mattia shrugged. "Pick you up for lunch or something."

He felt the heat in his face rise and guessed it wasn't so much from the sun; it was a lot more like he was blushing. He never handled situations well that made him uneasy and nervous.

Mattia swallowed a big-ass lump in his throat.

"But I see you're busy," he added hurriedly, and looked out the front window. When his gaze returned to his friend a heartbeat later, Leo's expression somewhat softened, and he beamed Mattia his usual, lovely smile.

"How about we all head to lunch together, and then you come to the beach with us?" Leo regarded him and nodded toward the truck. "We have one empty seat."

"Nah, I don't want to be a bother." Mattia shook his head, his fingers playing with the hem of his silk shirt. "I don't know your friends."

He didn't feel too excited about meeting Leo's friends, and even less excited about spending the entire day with them. He'd just be in the way...

Leo thumbed the car door. "Gee, you won't be a bother, Tia, and they'd love to meet you." Leo leaned in closer, and when he smiled, Mattia's heart smiled too. "Trust me."

Being this near, he could smell Leo's familiar cologne on the gentle breeze, something light and fresh with a hint of spicy cinnamon. Mattia took a quick look down at himself and shook his head.

"I'm not dressed for the beach." He smiled ruefully at Leo, who threw his head back and laughed. It wasn't even an excuse. Mattia could hardly sit in the sand with his suit pants and silk shirt.

"I can fix that." Leo beamed him a smile and opened the car door. "Get out of that car right now, mister."

How could he say no to Leo?

Mattia succumbed, pulled out the car keys and carefully got out, closing and locking the door, and without another word, followed Leo inside the building and up to his apartment on the second floor.

“Are you sure you want me to go with you, Leo?” Mattia glanced around Leo’s small kitchen; everything was arranged neatly and always appeared to be as tidy as the rest of his apartment. He’d only been here a few times and hadn’t seen all the rooms, but from what he could tell, Leo was either a neat-freak or had a maid who took care of everything. Yeah, probably not the latter.

“Of course, I’m sure.” Leo smiled that easy smile again. “It will be fun.”

He motioned for Mattia to follow him as he disappeared into his bedroom. When Mattia didn’t move, still feeling a bit uneasy and unsure about whether this would honestly be fun for any of them, Leo reappeared a moment later, waving white-and-red-checkered swim trunks at him. “Those should fit you.”

He also threw him an additional white T-shirt which would go better with the trunks than his long sleeved, brown shirt. “You can change in the bathroom to your right.” Leo waved his hand in that direction before turning around towards the fridge.

With a quick glance over his shoulder, Leo grinned. “It’s been a while since we went swimming together.”

Leo watched his face for a moment, then turned around to fully face Mattia, pouring himself a glass of grape juice, their eyes never unlocking.

Oh, yeah, he remembered.

“We used to go to that lake, behind that small forest where nobody would go besides us bored kids,” Mattia said, smiling at the memory of that one summer so long ago. Leo nodded, wiping a drop of purple juice from his lips with the back of his hand. Mattia watched him finish the glass with one long gulp, fascinated as Leo’s Adam’s apple bobbed while he swallowed. Like every time Mattia had seen him, Leo wore a thin silver chain with an anchor charm loosely around his neck, sparkling where the light reflected on it.

He tore his gaze from his friend’s throat when Leo suddenly laughed out loud.

“Oh, oh, remember the time you slipped off that enormous rock?” Leo shook his head and grinned at him. “You screamed like nothing I’d ever heard

before. I thought you'd broken every bone that could be broken! God, you freaked me out."

"You pushed me!" Mattia protested. "That wasn't fair."

"I did not." Leo laughed harder yet. "You slipped! I was merely standing beside you."

Oh, no.

"You did push me."

Mattia gave him a playful glare; he remembered it clearly, but Leo looked so happy and alive at that very moment, Mattia couldn't bring himself to be upset or care whether he had slipped or not. Still, he was fairly certain Leo had pushed him to see how far Mattia could fly.

Mattia smiled and headed for the bathroom to finally change. He called over his shoulder, "You were an evil kid, Leo," and enjoyed the sound of Leo's laughter echoing through the apartment.

Chapter Twelve

When I'm With You

Leo had driven them down to the Oak Street Beach, which was close to the Navy Pier and other familiar sights. Despite the start of school vacation the beach, thankfully, wasn't overflowing with families. It was nothing super fancy, far from any of those beautiful, tropical beaches he saw in travel magazines and on postcards. Although Leo preferred spending his free time on his boat, he enjoyed coming here from time to time when the weather would allow it. The ride had been better than Leo would have expected, knowing Mattia could be pretty closed up, and he hadn't seemed to be in the best of moods, but despite Mattia's introverted nature, he seemed to have gotten along quite well with his friends' insanity. Thank God for that. Leo hadn't been sure if he'd made the right decision to ask Mattia to come along, because he knew his friend too well and throwing him into a fish tank full of strangers could be a death wish.

Perhaps, he didn't know Mattia that well after all, because apparently Sonja and Daniel weren't bad enough to intimidate him. Maybe he'd just mistaken his brooding in the car for a bad mood. Sonja and Daniel could be quite the handful, especially together. They were both super fun to be around, a little crazy in the head, but absolutely lovable. Leo went to college with all three, Sam being the closest he ever had to a best friend. Unlike Mattia, Sam could be a real pain in the ass. Even after years of friendship, the two of them would still argue way too often about the most ridiculous and unimportant things, not to mention Sam's football obsession drove him crazy more often than not. He was a real friend, nonetheless, and Leo could always count on him if he needed something, and without a doubt, Leo would offer his help in return in the blink of an eye.

"Oh wow, Leo," Mattia gasped. "I didn't know you had a tattoo."

He was just about to get out of his clothes when Leo looked up to find Mattia gaping at him. Leo realized that his friend hadn't seen any of his ink yet. He beamed a smile at him. Mattia must have spotted the anchor below his waist when Leo lifted his shirt. Leo remembered the day a few years ago when—on a whim—he'd gotten his first tattoo.

That day, Leo was bored to his bones, jumping into his truck and driving into town in search of some distraction. It took him all day to find a studio that

had an open time slot for walk-ins like him. Luckily, Leo eventually stumbled into a small studio tucked away on a street he'd never been to, where Tucker D., a friendly, rather burly guy, had inked him his very first black-and-white rose on his left side, just below his armpit.

"Well, we haven't gotten naked together much lately, have we?" Leo grinned, then fully chucked his lime green T-shirt, dropping it right onto the pile where everyone had left their clothes.

By now, Leo had a handful of tattoos here and there, where nobody would see them unless he'd take his clothes off. His favorite was the anchor right across his hip bone. It had hurt like a bitch but was worth every second of pain. It was a beautiful piece, the size of his fist, filled in with black-and-gray ink, tiny dots, and bright yellow stars in the background. A brown rope wound around the anchor and it had four differently sized bright pink flowers, with bits of green leaves and yellow stigmas. When wearing trunks, or any kind of pants, only the top half of the tattoo could be seen. Most of the detail, such as the stars and writing underneath was hidden by the clothes.

The line saying, *Find The Horizon*, was his favorite part.

"Not lately, no. We only went swimming together when we were sixteen," Mattia pointed out, then his voice turned up a notch when he saw Leo's chest, now fully exposed. "You've got more! Like, wow!"

Leo chuckled. "Just a few." He waved his hand around in dismissal, looking in one of the bags for his sunscreen. It was always thrilling to see how others would react to his ink, and despite loving them himself, he always felt sort of put on display, awaiting everyone's approval. Thinking Mattia could be turned on by his tattoos was a bit unnerving.

The other one Mattia must have seen started from his shoulder, right below the neckline where most of his T-shirts would begin, weaving itself around his upper arm and back. Leo always chose carefully when it came to buying shirts, making sure his tattoo wouldn't peek out from under his sleeves or collar. The ink showed a sea turtle in greens and blues, surrounded by similar-colored bubbles of water, waves, and tiny colorful fish in the background. He also had a rather large gray skull with black wings and light pink and red roses on his chest, below his collarbone. The tip of its insanely detailed, bony wings reached from one side of his chest to the other.

Once Leo spotted the small orange tube underneath a bunch of green and yellow towels, he bent down to retrieve the sunblock, quickly straightening up

again. When he got the blue cap unscrewed, he squeezed a big dollop of the white cream onto his left shoulder.

Leo smiled fondly at his friend. “Care to help?” he asked. “My back’s sorta sensitive. I better get it covered as much as possible.”

With one big step, Mattia was right in Leo’s personal space, reaching for him, their eyes never unlocking. When he replied in his deep voice, “Turn around?” it was more a question than an order. Leo shivered, nonetheless, wishing he could hear those words in a completely different context someday.

Don’t kid yourself. That will never happen.

Leo did as he was asked and turned, with Mattia’s hand lingering on one of his shoulders, squeezing lightly. He then smoothed both his palms across Leo’s shoulders, spreading the lotion over the expanse of his back, massaging him—amazingly so—with both hands. The more Mattia smoothed and rubbed it all over him, and the deeper his fingers dug into his skin, the more goose bumps seemed to rise all the way down his arms and legs. He successfully suppressed a shudder.

Leo hadn’t forgotten that Mattia had a boyfriend. There was no way to forget *that*, but it didn’t stop his body from wanting to be touched or his heart from aching to be loved by the man. Stupid heart. Leo was still upset that Mattia hadn’t told him about the whole *being in love with another man thing*, but could he really hold a grudge? No, most definitely not. Mattia was still Mattia, and Leo felt the same about him as he always had. After ten years of hopeless wishing, Leo should be able to handle their friend-never-lovers situation. His feelings would always have to come in second place.

I just wanna be your man, see you dance, and watch the fireworks together.

“Look at you, Leo,” Mattia exclaimed suddenly. “You’re all grown up.”

Leo grinned. “Yep, all big and strong, aren’t I?” He struck a pose and couldn’t help but laugh, which got Sam’s attention. A shiver ran down his spine when his friend’s blue eyes met his.

“Geez, you two, stop flirting already.” Sam’s croaky voice interrupted their moment.

Sam raised an eyebrow, opened a can of Coke and threw back about half of it in one go. Both Leo and Mattia turned to look at Leo’s friend, then at each other. Mattia’s eyes went wide, and for some reason Leo had to laugh even louder. Mattia looked terrified. It should have been a lot more insulting than

amusing, really, but right this instant, it was just too funny, a weirdly *perfect* moment.

“Oh come on, you know what I meant, Leo,” Mattia muttered grumpily, then looked around Leo’s shoulder and gave him a quick glare, but went right back to massaging the rest of the sunscreen onto Leo’s back. When his fingers brushed his lower back where his swim trunks began, Leo’s cock twitched. *Fuck*. Leo shuddered. Having Mattia touch him like that really hadn’t been his best idea.

With a loud smack to his arm, Mattia announced completion of his work and walked around him. “Uh-huh,” Leo said smugly. “I know what you meant.” He wagged his eyebrows, which made Mattia harrumph.

They stood across from each other, Leo watching his friend closely, unsure of what Mattia would be expecting him, or them, to do next. Leo should probably get lotion on his arms and legs himself, before dragging all four of his friends down to play something by the water. Anything. Being in close proximity with Mattia was wonderful, but sadly, a very specific part of him felt way too wonderful at the moment, and wouldn’t that be great to be discovered?

Leo willed his restless cock to behave, but the way Mattia looked him up and down, then held up his hands as if asking for a towel, or more work, didn’t help one bit. Leo groaned inwardly, biting his lower lip. At least the swim trunks were fairly big and concealed his uncomfortable hard-on. Hopefully.

Ah, what the hell.

Leo held out both of his arms and tipped his head. “While you’re at it.”

Mattia rolled his eyes, squeezed some more of the white liquid onto Leo’s arm, then took Leo’s left hand in his. “Don’t like to get yourself sticky, huh?” he asked, while spreading sunscreen up and down that arm, then tugging at the other hand and continuing his work. It pleased Leo to see the smile on Mattia’s lips never fading.

“Feet, too,” Leo smirked. “Please.”

Mattia harrumphed, and Leo laughed.

Quickly, he felt the heat rise between their bodies. Standing in such close proximity, shirtless, and with Mattia’s gentle hands on him, was *nice*. Really nice. Too nice. Gee, he felt like a pervert for enjoying the attention and taking advantage of his friend.

I’m not really, am I?

He was merely trying to be a little spoiled. The only person who'd ever rubbed lotion on him, or spoiled Leo in any way, was his mother. Now, if that wasn't sad, what was? Maybe Leo ought to find a boyfriend himself; after all, being alone and having to watch Mattia play happy couple with his douche of a man was depressing as hell. He should probably give Miguel a call tomorrow night. They hadn't hooked up since the trade fair in Philadelphia all those months ago. Leo hadn't felt like seeing anyone lately, especially not strangers, but perhaps he'd need to change that now.

At first, Leo had still had his hopes up high, thinking he might get a chance with Mattia, but when those hopes were crushed, he simply hadn't had the energy to bother with Miguel or anyone else. Perhaps Leo was the type who would rather mope and grieve instead of throwing himself into meaningless sex to forget. And he wasn't made for relationships; at least that's what he'd been telling himself.

Nobody would live up to his standards, so why try?

They weren't Mattia.

"You know what I meant, before," Mattia prompted, his fingers gently dancing around Leo's wrist. "Of course you're grown and all but..." he trailed off, searching for the right words. "The tattoos—I just would have never thought you'd get any. And there are so many, and so big."

Leo bit his lip, it was cute to listen to Mattia talk, and he sounded amazed.

"I knew you always *looked* the type to get tattoos." Mattia smeared more sunscreen on Leo's forearm, taking great care in spreading it evenly, making a masterpiece out of getting him all nice and greasy. "...and they do look good, really. I just wouldn't have expected it, with your sophisticated job and professional look and everything. I'm surprised."

Mattia was rambling now, something that almost never happened.

Please, don't stop talking.

The sound of his voice was soothing, and the flush across Mattia's cheeks plus the ruffled hair was adorable. Leo felt his own cheeks heat up too, but with the hot sun shining down on them it would, hopefully, go unnoticed. He had to stop gazing up at his friend, though, because the pent-up longing he felt swelling inside his chest became too fast and too difficult to ignore.

Easy as pie, avert your eyes, Leo. Look out toward the water.

Chase the birds across the sky.

Count the grains of sand around you.

Leo swallowed with difficulty. Mattia's gentle hands, those firm fingers on his warm skin, caused his stomach to flutter and the heat to rise and rise. *Feels too nice, have to stop.*

He lowered his gaze, dropping his eyes, and what he saw wasn't helping much. Red-checkered swim trunks. They were his, but seeing them on Mattia made him feel stupidly happy. They looked good on him, he had to admit. And they fit just perfectly. There was no doubt it was the highlight of Leo's day, seeing Mattia in swim trunks without a shirt.

Heaven help me, how can I resist that man? He's all I ever wanted.

And so close, it was too tempting to touch.

Suddenly, Mattia's gravelly voice tore him from his thoughts. *Thank you.*

When Mattia prompted him to answer, a death glare in his pale gray-blue eyes, Leo had the sudden revelation that he hadn't been paying attention to anything Mattia might have said for long minutes, though it felt more like hours to him. Anyhow, he couldn't recall what his friend had been saying.

"Er..." He swallowed hard.

But then, Mattia laughed, laughed with his whole heart—it was a goddamned good sound, one Leo had missed for years—and he couldn't help but join him.

Chapter Thirteen

The Sky Looks Like an Astro Pop

“Isn’t this just amazing?” Mattia whispered to himself, stunned by how incredible the Chicago skyline looked with the sun setting, painting everything in shades of yellow and orange. It wasn’t the first time he was seeing the sunset in Chicago, but tonight he felt almost speechless at the beauty before their eyes. Mattia shivered slightly and wondered where that gentle breeze tickling his exposed skin came from. Today had come and gone so fast he could hardly believe the day was already turning into night.

To his right, he saw Leo crouching down in the sand next to him, still wearing his lime green swimming trunks and a matching T-shirt. A few feet down the shore were Sonja and Daniel, holding hands and enjoying the quiet of the early evening. Both of them were absolutely insane. Mattia hoped he would not have to see them again too soon. They were incredibly lovable, oh yeah, but too much for him. Simply too much.

Leo’s friends were a noisy bunch, fun but exhausting. Mattia wasn’t used to their free spirits. Despite everyone being around the same age, those four had the energy and wild nature of college kids. He felt a good twenty years older after just one day with them.

From this position, Mattia couldn’t see Sam anywhere but guessed he was chatting up more women, somewhere. He was quite the ladies’ man. It had been amusing to see him with a different woman every time he spotted the guy.

“If you could be any fruit, which fruit would you be?” Leo suddenly asked, his voice sounding closer than he’d been before. When Mattia tore his gaze away from the water and looked up, he was met with his friend’s impish grin. The way Leo’s brown eyes sparkled with joy always caused Mattia’s stomach to do strange things.

Leo’s question caught him off guard. And had he just asked him what *fruit* he wanted to be?

“A moldy strawberry,” Mattia answered sincerely, even though it was the weirdest thing anyone had ever asked him. He wasn’t sure, even now, that he’d heard it right. Even for Leo, this was unexpectedly odd. Mattia smiled.

Scooting closer, Leo looked at him with an unreadable expression that made Mattia shiver. While they both sat cross-legged, merely inches apart from each other, Mattia sensed an unfamiliar air around them.

“Why?” asked Leo, his eyes holding Mattia’s gaze.

With Leo’s dark brown eyes staring at him so expectantly, as if Mattia held all the answers to the universe, surprising emotions welled up inside of him. He suddenly wanted to reach out and draw Leo into his arms, not to comfort him—because, right this moment, it felt strangely like the most natural thing to do. Eventually, Mattia shrugged and replied casually, “So nobody would eat me.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “You’ll have to be moldy all your life,” he whispered, and by the way his lips twitched and his eyes squinted, Mattia could see how hard he tried to sound serious.

“It’s a good price to pay, considering I’ll not be eaten, don’t you think?”

Mattia couldn’t help but crack up as soon as the words left his lips, and not a second later, Leo joined his laughter. For a long while, they sat there laughing and drinking, enjoying each other’s company. It was getting late, but Mattia was unwilling to leave; he hadn’t had that much fun in a long time. It had been exhausting; yes, he wouldn’t change his mind about that, but fun nonetheless.

“You’re right. It’s a fair price to pay,” Leo unexpectedly continued their strange conversation. Mattia watched Leo taking a long swig of the rum and coke which Sam had mixed for them earlier in the back of Leo’s truck. Nobody would guess what they had in their Starbucks tumblers.

“I would still like you, if you were all smelly and rotten,” Leo promised with a fond smile.

Somehow, he knew Leo would.

“What about you?” Mattia asked. “What *fruit* would you want to be?”

And yes, he had no idea why he was keeping their topic alive.

Leo grinned and leaned in so he could whisper close to Mattia’s ear, “Why the hell would I want to be a *fruit*?”

Mattia growled, shoving his friend, playfully punching Leo in the shoulder, drawing a series of giggles from him.

“Nobody in their right mind wants to be a fruit!” Leo burst out laughing and shoved him right back.

“You are an idiot!” Mattia said, shaking his head.

“You knew that before you decided to keep me.” Leo shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant but Mattia could tell the difference in his voice. Something was up with his friend and he didn't know what.

Mattia's heart pounded a little faster as he carefully reached out, wrapping his arm around Leo's shoulders and squeezing him tight. “Not gonna regret keeping you,” Mattia whispered, his voice soft with affection. Leo rested his head on Mattia's shoulder and sighed heavily. A strange fuzziness unsettled Mattia's stomach, and he felt the sudden urge to say something, but he was at a loss for words.

What was going on?

Leo's company made him feel happier than he'd been in a long time. The world was seemingly perfect, and yet the heaviness of unexpected emotions was wearing him down. Feeling a sea of anxiety deep within, Mattia's pulse sped up, and it was as if strong hands were squeezing his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Next to him, Leo nervously wiggled his butt on the ground, wrapping his arms around his pulled up legs, cradling them close to his chest. Considering they were on a public beach, the area around them seemed unusually peaceful and quiet; only the sound of the waves and light traffic in the distance could be heard. Or maybe, Mattia just couldn't focus on anything but the body leaning against him, soaking up its warmth with every cell of his own. The faint scent of Leo's sun lotion reached Mattia's nose, and after having spent all day in his friend's company, the sweet smell had become quite familiar and comforting.

Long, silent moments passed before Mattia asked, “Hey, what's on your mind? You're being awfully quiet.”

When Leo turned and lifted his head to gaze at Mattia, his eyes were soft and a little unfocused, but sparkled with their usual intensity. When Mattia smiled, Leo's somber expression turned into a cheerful, bright grin. “Uh, nothing really,” Leo replied with a shake of his head and absolutely no conviction whatsoever.

“Liar.” Mattia playfully nudged Leo's side, causing him to laugh and double over. He was certain that something was bothering Leo, but he didn't know if he'd be able to bring Leo to talk to him. Hell, it might be best if he didn't; counseling wasn't Mattia's strength. But he would try.

“Maybe I was thinking of moldy strawberries,” Leo said, with a hint of embarrassment when his eyes returned to Mattia’s face. The slight flush on his cheeks gave Leo a bashful look that matched his unsteady voice. Suddenly, Leo looked away, biting his lip, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been doing, or saying.

Mattia felt his stomach flip-flop. He instinctively reached out to lay a hand on Leo’s drawn-up leg. In the distance a car horn honked, and close to where they sat, a group of teenagers were walking toward them, laughing and talking. When his eyes focused back on Leo, Mattia was welcomed by a big, easy smile, and the unmistakable intelligence that lay in those good-natured eyes. The gentle breeze ruffled Leo’s wavy hair, causing the long, brown strands to obscure his vision. Reaching for the errant curl, Leo tucked it behind his ear like he so often did. Mattia didn’t try to fight his eyes, as they enjoyed the sight before him. It was always difficult to look away when the guy smiled at him, so honest and delighted, the action lighting up his whole face. Not for the first time, Mattia couldn’t find a thing about Leo not to like.

Perhaps Leo had a little too much to drink, for he suddenly looked a little loopy. Before Mattia could suggest they get something to eat, Leo reached for Mattia’s arm, resting it there like it belonged. The warmth of Leo’s palm on his skin caused goose bumps to rise, spreading quickly up and down his spine all the way from his neck to his toes. Mattia looked down where Leo’s fingers curled around his lower arm, close to his wrist, and briefly wondered why having Leo touch him felt so strangely good when it really shouldn’t.

“I would kill for some cookies right now,” Leo groaned and Mattia laughed.

“We’ll get you some.”

From underneath a pile of towels somewhere, his phone started ringing. Mattia squeezed Leo’s hand, giving him an apologetic look before he got up to find it. Digging into one of the bags, he quickly found the noisy device. Mattia took a few steps toward the shore before answering the call.

“Hey Rich,” Mattia greeted his boyfriend with an uneasy feeling. He hadn’t even once thought of Richard today. His boyfriend’s impatient voice, as he was asking Mattia why he wasn’t at home when he said he would be, told him that Richard wasn’t the slightest bit pleased with his absence. Which shouldn’t have made Mattia feel guilty, because as far as he recalled, they hadn’t made plans to see each other today. Okay, Mattia remembered *vaguely* that he’d said he’d be home later tonight. But still.

"I'm out with Leo—and some of his friends," Mattia said, glancing over his shoulder to see Leo sitting right where he'd left him, gazing out toward the ocean.

"I can be home in half an hour, give or take," Mattia answered half-heartedly. Richard told him to drive safely and that he'd missed him. "Uh-huh. Me too." Mattia nodded into the phone, old habits dying hard.

Shit. Talking about driving, he left his car at Leo's apartment, and Mattia doubted he should be sitting behind a wheel after that rum and coke. Not that he was drunk, but as he always said, better safe than sorry.

Shoving his phone into his borrowed swim trunks, Mattia returned to gather his belongings.

"Sorry, Leo, we'll have to grab dessert another time," Mattia apologized. "I've got to get home."

Leo looked up at him with a curious expression.

"Richard and Prince are missing me." Mattia tried a smirk. "Can't leave them boys alone for too long, you know."

Leo scrambled to his feet and reached for their bags, pulling out the T-shirt Mattia had been wearing today. Mattia noticed the way Leo tried to avoid eye contact when he handed him the piece of clothing.

"I'm sure they do," Leo muttered, his gaze fixated on the bright colorful bags in the sand. The sour tone in his voice didn't go amiss. Mattia could hardly blame him, though. The last, and only, time he'd met Richard didn't go down very well. Truthfully, Mattia hadn't expected Leo to like his boyfriend, but he couldn't deny that it would have been great if they could have gotten along better.

"Thank you for dragging me out here today. It was a lot of fun," Mattia said honestly, while sliding the soft T-shirt over his head. Leo's eyes met his, and a strange, tingling sensation pooled in his stomach, as he realized that he'd really love to stay.

"Of course it was. My guys rock." Leo winked at him and before Mattia could turn around, to see which way he'd have to go to catch a cab, Leo reached for him. Mattia shivered when Leo clutched at his arm, Leo's fingers feeling cold where they touched his skin, causing goose bumps to rise on the back of his neck.

For a moment, Mattia felt paralyzed as Leo gave him a lopsided grin, his dreamy expression sending another chill down Mattia's spine. Leo's eyes appeared melancholy, but he didn't have enough time to fully make sense of it all. He didn't realize his own body was moving until they were only inches apart, directly facing each other—the next thing he felt were Leo's warm lips on his mouth.

At the first touch, Mattia's skin tingled all over, his stomach churning. For a short moment, he was frozen to the spot, his skin slowly, but steadily, catching fire. Leo's mouth was moist and soft on his, moving tentatively, his fingers curling around Mattia's biceps. The kiss was chaste, merely a brush of lips, an exchange of breath. Without a thought, Mattia's hand found its way to Leo's chest, his fingers closing gently on the fabric of Leo's soft T-shirt as he kissed him back.

Mattia felt the hitch in Leo's breath when his lips fell open just slightly, enough for Leo's tongue to poke inside, nudge his own, and deepen the kiss with welcoming ease. Leo tasted good, too good. With shaking hands, Mattia clutched Leo's waist, drawing him in closer. A tiny voice in the back of his fogged brain told him to stop, but he couldn't. Their knees gently bumped each other's, and Leo's fingers brushed up and down the length of Mattia's arms before gripping him by his shoulders and pulling Mattia hard against his chest. In contrast to his tight hold, Leo kissed him slowly, gently, and everything felt just right.

Leo's lips, his scent, and the feeling of his lithe body against his, had Mattia hypnotized. It was everything he once had imagined kissing Leo would be like. Like fire and ice, almost electrifying, and so wonderful. It felt like they should have been doing this all along, and continue doing so forever.

Mattia didn't know what exactly happened, but something in that moment told him that he'd been in love with Leo for quite some time by now. Had he just been too blind to see it? Mattia guessed it hadn't changed the way he felt about Richard, because he really didn't love him any less. One thing was for sure, it was wrong to have similar feelings for another man, but shit, what could he do?

Realizing that his heart was confused, beating too fast for two men at the same time, Mattia slightly panicked. He gasped when Leo's teeth pulled at his lower lip, his gentle fingers squeezing his neck. It was definitely not the right time to ponder this new discovery. Right now, every cell in his body wanted Leo.

With Leo sighing into his mouth, their kiss quickly grew deeper and more possessive. Suddenly, Mattia wanted Leo more than anything, all of him. He wanted to be devoured by Leo's soft lips, consumed by his greedy kiss. But, shit, they had to stop this; it wasn't right. He couldn't kiss Leo while he was with Richard. And besides, Leo was drunk. He might not even want this in a sober state of mind.

"I had the best day in years, Tia," Leo breathed against his dampened lips. Mattia felt him shiver beneath his touch. "Thank you for coming along with us."

Mattia tried to carefully untangle himself from Leo. Bringing his hands to Leo's smooth cheeks, Mattia gently eased him back. The heated skin beneath his fingers made it difficult for him to pull away; instead he wanted to lean in again to claim Leo's mouth in another searing kiss. A frightening chill rolled down his back, and the knowledge that this could never happen again had Mattia move without a second thought, catching Leo's lips with his and kissing him softly. With gentle caresses, he carefully savored his friend's taste one last time, because he knew this had been the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

Unfortunately, the blissful moment didn't last very long. When Mattia eventually broke the kiss, and they let go of one another, reality came rushing back too fast and with full force. At the sound of someone clearing his throat, both took a step back, and Leo turned to find Sam—the tall blond with the shades—standing next to him. *Where the hell did he come from?*

Shit. They've been caught kissing like horny teenagers. Mattia felt momentarily relieved when Sam chuckled and quickly pulled Leo close, throwing an arm around his shoulder in a brotherly hug.

Of course, someone had to have seen them making out in public. Perhaps, Leo's other friends and a bunch of strangers had too. Despite feeling mortified about what he'd let happen, he didn't feel embarrassed when Sam studied him closely. He'd probably never see Leo's friends again. Maybe not even Leo after that.

Mattia's stomach twisted in an uncomfortable way when regret tugged Leo's mouth down in an expression that looked so wrong and unnatural for him. Addressing his friend, Leo spoke quietly, "Sam, drive Tia home, will you?"

Mattia felt a pang of guilt when Leo avoided looking at him. "No, it's fine. I'll get a cab," Mattia said. "See you guys," he added hurriedly and waved

good-bye before turning around and running for the main street as fast as he could.

Oh God, just what have I done?

Chapter Fourteen

The Thing About Love

Oh God, just what have I done?

Leo ran a shaky hand through his damp hair. His breath was ragged, his head spun like a damned carousel, and his heart madly pounded away, slowly forcing its way out of his chest.

He'd *really* kissed Mattia. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Leo had never hated himself more than right at this moment. Kissing someone in a committed relationship was low, very low. He couldn't believe he'd seriously done that.

The feel of sweat trickling down his neck made him shiver in disgust, reminding him of how he hated running on the treadmill. Leo resented anyone who worked out effortlessly; it made him sick to just watch someone run, bathed in sweat. Leo thought an hour on the treadmill would be good punishment for his stupidity—he hardly lasted twenty minutes.

Crap.

There was no way he could do it—the never-ending sweat, the unbearable heat, the pressure in his chest, and the unimaginable effort to take a proper breath—he just wasn't meant to exercise.

His heart hammered against his heaving chest, his knees too weak to keep him steady any longer.

I kissed Mattia.

His knees hurt and were about to turn into pudding at any moment, and crap, he might be one step away from a heart attack. Leo slowed down, trying, but failing, to steady himself. He pressed madly at any blinking button he could reach and tried to calm himself down, but his head just wouldn't stop spinning, and his vision became blurry and *strange*.

No, please no. I don't want to faint.

He should have eaten something this morning.

Strong arms gripped him from behind, holding on to his arm and bicep, keeping him from falling facedown. "Take a deep breath." He heard the

unfamiliar voice, sounding distant and almost robotic, but that was probably just his brain not getting enough oxygen.

Leo's chest ached, and it was just so difficult to take a breath, his head continuing to spin as he stepped off the machine and let the stranger guide him far, far away from that evil thing. "Breathe. Calm down, man." The manly voice, now closer and stronger, soothed Leo enough that he managed not to lose consciousness. *Thank heavens.*

His vision was still unclear, slightly blurry, but he found a chair, and strong arms guided him down onto the soft cushion. It wasn't very comfortable, not relaxing him at all. Leo's entire body still shook, just slightly now, but enough to feel concerned.

"Drink some water. You might be dehydrated."

Taking deep breaths and a tiny sip of cold water slowly cleared Leo's foggy brain. He blinked rapidly until he could make out the man's strong, bodybuilder features, his chestnut-brown hair, and—wow—all those muscles.

Leo shook his head. "I've only been on that thing for a few minutes. I just suck at running."

The stranger arched an eyebrow. Thank heavens, Leo was conscious and could see clearly again, his breath coming more easily now too.

"Thank you for your help. I thought I was going to die." Leo shuddered. "Heart failure or something."

His heart surely felt like a failure. *Why couldn't he have fallen in love with someone who could love him back?* Leo's head was still spinning a little, but he probably wouldn't faint now. That was improvement enough, he guessed. What a *terrible* morning.

"I'm Tank." The guy offered Leo his hand. With a nod, he shook it but didn't give his name in return. He felt embarrassed as hell. Leo chanced a glance down his body, and oh boy, he was all sweaty and yucky.

"What happened to you? You wanna talk?" Tank queried and shrugged. "Sometimes it helps and maybe next time you run the treadmill you won't start hyperventilating so fast."

Oh there was absolutely no next time for Leo on that terror machine. Never, ever again. Talking might also not help him in any way right now, but—shit, he might as well spill his guts to a stranger and move on. It couldn't get any more embarrassing anyway.

"I kissed my friend," Leo admitted.

Raising an eyebrow, Tank asked, "And?"

"I'm sure he's gonna be engaged and happily married soon. I knew he was in love with someone, in a committed relationship and all, you know? I still kissed him. I won't even blame the alcohol, even though I was slightly drunk." Leo ran a hand across his face, feeling ashamed and tired. "I've wanted to kiss him since I was sixteen years old, from the very moment I first saw him. We lost touch for years, but his face still haunted me. That's no excuse, I know. I shouldn't have given in to my longing."

Leo took a quick breath, he was rambling now and—crap—his lungs burned. "I love him. I really do. And I thought I respected him and his decisions. I mean, I adore him to bits, and yet... shit, I really am the worst!"

Tank considered him for a long moment then asked, "Does he know how you feel? I mean, did he choose that other fellow over you or something?"

Leo wasn't stupid, he had figured out by now that Mattia liked him, probably not exactly the same way Leo liked and adored him, but Mattia liked him. Despite their harsh parting words ten years ago, they quickly became good friends once again.

"No. I don't think he's got the slightest clue how much he means to me."

And that was probably true. Mattia should know how much he mattered to him as a friend, but that was probably all. Leo thought he'd been able to reach Mattia, but either he was imagining it, or they were just not meant to be, after all. It would have been the perfect time for them to fall in love, except that Mattia was already in love with Richard.

"Well that's good news, isn't it? He might like you too and just needed someone to open his eyes for him. Sometimes we don't see what's right in front of us."

Leo pondered that. It could be possible, why not? Well, maybe because he was head over heels with Richard. That's why not.

Sometimes, he thought Mattia subconsciously flirted with Leo and didn't even realize he was doing it, because his brain was all wrapped around the idea that they were just friends.

Leo shook his head. "I don't know, man. He's in love with someone else, and he's not the kind of guy who would just ditch anyone 'cause he's itching

for a new flavor.” Leo sighed, “He’s the *‘in it to win it’* kinda guy, you know. I might as well forget about him. I’ve got no chance here.”

Maybe Leo was just a bit full of himself, thinking he had that effect on Mattia. He hadn’t even tried to find out whether Leo was gay too. Maybe he didn’t need to ask, and it was somehow obvious, but maybe he didn’t bother because he already had Richard and wasn’t looking for someone to love. He wouldn’t care whether Leo was straight or gay or bisexual. Or none of the above.

Leo chuckled. “He probably won’t even think that I *am* interested, anyway.”

“Oh. Mh.” Tank rubbed his chin between two fingers. “Well, the kiss should have finally opened his eyes.” He snickered. “Don’t be too upset, buddy. Fate will find its way. And if he isn’t the one, then someone else will be. Just don’t give up. Have some hope, okay?”

He didn’t think there was anyone for him, but Leo nodded anyway. It wasn’t Tank’s position to pep talk him, but he still took the time to do so. The least Leo could do was to appear as if it helped.

“And stay the hell away from the treadmill. Just some friendly advice.”

“Oh I will gladly follow that.” Leo held out his hand, and Tank gripped it tightly, shaking it, with a nod of his head. “Thank you, Tank. For saving my life, listening to my story, and your great advice.”

“You’re welcome, bud. Now stay right here for another few minutes, relax, gather your thoughts, and stay on track. I’ll get you some more water and a power bar.”

Leo wanted to tell him there was no need to bother with it, but Tank was gone in the blink of an eye, and he honestly could use more water and some sugar.

Oh, Tia. Leo sighed. He had always tried to do right by him, but had failed terribly when he drunkenly kissed his friend. Leo groaned. Just how could he make it up to him again?

Leo felt trapped. He knew he messed up, and he didn’t deserve Mattia’s forgiveness, but giving up on his friendship made his heart ache. *Dammit.*

For all he knew, Mattia wouldn’t even want to see him again after that stunt.

Chapter Fifteen

Like Smoke in the Mirror

Stay.

Leo, please, don't go!

Don't leave me.

Leo.

Come back, please, stay.

For the third time this week, Mattia woke up dizzy and confused, tossing and turning on his silky sheets until he realized he was awake—it had only been a dream. A dream in which Mattia had been desperately clutching Leo's T-shirt, begging him to stay. Feeling hot and sweaty, Mattia pulled down the covers, shivering the instant the chilly air hit his exposed skin. For a moment he thought he could go back to sleep, but when he closed his eyes he saw vivid images of a sixteen-year-old Leo *kissing* him like there was no tomorrow. Mattia shuddered, his throat thick and dry, his pulse racing. He could still hear himself shout at Leo like he did ten years ago, and thinking of his friend's hurt expression made his chest ache.

Fucking nightmare.

With a long yawn, Mattia stretched, his neck and lower back hurting like hell. When he reached to his left, he was glad to find the space next to him empty. Richard hadn't been pleased about the wake-up call at four in the morning the other day. Deciding that it was impossible to fall asleep now, Mattia crawled out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

He'd had that dream of Leo walking out of his life that summer over a million times since he was sixteen. Recently, the ending altered in a way he'd have never thought could feel so real and frightening. He hadn't had that nightmare for a long time, so when it returned the other night, it scared the life out of him.

After relieving himself, Mattia stepped out of his loose gray boxer shorts and threw his white T-shirt into the sink to his left. He took a quick look into the mirror above and groaned. The red-rimmed eyes and black circles underneath made him look like a zombie. One with a slight tan he thought, a

little amused despite it all. He wasn't as pale as Leo, but healthy sure looked different. Mattia stepped into the small shower cabin and closed his eyes as the gentle spray of warm water slowly, but effectively, helped him to relax. The way his muscles loosened felt good, but instead of cleansing his mind as he'd hoped, the sounds of water drizzling down on him only reawakened recent memories of the other night by the beach when Leo kissed him so sweetly, and yet demanding, to a background music of mellow waves in the distance.

How could this one time leave him so confused and aching for more?

All week he'd pushed those images of Leo's soft lips, his loopy smile and that addicting taste of their kiss out of his mind. Mattia had tried all he could do to ban the memory of Leo's scent and how it made his skin tingle when they touched—skin to skin—the moment their lips collided. Mattia groaned. This wasn't right; Leo was only a friend, no matter what he might or might not be feeling for him. Mattia had given up on Leo a long time ago. He'd made his decision to be with Richard when he fell in love with him.

Leo only kissed him because he had too much to drink anyway. Leo knew he and Richard were serious. He'd said so himself—that their kiss was an accident, a mistake even. Those were Leo's words when he called him the next morning, his sleep-laden voice full of regret and sorrow. He apologized and hung up on Mattia as if he couldn't bear talking to him for a second longer.

The mere thought of Leo being disgusted by their kiss hurt.

It shouldn't matter, really, because he loved Richard. Not Leo, no, he didn't love Leo. Leo might have been drunk, but he'd kissed him back. *Shit*. He didn't want to love Leo. Not now. He couldn't.

Can't those feelings just go away as suddenly as they appeared?

When he was sixteen, he thought that he had the biggest crush on the rebel with the skateboard who lived across the street. It was new to him, confusing, scary. Mattia didn't know what it all meant, but he loved that summer, loved everything they did together and dreamed they could always do those things in the future. Together. Even years later, Mattia had hoped, wished, and prayed that they would be able to find their way back to each other and love one another like he thought they could.

Since Richard came into his life, Leo had only lived in his distant memory, and for years, he'd accepted that things would never be the way he once dreamed they could be. He had been the only person who made Mattia feel wanted, needed, accepted, and loved in his own way.

With Richard, it had been two satisfying, wonderful years. If it hadn't been, Mattia would have never risked coming out to his family and friends. He had always known deep down that they wouldn't accept him, but he owed it to himself and Richard to be true to himself and live the way he wanted.

He only wanted to be happy, loved, and live a peaceful life.

That one moment he'd been completely honest with himself, and told his parents that he was in love with a man, that he wanted to one day get married to that man and live happily ever after; that one moment in time, had destroyed everything he'd once known. His entire world shattered to pieces.

His family had been outraged, telling him to never set foot in their home again. And word had traveled faster than he could. None of his friends were there to support him when he flew back home in hopes of convincing his parents that he was still their son, the one they used to love.

But they didn't; his family *hated* him.

They wouldn't even look at him anymore. If Richard hadn't been there for Mattia, he probably would have lost his mind a long time ago. But with Richard by his side, everything had worked out; he had found love and he promised himself that he'd be able to keep it.

Richard had become his rock and shelter, the one person he could turn to when he felt lonely and missed his family. Richard might not be as chatty and vibrant as Mattia wanted him to be, but Mattia loved him, and he would keep him.

Tomorrow, he would finally ask Richard to marry him.

Chapter Sixteen

You Know It When You Feel It

Leo yawned and stretched, his bones cracking and snapping into place. It was early Saturday morning, light filtered through the half opened blinds and his bed was empty as usual. A sudden melancholy overcame him. In the past, he hadn't wanted anyone in his bed, but lately he'd give anything to have a warm and comforting body warming the other side. For once, Leo wanted to wake up to someone talking sweet nothings into his ear, combing gentle fingers through his long, wavy hair, tugging slightly and planting kisses along his neck. He might even welcome morning sex, who knew? Perhaps they could have breakfast in bed—something he'd also never done—followed by a couple of hours watching cartoons, and other nonsense, until it was time for bed again.

Leo groaned. This was dangerous ground he was walking on. Leo couldn't afford to lose his mind over shit like a partner, and he didn't want just any partner, he wanted Mattia. In his bed, as his friend and lover.

Leo just knew he'd make the best boyfriend imaginable. It was not for nothing he used to lose his sleep over the guy. Mattia was so sweet and caring, even when he tried not to show it. It was the little things that gave him away, those smiles and small gestures like remembering that Leo's favorite song was "*Baby Can I Hold You*" by Tracy Chapman, that he preferred grape juice over orange, and gin and tonic over anything else. He'd never know just how much those things meant to Leo.

I'd better get up.

Leo groaned and stretched some more, and just before he could decide to let himself fall back into bed, he rolled off the edge and stood, sort of. Feeling a little wobbly and way too tired to move, he dragged his sorry ass into the bathroom which, luckily for him, was only a couple of steps from where he landed after rolling out of his queen-sized bed. He turned and gave said bed one last glance. "*See you tonight,*" he whispered to himself and headed for the shower.

Once the icy cold water revived him, and Leo could feel his heart beating again, he made quick work of getting dressed in his favorite purple Calvin Klein button-down shirt and a pair of comfortable, yet fancy enough, white

pants for a day out. It was Saturday, after all, and he could use the distraction of a shopping spree or something equally as interesting.

Pouring himself a big cup of the strongest coffee, Leo then headed for the small balcony attached to his front room. On the way through the sparsely decorated living area, Leo grabbed his messenger bag off the sofa and retrieved his second smartphone, one Leo only used for private matters. Switching it on, Leo braced himself—it was time to face reality and finally check his messages. When the screen lit up, he was instantly welcomed by various notifications, indicating that he had in fact several new texts and ten missed calls. Three from Sam, two from his mom, and five from Mattia.

Not responding to anyone's calls or messages for almost over a week wasn't his style, but Leo'd needed to avoid talking to anyone important for a while. Good thing he had a work phone and one for private affairs, so it hadn't hurt at all to keep the latter turned off until now.

Leo'd also stubbornly ignored the emails Mattia had sent to his business account, knowing most of them were work-related anyway. He'd thought he could delay reading and answering them for a while, as they were still ahead of schedule. Leo hadn't even taken a peek at those emails, in case Mattia asked to meet in any of them. Leo had to admit, it was cowardly of him to ignore Mattia.

It had been easy to dodge Sam, since his old friend was constantly busy with his teaching job, and he hardly ever came by unannounced. But they were close and often talked on the phone, so Leo was less surprised to find that Sam had called him a few times. Avoiding his mom had been a little trickier. After all, she had a key to his apartment, and could practically blow in with the wind, only she hadn't. At least Leo hadn't noticed whether she had been here while he was out. He was certain, though, that she would have waited for him to return, no matter how long she had to wait.

Leo sighed. He would have to take care of one person first, or else he'd never hear the end of it. With a few quick clicks, he sent a text saying,

*Hey Mom, I'll call you later, okay? Everything's fine here.
Love you.*

Next was his friend,

Sam, man! How's it going? I'll give you a call tonight.

Scrolling through the small gadget, Leo maneuvered through apps and emails and eventually checked his text messages.

Tuesday, 08:37 AM

Leo, come on, man. Pick up your phone or call me back.

Wednesday, 09:19 PM

Hey, I sent you a new build for the app. Need you to verify some things before I can continue. Will do by next week. Talk soon, okay?

Friday, 10:47 AM

Just checking on you. Call me, text me, mail me, something.

Friday, 08:04 PM

This is ridiculous. Talk to me, Leo.

Friday, 11:43 PM

Don't be a dick and ignore me. You have to talk to me eventually!

Out on the balcony, the sun was slowly drying the remaining rain drops from last night's shower, leaving ugly water stains on its glass railing. Taking a deep breath of fresh morning air, Leo fought the urge to fall into bed again and pull the blankets over his head. It had been stupid to basically run away from everything. He should have faced Mattia the next day, apologized in person, and moved on. *Mattia was his friend, he would forgive his momentary insanity, right?*

With an inward groan, he flopped down onto the metal chair, reading another text from Mattia, sent less than an hour ago.

Saturday, 09:12 AM

Get your ass out of bed and fire up Skype, man. Or I'll be outside that damn apartment and knocking on your door within the next half hour.

Knowing that he couldn't avoid Mattia forever Leo exited the text message app, ready to call his friend when another text flew in. Quickly he touched the small pop up alert on top of the small screen, opening the message.

Saturday, 09:34 AM

I know you're home, saw your car outside. Don't try to jump off your balcony ;)

Said text was quickly followed by a harsh knock on his apartment door, and the furious ringing of his bell. "Geez, I'm coming," Leo muttered under his breath, and made his way to the door. The smile that found its way onto Leo's lips at the thought of seeing Mattia crumbled away the moment Leo opened the door. Besides looking damn good in faded jeans, a white button-down shirt and slight flush on his cheeks, Mattia's furrowed brows indicated he was definitely not in the best of moods. There wasn't a trace of a smile on his handsome face when he glared at Leo from the hallway.

"You are still ignoring me," Mattia said accusingly, his angry expression and the harsh tone of his voice making Leo cringe.

"I'm not, well, I was, I guess. I mean," Leo mumbled with a small voice, feeling uneasy and just a little nauseated. He waved Mattia inside. "I'm sorry. We can talk about everything."

"There is not much to talk about, Leo," Mattia said with a firm glare and then let himself inside, heading straight for the living room.

One thing was sure, it couldn't be good if Mattia didn't want to talk.

Leo already said he was sorry for kissing him. Over the phone may have been cowardly, but he'd meant it and wanted to clear the air as soon as possible. Calling the next morning seemed to be the best and fastest option. Perhaps he shouldn't have hung up on Mattia before he could say anything himself, though. It was understandable that his friend was angry with him for a lot of reasons right now, especially for making it impossible to get a hold of him in over a week. Leo should have known better; he should have acted like a grownup man, for crying out loud.

What the hell is wrong with me? Leo couldn't do this hormone-crazed teenager phase right now.

Leo hurriedly closed the door behind him and stumbled into the kitchen. Feeling queasy, he tried his best to sort out his thoughts and not let his nerves break down. He opened and closed the fridge a few times, every time wondering just what they were doing. Why was Mattia here to tell him that there was nothing to talk about? Leo absentmindedly grabbed two bottles from the fridge and went to find Mattia.

Kneeling down on the carpet next to his glass table, Leo gazed at his hands to see what he'd brought along. *Ah, not bad.* "I've got some ginger ale and water," he offered with a weak smile, setting both bottles on the table before

them. At least Leo hadn't grabbed the ketchup or the carrot juice his mother always bought for him, despite knowing he didn't like it.

Leo met Mattia's gaze as he pushed to his feet again. The anger in his friend's eyes had already faded, and Mattia appeared to be quite comfortable, leaning back against the neatly arranged throw pillows on his leather couch, both legs lazily stretched out on the length of it.

"Well, I, we, just need some glasses, I guess," Leo mumbled nervously, and before Mattia could speak up, Leo darted back into the kitchen, sweating a little.

"Are you sure we don't need to talk?" Leo asked once he was back with their glasses, biting his lower lip and unable to look at Mattia. He filled one with ginger ale when Mattia took the water, pouring himself a glass.

"Not really," Mattia muttered before taking a drink of his water.

Leo sighed. "I believe there is a lot we should talk about," he added quickly, his eyes fixating on Mattia as he took another big swallow. It was difficult not to watch; Mattia looked sexy as hell even just drinking. Leo felt momentarily hypnotized at the beautiful sight of Mattia's lightly flushed cheeks, his parted lips damp from the water and his Adam's apple bobbing.

Mattia gave him a small smile when he sat the glass aside, but a loud noise coming from the hallway interrupted whatever he was about to say.

Leo's eyes went wide when a tall, slender woman appeared in his kitchen. "Mom?" he asked with surprise. What the hell was she doing here?

"Didn't you get my message?" Leo asked, slightly irritated. "I said I would call you later! You didn't have to come by!"

"Yes, thank you dear, for letting me know you are still breathing," his mother scolded him, dropping her white purse on the kitchen counter, along with a brown shopping bag. "I was at the grocery store so I thought I'd drop by and make you something decent to eat. I know you're not eating well."

Glancing around the one-bedroom apartment, she quickly spotted Mattia who had already gotten up and was now hovering close behind Leo, between the kitchen and living area.

"Oh, look," she squealed excitedly. "Who do we have here?"

Mattia smiled nervously when he saw Leo's mother walking up to them, a much brighter, confident smile on her face. His mother was naturally cheerful

and knew how to draw a laugh out of almost anyone. Leo had wanted for her to meet Mattia for a while now, but never knew how his friend would react to her openness. She could be quite invasive without meaning any harm, and Leo knew how much Mattia valued his privacy.

Politely, Mattia reached out his hand and greeted her respectfully. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs. Brooks." He winked at Leo. "Your son talks about you non-stop."

Leo rolled his eyes dramatically, watching his mother as her face lit up like the sun.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mattia dear," she said, cheerfully greeting Mattia. "And you may call me Barbara, sweetie." Today, she wore a long, red summer dress, her chestnut-brown hair tied back into a pony tail. Leo guessed their hair would be identical if he'd let his grow down to his waist. *No, not happening.*

The surprised expression on Mattia's face as Leo's mother approached him, obviously knowing his name, was priceless. Leo and his mother always had a very close relationship; it might be unusual for men at his age, perhaps, but he loved his mother dearly and they'd always shared each other's secrets. She knew everything about Mattia there was to know. From the fact that Leo had been hopelessly in love with him for ten years, right down to the embarrassing moment when he'd once, as far as he had been told at least, whispered Mattia's name during sex with some random guy who'd picked him up at a café one lonely afternoon many years ago.

Just the other day, before he went into hiding, Leo had shown her some of the pictures they had taken at the Navy Pier, both smiling and eating ice cream. His mother often came to visit Leo on weekends, bringing homemade jam, bread, and his favorite cake that they had while drinking coffee out on his tiny balcony. When she wasn't here to gossip, his mom would often tidy up and do his laundry, despite his constant complaint that he was old enough to do it himself. In the end, he was thankful for her help; it never hurt to be spoiled a little.

"It's wonderful to finally meet the infamous Mattia," His mother chirped, giving Leo a sideways glance.

"Mom!" Leo groaned, willing her to shut up and mind her own business for once. He'd not live it down if she said anything. Anything at all. *Please don't, Mom.*

“Just ignore her, Tia.” Leo regarded his friend who was looking rather uncomfortable and perhaps nervous. “Didn’t you say you were going to cook, *Mom*?” he prompted impatiently.

“See how he treats me, Mattia? That kid can be so ungrateful.” Leo’s mother shook her head and straightened her silky dress. “Nowadays, I’m just his cook and cleaning lady,” she raised her voice exaggeratedly.

Leo cringed. “Mom...” he pleaded, thinking of a way to get rid of his mother without hurting her feelings. He needed to talk to Mattia in private, and this didn’t look like it was not going to have a good ending if she was scaring him away. Or worse.

“I’m just kidding, dear. Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” She smiled and reached to pat his shoulder. “Now you boys go do something fun while I am making you a casserole you will tell your grandkids about.”

Instead of running for his life, Mattia suddenly smiled a tentative smile as he followed Leo’s mom into the kitchen. Leo was at a loss for words as he watched Mattia help his mother unpack groceries without being asked to do so. Mattia’s politeness didn’t surprise him, but the content smile on his face did, a little. Leo didn’t want to interfere with their silent activity. With a heavy heart, Leo stood back and observed the scene until his mother eventually told Mattia that she could handle it from there.

While she prepared her favorite casserole, Mattia dragged Leo out to his balcony, with the coffee and cookies he’d brought along. Despite everything, they fast fell into their comfortable camaraderie, not mentioning their kiss the other day. Instead, they talked about what Leo had missed the last week, especially regarding their application that still needed the verification only Leo could do. The tense air from earlier was gone too, leaving Leo just a little confused but glad about the fact that he hadn’t lost his friend.

Later, they gathered around the small dining table and ate his mother’s fantastic lunch in enjoyable silence. With their plates empty and their stomachs full, they picked up where they left off from their last conversation. His mom, for once, appeared to be showing her best side, and Leo was grateful that she hadn’t mentioned anything embarrassing from his past.

Occasionally, Mattia would ask his mother about her work at the law firm, or he’d want to know little things about Leo’s childhood. Thankfully, his mom only replied vaguely, but honestly, keeping the embarrassing details to herself. Growing up, there had been days when he wished they’d lived in a better place,

with more money and a father who cared for them. His mom never had it easy with Leo or her husband, and Leo resented his father for treating her badly.

Years later, Leo still felt deeply embarrassed for all the heartache he'd caused his mom by being an irresponsible, chaotic, and ungrateful teenager. She had assured him that he hadn't been as bad as he always said he was, but Leo would still feel terrible for his behavior. Until now, he couldn't tell exactly what gave him the needed push to get his shit together and be the son his mother deserved, but he was grateful that it happened. He loved his mom more than anything in this world.

A loud clink of porcelain brought him back to the here and now. He hadn't realized Mattia and his mom had begun clearing the table. When he was about to get up, Mattia put a hand on his shoulder and told him to stay put.

"You sit down. I will help your mom with the dishes," Mattia said with a genuine smile, looking all handsome and dashing under the yellowish artificial light.

With a thankful nod, Leo sat back and watched them gather the rest of the dirty dishes and clean the small kitchen, once again in companionable silence. It was a scene to behold. He would have never guessed his mother and Mattia would get along that well. They functioned together as if they'd been doing this simple duty of washing dishes all their lives. Leo's heart filled with an indescribable love for both people at his kitchen sink; there was no need to feel jealous that Mattia had taken his place, not at all.

After his mother said her good-bye, Mattia caught him by surprise as he gripped Leo's arm and pulled him closer. "Just so you know, we are good," Mattia whispered reassuringly, with a dangerously sexy twinkle in his eyes.

Leo could only nod and look at Mattia with a feeling of unease in his stomach. Mattia sounded calm, but his piercing eyes were an intense stormy gray-blue, filled with unfamiliar emotions—unlike anything Leo recalled seeing before. It was as if Mattia was saying one thing with words, and something completely different with his look.

The intense glare he received from Mattia, accompanied by the strong hold on his arm and Mattia's body too close to his, sent shivers down Leo's spine. He wasn't so sure whether they were the good kind or far from it; his body felt shockingly confused, reacting in the weirdest ways. His blood was suddenly boiling, his cock stirring, and his heart racing—anticipation and disappointment pooling inside of him. There was no reason to feel hopeful in any way, Mattia had forgiven him, and their kiss had been a mistake.

“We’re good?” Leo asked, eager to at least apologize once more before they moved on. He wanted Mattia to see that he’d never intended to cause him and his boyfriend trouble, despite his earnest dislike for Richard. “You know, it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done—”

Mattia cut him off with an intent glare and a firm nod. “We’re good,” he muttered. He then carefully let go of Leo’s arms. That piercing stare unlocked from his eyes and looked away. “I had to tell Richard, you know. He’s not upset or anything. It’s all fine, so let’s just forget about it.” Mattia’s voice lost all its previous power as it trailed off, and he slowly made his way toward Leo’s couch.

Leo quickly followed and sat down next to him on the sofa. Mattia’s words echoed in his mind, making him feel queasy and more upset than before. Richard knew, and he also, very likely, hated his guts. Not that it mattered to Leo what that douche thought, but he was ashamed of his uncontrolled behavior.

This time you really messed up, man.

Leo reached for the remote control that lay on the table and turned on his TV. From the corner of his eyes he saw Mattia watching him as he browsed through the afternoon program lineup, before settling on his favorite, the *SyFy* channel. Leo glanced over his shoulder and wondered what he could do to have Mattia relax again; he’d become so tense all of a sudden, once Leo’s mother left.

When Mattia’s eyes locked on his, Leo felt his cheeks heat up. Mattia’s unexpected smile caused his insides to feel funny, and the urge to kiss the man was so strong that he had to look away.

“Is it okay if I stay a while longer?” Mattia asked, sounding a little unsure. “I wouldn’t want to keep you from doing something more important.”

Watching Mattia chew on his bottom lip, Leo pulled his legs up and hugged them loosely. “You can stay as long as you like, always,” he said sincerely, meaning every word.

“Thanks.” Mattia smiled, holding his gaze for another long moment before they both returned their eyes to Leo’s flat screen TV on the opposite side of the room.

After watching an episode of *Continuum*, and half-way through a movie he couldn’t remember the title of, Leo worried about Mattia’s silence. His friend

hadn't said a single word for way too long. Any time they fell into silence in the past it was usually comfortable; it hadn't ever felt awkward before. Mattia's earlier tension had been obvious, but even he wasn't this quiet when they were watching TV, especially not something they both liked.

"You're still a little cold with me. We've got to change that," Leo said, playfully pinching Mattia's arm, causing him to look at Leo. "Loosen up a little okay? It'll do wonders. I promise," he added teasingly.

Leo couldn't help it. They were *good*, so Mattia said. And there was no way he could keep his sour mood when Mattia was with him. He might not be able to have him in the way he wanted, but that couldn't be the cause for their friendship to go as sour as he'd been feeling all week.

"Oh, shut up," Mattia muttered, his gray-blue eyes twinkling with humor. "I'm *not* cold," he pouted, looking way too adorable with his lower lip jutting out just slightly and his dark hair in disarray.

"Yes you are, mister." Leo grinned, poking his arm firmly. "It hurts my feelings, you know," he said with mock hurt, and Mattia rolled his eyes at him, leaning in closer.

"Am not." Mattia's brows furrowed when he mock-glared at him, barely looking as annoyed as he tried to sound. In one swift movement, Mattia threw his arms around Leo, hugging him tight and whispering close to his ear, "See?" He gave Leo a full body squeeze. "Not cold."

For one moment too long, Leo's heart stopped.

"I take it back," Leo whispered. "You're not cold. You're..."

Incredibly hot. Cuddly. Absolutely gorgeous. And I love you.

Please hold me a little while longer.

Just hold me, Mattia.

Leo knew it was wrong but it felt so *right*, and he just wanted Mattia to hold him.

Chapter Seventeen

Best Thing You Never Had

He'd wanted to ask Richard the big question for a long time now, and even though he decided he'd finally do it, Mattia stalled again and again. Last week was supposed to be *it*, then again four days ago, and then yesterday—he always backed out at the last minute. There just never seemed to be the *right* time for something as important as that one little question that would change his life.

At first, Mattia had thought about going away for the weekend, spending some time at a nice hotel. He could go all out and fill the tub with champagne and roses and shit like that. Maybe have pralines and strawberries in bed. But then he remembered Richard was allergic to roses, hated pralines, and wouldn't, for the life of him, sit in a tub filled with anything but lukewarm water. He was a little spoiled with anything that went either on, or in, his body. Mattia always had to remember little things like Richard's hatred for onions, cheap wine and everything he was *allergic* to.

Come what may, today would be *the* day. Mattia would finally ask him, no matter what. Maybe he didn't need a special moment; he'd make it special. After only two hours of work, Mattia gave himself the rest of the day off, knowing Richard would be at his apartment today until the early afternoon—it would be the perfect time for a surprise visit.

There was no backing down now; he would do it. Mattia told himself that there was no reason to be nervous as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. Once standing in front of his door, he took a deep breath, unlocked it with shaking hands, and stepped inside, Richard's favorite cheesecake wrapped in a plastic box in hand and a smile on his face.

The moment he saw his boyfriend naked on the couch, his heart stopped, the cake fell to the floor, and the smile was wiped from his face as he watched Richard vigorously fucking some kid who was shouting his name in ecstasy.

This was worse than his deepest, darkest nightmare.

When Richard looked over his shoulder, his voice producing a trembling, "*Oh hey, honey, you're home early,*" Mattia freaked, and was—*oh God, oh God, oh God*—hyperventilating, when Richard made no attempt at stopping what he was doing.

This can't be happening.

“Will you stop fucking, for chrissake!” he shouted, and yes, he was as furious as ever.

Eventually, after yelling a couple more times, they stopped their disgusting activity, and Mattia watched them with bleary eyes as they hastily got dressed, scampering around the room to collect their clothes.

His very own living room.

Mattia's stomach turned at the thought that this might not have been the first time they'd done their filthy dance on his couch. Perhaps, even in his bed?

Oh, God.

I'm so going to kill him!

Eventually, Richard shoved the young kid, who looked mortified, out the door, then turned and smiled. Fuck, Mattia had greeted that kid a hundred times in the hallways and elevator; he only lived three floors below. Mattia was about to lose it.

“I thought you loved me,” he yelled at Richard, who stood across from him, buttoning up his expensive, red satin shirt after having slipped into his tight, black designer jeans.

Mattia knew he sounded fucking cliché. He might have whined too, a little, but heaven help him if he cared what he sounded like at that moment. And of course, Mattia thought Richard loved him, truly loved him. *He* loved Richard. Yes, he fucking *loved* Richard. Mattia had been sure of it, until now.

“Matt, babe,” Richard cooed, his damp black hair falling into his eyes. “Come on, don't be grouchy, honey.”

Don't be grouchy?

He had the right to be a little more than just grouchy.

I will show you grouchy!

“What the hell is going on here, Richard? Why were you fucking that, that *twink!*?” Mattia said hoarsely. “Am I *not* fucking enough anymore?” He paused. “Don't you love me?”

Fuck. His throat hurt. Mattia shook his head when Richard didn't say a word in response.

Good answer.

In serious need of a drink, he walked across the vast living room toward the bar. There were all kinds of liquors in the cabinets, beer, and the finest red wines you could want. Personally, he really dug his gin and tonic, the apricot brandy, and every now and then, a glass of whiskey.

“Of course I love you, honey.” Richard’s deep voice was suddenly close behind him. Mattia ignored him until he had himself a glass of rum and coke fixed. With ice. Why not? He felt like it.

“I’m serious here, Rich.” Mattia bit his lip to calm down, not wanting this to get out of hand. “I can’t believe you’d do that, then say you love me. What were you thinking? There is something wrong with this picture. Don’t you see it?”

“I’m sorry?” Richard offered with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mattia took a long swig of his drink, then asked, “That wasn’t the first time, was it?”

Everything told him that it wasn’t. Now, was Richard going to deny it or come clean? He would have bet money on him not denying a thing.

“It wasn’t,” he answered truthfully, and Mattia took another drink.

Funny how you know your partner, but at the same time you don’t.

Mattia shook his head. “I thought we’ve always been honest with each other. Wasn’t it something that had been dear to both of us? Honesty?” He said angrily, “Oh wait, you probably haven’t mentioned a thing, because I hadn’t asked.” With both hands on the table, Mattia sat down on one of the barstools. “Is that it? You played safe because you thought I wouldn’t mind?”

“We weren’t going to get married or anything.” Richard shrugged and glared at him as if *he* was the bad guy all of a sudden.

Mattia groaned, “Only because I hadn’t asked, yet.”

Richard blinked at him. “I’m sorry, honey, I didn’t think you were *that* serious,” he said with as much conviction as if he really believed his words.

“You didn’t think we were *that* serious?” Mattia raised his voice and was fully aware he was doing it. “Are you kidding me? We’ve been together for two years. Two. Years.” Where had they gone wrong?

“Come on, Matt.” Richard softened his tone. “Honey. We’ve been dating, yes, but... you have to admit you’re not really good at showing what you feel. I

just didn't think it would be such a big deal if I had some fun on the side. It never interfered with our relationship," his so-called boyfriend said matter-of-factly.

Mattia wanted to throw things, jump at Richard's throat and show him *matter-of-factly* just how much he hated him right now. Did they really live two different lives?

Maybe it was about time to show more emotion and feeling, and whatever he apparently was missing. God, Mattia was angry, and he was determined to show it.

"I do love you," Richard said huskily, moving towards Mattia.

Fuck.

You.

"You can't be serious! You wanted fun on the side?" Mattia said accusingly. *In my fucking apartment?* "On my fucking couch?" Mattia felt exhausted "Have you lost your mind completely?"

...and here he was, sitting by the bar in his apartment with a stupid gold ring in his pocket, ready and eager to fall to his knees and surprise his boyfriend of two fucking years with a marriage proposal.

What a fool he'd been to carry around a ring for the last three months. Why hadn't he noticed anything? His heart ached. How could Richard have fooled him like that?

"Yeah, I like fucking on your couch, honey." Richard walked up to him, once more fussing with the buttons of his silky, red shirt, obviously ready to take it off again. "Why don't we have some hot makeup sex? That will calm you down." Richard winked, a ridiculous grin on his face.

"Makeup sex?" Mattia shouted incredulously. *Oh, no way, not with me.*

Was there something wrong with his ears? The guy he loved, who had been balls-deep into some twink, wanted to have *makeup sex*? On the very same couch where he'd just had a disgusting fuck-fest with some random kid? Like he could fix anything with sex...

Richard moved closer, holding out a hand in invitation. "Of course. You'll see how much better you will feel," he drawled, making Mattia shiver in disgust.

“Don’t you touch me! Move. Leave. GET THE FUCK OUT!” Mattia shouted, shoving Richard away from him. He couldn’t let the guy touch him.

Crap. Now he was shivering all over. But the anger was still too strong, too fresh, and the tears he knew would come later didn’t fall just yet.

“I don’t ever want to see your face again!”

Richard took his shoulder and squeezed it. “Now you are overreacting, honey.”

“Overreacting?” Mattia gasped and stepped away from his ex-boyfriend.

He couldn’t believe this was happening. How fast could he make Richard leave? He threw his arms in the air and stepped away from Richard who still came at him with a sultry look, thinking he could just win him over again, act like nothing happened.

Richard walked around him. “Yes you are,” he muttered, moving about like he owned the place, opening cupboards, taking out things. While fixing himself a glass of red wine he asked, “Maybe we can talk about this like adults?”

“There is nothing to talk about.” Mattia snorted. “Last time I checked, you fucked a stranger in my apartment. Fuck, Richard, you slept around like I didn’t mean anything to you!”

Richard gave him an incredulous look. “It’s not like you and that pretty guy you work with haven’t fooled around.” Taking a sip of his wine, he said, “Behind my back, I might add.”

Mattia clenched his teeth. “Are you seriously accusing *me* of cheating? I haven’t touched Leo more than you know about,” Mattia said incredulously, “or anyone else for that matter. The kiss should never have happened, I know, but I would never sleep around behind your back. You know I wouldn’t!”

“Come on, Matt.” Richard smirked. “He was practically all over you at that dinner, undressing you with his eyes and all that.” He snorted before taking another sip of his wine. “You can’t seriously think I haven’t noticed how you look at each other? Not that I blame you, he’s quite the looker.”

Mattia stared at him with irritation. Richard was definitely going too far.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You two made out the other night. You even told me,” Richard said matter-of-factly, like he didn’t even care but had to say it anyway. Mattia

tightened his fingers into fists. Richard had obviously never been bothered about the thought of him sleeping around. *Just wonderful.* Mattia had been living in a delusion.

“Oh, no. You are not allowed to do this, Richard,” Mattia said in frustration. “Leo kissed me!” *First.* “He was drunk. He said he was sorry. I told you everything there was. You even said it didn’t matter.”

Which should have been a clue.

But no, stupid me was thinking he loved me so much he’d forgive a little innocent kiss!

“Because it didn’t,” Richard said, palming his half-empty glass. “If we loved each other it wouldn’t matter what we do with others. It never meant anything what I did with anyone else, you know.” Richard looked at him intently, his voice even and calm. “Except, that Leo guy means something to you, doesn’t he? That’s what’s got you so twisted.”

“Jesus, Richard. You are molding this into something that makes *me* the bad guy? Can’t you just accept that I’m not like you? I don’t sleep around, and I don’t—” *fall in love with others while I am with someone I already love.* Shit, isn’t that exactly what happened?

He really had fallen for Leo. They had both fucked up here, hadn’t they? This wasn’t how his life was supposed to turn out. He’d never meant for any of this to happen. He hadn’t planned to fall in love with Leo, not now anyway, and he’d never meant to get his heart all twisted and shit.

“Just tell me one thing—why would he kiss you if he wasn’t into you?” Richard smirked. “Or at least want to get into your pants?”

That was it.

“Don’t you dare talk about Leo like that!” Mattia yelled, shoving Richard hard, causing him to spill some of his wine onto the counter as he moved. “I want you to leave. Now!”

Richard snarled, “What is so good about that guy, anyway? He’s hot, okay, but that can’t be all there is.”

“He is a great friend to me.” *Something you never really were. And he is kind and sweet and caring, and he wouldn’t treat me like you did.* Mattia felt exhausted. Why wouldn’t he just leave?

“I mean it, Richard, please. You can’t be seriously thinking that things will be okay between us, not now, probably not ever. This can’t be fixed.” Mattia

sighed. "Actually, I don't even want it to be fixed." He took a deep breath. "I'll ask you one last time before I call the cops, please, just leave me the fuck alone tonight."

Finally, Richard seemed to get it, understanding that he'd lost the game he was playing, not that Mattia thought Richard might actually care about losing him all that much. Quietly, Richard collected his fancy leather shoes and his expensive designer jacket. Mattia escorted him to the door.

With one hand on the metal doorknob, Richard looked over his shoulder and smirked, "I know you're fucking him," he said matter-of-factly. "Now you have my consent and blessing. Do it right, or you'll lose him too."

He couldn't believe this guy! Frozen to the spot, Mattia watched him walk out of his life, knowing he'd have to face Richard again to retrieve his key and let him take the few things that were his. In the past, Mattia had often complained about Richard never feeling as if he could trust him with his possessions, but for once Mattia was glad that he kept this distance between them. They should be able to have another conversation some other time; Mattia just couldn't deal with all of this right now. He wanted Richard out of his sight for as long as possible.

Funny, how you can go from loving someone so dearly to hating his guts in less than ten minutes time.

Fucking shit. Crap. Bollocks. Fuckityfuck.

Mattia's heart hurt.

It was painfully throbbing, pounding almost unbearably fast. He could hardly believe how much his chest was able to ache. Maybe it should just stop beating altogether. Would save him some fucking pain, and nobody would miss him anyway.

He'd been sitting on the floor between his bedroom and the kitchen, huddled in the corner with Prince purring on his lap. Hours passed, and he'd hardly moved, only getting up once to feed his cat. Mattia watched the sun go down from where he sat, petting Prince. Eventually, even his cat left him and moved to the sofa where he lay curled up in a ball, sound asleep.

Stupid, disgusting couch.

The growing headache made it painful to think, or do anything but stare into the darkness of his apartment. Unable to sort his thoughts, he wondered what

he'd done wrong in his previous life to make him deserve any of this crap. His father would probably say, "*I told you so. That's what you deserve for being a cocksucker.*"

Oh yeah, as if liking cock had anything to do with it. It didn't define who he was. But his father had made it perfectly clear before, told him just how fucked up he thought Mattia was. As if being gay made him such a horrible person. Maybe he was right, and Mattia really didn't deserve happiness.

Mattia palmed his smartphone, cradling it in his hands like it was precious. He turned it around carefully and then turned it some more, eventually dialing the only number he programmed into his speed dial besides Richard's. *Oh god, Richard.*

"Leo?" Mattia choked out, sounding fucking weak to his own ears, and his vision blurred for a moment, feeling nauseated.

"Mattia? Come on, man," Leo grumbled into the speaker, "it's one in the morning. Why are you not in bed?" Leo's voice came through low and raspy, sounding a lot like Mattia had just woken him up. *Sorry.*

"I think I am...."

There was a long pause. Mattia couldn't think, couldn't concentrate on speaking. His heart hammered too fast, pumping and pounding against his ribcage. The damned room was still spinning like a fucking carousel.

"You, what?" Leo yawned.

Shit. He should have gone to bed and called in the morning, or afternoon. Only problem was Mattia couldn't go to bed, couldn't forget about today. Nothing was right anymore, and his chest ached so much...

"I think I am having a panic attack or something."

Or something.

I might be dying for all I know.

"Shit, Mattia," Leo gasped. "What happened?"

"The room. I'm dizzy. It's spinning." Mattia took a deep breath, but his throat was so dry, and it hurt so much, he choked. "Can't hold on. Can't breathe."

There was shuffling on the other end of the line, a short pause, and then Leo's worried voice echoed through his ears. "Tia, calm down, please."

He did as Leo asked, trying to take a deeper breath and let it out without choking. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in—*Fuck*. It really hurt. Mattia yelped when Prince's tiny paws stumbled over his legs. He hadn't even noticed the cat return.

"Listen, you've got to calm down, and tell me what happened."

"I." He coughed into the speaker. "Can you? Leo. Please."

Leo, please. I need you.

"Where is Richard? Shouldn't you be calling him? Wait." Leo paused a moment, then raised his voice asking, "Did something happen to him?"

"Oh, God. Richard."

Mattia broke down, and the tears finally ran free. He sobbed and sneezed and sobbed some more, because now that was all he could do.

"Just... sit down, okay? Don't freak out. I'm gonna be there in ten minutes," Leo said calmly. "Hold it together for me. I'll be right with you."

As much as he wanted Leo here, he couldn't let him see him like that.

I'm such a fucking mess.

Chapter Eighteen

My Love Lasts Longer Than a Summer

Leo quickly slipped into his black denim pants and cream-colored flip flops that he wore to the beach the other day. He didn't bother with a T-shirt and just flung his dark blue trench coat over his bare shoulders, closed one button in the middle, and ran for the door. On the way, Leo grabbed his messenger bag and tossed his keys and phone inside.

"Dammit," Leo cursed when he had to search for his car keys, once he reached his truck. He could hardly concentrate on the simple task of getting the door open, and on his way to Mattia he knew he broke several traffic laws, but luckily didn't get pulled over by the police. It was dangerous and stupid, he knew that, but all he could think of was getting to Mattia as fast as possible.

Leo bumped into a tipsy, young couple, chuckling at each other as they went through the main entrance the moment he arrived at his friend's apartment building. They must've just come back from a date, seemingly too wrapped up in each other to be suspicious of him following close behind. Leo hurried up the stairs, and thanked heaven that Mattia still had his emergency key inside a white, cat-shaped ceramic figurine next to his doormat. Leo had a feeling that something was seriously wrong when, even after ringing the doorbell a couple of times, Mattia hadn't opened for him.

"Christ! Look at you, Tia. What the hell happened?"

Leo didn't want to believe his eyes when he found his friend huddled on the floor, his back against the wall, his arms tightly wound around his knees. He wore a tight black T-shirt and well-worn gray sweats. Without a second thought, he dropped to the ground and joined Mattia, reaching out to touch his arm so he'd look up at him, but he didn't stir.

"Hey, it's me," Leo barely whispered, not wanting to startle his friend. He gently ran his hand up and down Mattia's arm. His skin was chilled, and Leo's finger brushed over goose bumps at the back of his arm. "Hey." He tried once more but no reaction. Leo took a deep breath, praying he would be able to stay calm. "What happened?" he asked with difficulty, tears threatening to fall.

It scared Leo when Mattia still wouldn't answer, continuing to simply stare at the floor in front of him. Then Leo slowly stood, smoothing out the wrinkles

in his trench coat. "Come on. Let's move you to the couch," he said with a small smile, in case Mattia decided to look at him.

Leo reached out and offered his hand to help him up. Mattia shook his head back and forth like it was possibly the worst idea ever. Leo wasn't prepared for the forlorn look on Mattia's face when he finally lifted his face. His heart stopped. Mattia's eyes were red-rimmed, dark and emotionless, his cheeks red and tear-stained.

"No," Mattia whispered, biting his lip hard and squinting his eyes in pain. Leo feared he might draw blood if he continued biting down like that.

"Okay, okay. The floor is fine," Leo whispered soothingly, and once more dropped to his knees in front of a broken-down Mattia. His friend looked exhausted and shaken, traumatized even. Leo could see more tears in the corner of his usually so breathtakingly beautiful, gray-blue eyes. He reached for Mattia, caressing his cheek when his fingers made contact with Mattia's face. Leo gently ran his hand across his heated, tear-stained skin. His thumb brushed along Mattia's lower lip, carefully nudging the soft mouth in the hope that he'd ease up his teeth and stop biting his lip.

"God, do you know how much it hurts to see you like that?" Leo whispered, gently grasping Mattia's jaw.

With a low sigh, Mattia lifted his head a little higher, and when his eyes collided with Leo's, Leo felt his breath catch, and his throat suddenly ached like he'd been trying to swallow a rock. Shaking his head, Leo dropped his hand and let his eyes take in Mattia's *lost* expression once more, before casting his eyes to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Leo said. "It's just... really hard to know you're hurting." *And I can't do anything.*

When the only response he got from Mattia was a weak snort, Leo reached for his hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "Please relax a bit. I'll get you some water and a pillow for your back," Leo whispered, barely audible to his own ears. "Then you tell me what else I can do to help, okay?" he asked and got to his feet, not really waiting for an answer.

Mattia stared at him, looking bewildered, and nodded. When Leo moved to get said items, Mattia reached for his hand and stopped him from walking away. "No pillow, please. Not from the couch," Mattia mumbled, almost choking on the last word.

"I can get you some from your bedroom," Leo offered, wondering what was wrong with Mattia's couch.

Mattia considered him for a long moment before speaking. "Water will be great, thank you," he whispered, giving him a small smile that pained Leo. He had to do something about the terrible state Mattia was in, and fast.

Leo returned shortly with a glass of water and a large black satin pillow he plucked from Mattia's bed. He watched Mattia empty the glass in long gulps and then settle back against the wall, relaxing into the soft pillow. When Mattia appeared to have calmed down a bit, Leo sat beside him, their shoulders touching.

After a long moment of silence, Leo finally asked, "Will you tell me what happened? And where is Richard?"

Leo watched Mattia's face for any indication of pain. Was he hurt somewhere? Leo couldn't imagine what was going on, and why the hell wasn't Richard here for his boyfriend? Leo knew that Richard had his own apartment, and they often spent days or nights apart, but what the hell? He should be here for Mattia right now! Unless something happened to him? Was that why Mattia had been crying?

"Is he okay?" Leo asked carefully, dreading the answer. "Do you want me to call him?"

"Please, God, no." Mattia shook his head and tears eventually fell again. "He's a liar and..." He wiped the rolling tears with the back of his hand, sniffing adorably. "Fuck Richard! He cheated."

Oh, shit. Leo tightened his fingers into fists. "Are you... sure?" he asked, keeping his voice low and as calm as he could muster. He honestly couldn't believe what he was hearing. Anger quickly pooled in his stomach while watching Mattia's face contort with the rage Leo was feeling.

Richard, that bastard.

Mattia growled. "Uh-huh. Pretty sure." He then gave Leo a weak, lopsided grin—one Leo thought he'd not see again so soon. It didn't fool him, though, he knew Mattia was far from amused. The knowledge that Richard hurt Mattia in the worst way possible made Leo want to hunt the fucker down.

"I kinda, you know." Mattia tipped his head into the direction of his living area. "The couch."

“Are you kidding me? You saw them?” Leo asked, shocked, his voice sounding strangely pained to his own ears. *Shit. That bastard! I'm going to rip his fucking throat out.*

“Blue-haired twink from the third floor,” Mattia muttered. “Fuck. He kept the punk busy, all nicely bent over the couch while I was out...” he added, sounding resigned.

“Oh Tia, I am so sorry.” Leo scooted closer and reached out his hand, giving Mattia's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Mattia nodded. “Me too,” he said in a whisper and closed his eyes, leaning into Leo's comforting touch. Leo wanted to wrap him up in his arms and stay like this forever. His blood was boiling at the mere thought of Richard even existing.

Leo sighed. “It's lame to say, but I'm *really* sorry he did this to you.” How Leo wished he could've saved his friend from that man, before something like that could have happened. It wasn't fair. Mattia didn't deserve this pain.

Mattia nodded. Leo moved and closed his eyes, inhaling the faint scent of Mattia's spicy cologne. “You don't deserve this, Tia,” Leo whispered as he wrapped his arms around his friend and just—finally—held him tight for a long while.

Leo feared Mattia might just fall asleep here on the floor with him, but before he had any chance to suggest they move this to the bedroom, so Mattia could finally sleep and get some rest, Mattia asked, “Am I really that bad?”

Leo moved back enough to get a proper look at Mattia's face. “What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

“Why does everyone hate me?” Mattia's voice was low, sounding sad and close to tears. Leo's stomach churned.

“I don't hate you, Tia,” Leo stated, unable to tear his eyes away from Mattia's as he waited impatiently for his reply.

“Yeah, I know,” Mattia eventually whispered, sounding unconvinced. The forlorn look on his face was like a punch to Leo's gut.

“Do you?” Leo asked carefully. “'Cause you sure don't sound like you believe me.” Leo poked Mattia's shoulder, trying to lift his spirits, and pulling Mattia away from all those negative thoughts looming over him. When Mattia grinned back at him, Leo smiled in return, the heavy feeling on his chest

dissolve a little. Given Mattia's grin was only a weak attempt, but it was one, nonetheless.

"I guess so. I mean, you're here, right? You wouldn't be if you hated me." Mattia considered him. "'Cause honestly, Leo, I have nothing of value for you to steal."

Mattia's small smile barely reached his eyes, but Leo hadn't expected him to feel all better yet, so it was okay. He'd need time to recover from his shock, and Leo planned to be there for him along the way.

"Unless..." Mattia continued, faking a loud sigh. "Shit. Unless, you want my jewelry! You'll have to wait until I pass out from exhaustion, before you can run away with it," Mattia said with teasing banter.

"You're an idiot, Tia." Leo shook his head. "And nobody hates you."

"Yes they do," Mattia said stubbornly. "And out of all the people who hate me, you should be the one despising me the most." Mattia startled him by reaching for his hand and wrapping his fingers tightly around Leo's. "You really do have reasons, Leo, even if it's been years since I... You know."

Mattia's gaze fell, and Leo could have sworn he heard a quiet sob escaping him.

"But I don't!" Leo said firmly, squeezing Mattia's hand. Because he didn't. "Shit. I could never hate you, Tia. How can you even think that?" Leo shouted.

"But you should. I didn't treat you right."

"You idiot! Man, that was ten fucking years ago!" Leo exclaimed, frustrated. When would Mattia ever stop mentioning it? "It's done and forgiven. I've told you so, how many times now?"

"Thanks," Mattia whispered. He gave Leo's fingers a quick squeeze but didn't look up from where his eyes were fixated at the ground. "I'll try to believe you."

"Good. You'd better believe me," Leo said, tugging at Mattia's arm to get his attention. "Don't you ever say that I should hate you again," he added firmly, hoping they would never have to discuss this in the future. Leo was at a loss for what to do now, though. Despite the terrible event that'd brought them here, Mattia's closeness was starting to take its toll on Leo. The longing he felt toward Mattia hadn't diminished. In fact, now, it steadily grew stronger the longer they sat huddled together on the floor like this.

The shy smile on Mattia's face, when he finally looked at him, was almost too much, and Leo could hardly resist kissing him. Deep and hard. Soft and slow. And all at once. Leo desperately wanted to throw himself in his friend's lap and—

“What?” Mattia growled, his voice deep and husky.

Leo blinked at him, slightly confused. “What?” he stupidly repeated Mattia's question.

Mattia raised his eyebrow. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, searching Leo's face.

When their eyes met again, Leo relaxed and smiled. “Because, you are you.” Leo sighed. “And you care, Tia. About what I think of you. And you're worried that I don't like you. You also trust me, and that makes me happy.” *And just a little aroused*, he thought, embarrassed.

Mattia considered him. “I, well, I guess so.” He then shrugged and beamed a playful grin at Leo, one that he didn't see that often, and it was all the more beautiful right that moment. Leo squirmed a little. It was suddenly too difficult to keep his hands to himself and not jump Mattia right then and there.

“You're like my only friend now,” Mattia said matter-of-factly. “The only person who cares I even exist,” he added sincerely, gazing at Leo with flushed cheeks and a hopeful smile.

Leo felt guilty that this made him even happier.

“You should have a million friends, Tia,” Leo whispered. “That's how amazing you are.” Leo's fingers twitched, wanting to touch Mattia so badly. “Shit. The whole world should know how wonderful you are.” *Although I don't want to share you with anyone.*

“Oh, God, please no!” Mattia whined. “Way too many people. Way too many.” He then laughed, the sound causing Leo's heart to sing along. “I'm glad when I can deal with one person at a time. I don't need more friends.”

Leo couldn't help but grin. Mattia could at least smile again and laugh a little. Maybe Leo was doing his job right. He inched forward, resting his hand on Mattia's shoulder and gave his soft fabric-covered arm a squeeze.

“You can be so adorable when you let your guard down, Tia.” *Can I kiss him now? Please?*

“Excuse me?” Mattia almost squeaked the two words. He raised his eyebrow, and the flustered expression looked so good on him, Leo could hardly

resist any longer. Yes, his cheeks were red, and the faint stains of his tears were still visible, but he was beautiful, and it took Leo's breath away.

But Leo was sure the last thing Mattia needed right now was Leo kissing him. He might get his chance, but tonight was definitely not it. Before Leo could suggest they finally get up from the floor, which was starting to become rather uncomfortable, he noticed Mattia lowering his head. Leo nudged his friend. "Hey," Leo whispered. A quiet sob escaped Mattia's lips. *Shit.*

"You know, I'd planned to propose today." Mattia's deep voice for once didn't make Leo weak in the knees, instead painfully tugging at his heart. *Propose.* Leo rolled the word around in his head, on his tongue. And he caught his boyfriend fucking someone else? *Fuck.*

Mattia's hand gently nudged Leo's shoulder, feeling it slowly slide down his arm. When Leo looked between their bodies, he found Mattia's balled fist resting on his trench coat covered arm. Before he could ask what was wrong, Mattia slowly opened his hand, and a small golden band twinkled in the darkness. Leo's breath caught, and without a second thought, he gathered his friend in a tight embrace, losing the ring with their movement.

Leo didn't need an explanation; he knew that this was most likely meant for Richard. Leo could only imagine how much the guy meant to Mattia. One thing Leo knew for certain: Mattia lived for the idea of getting married. Mattia had mentioned often enough that he dreamed of building his own a family. After Mattia had lost the support of his parents and friends, Leo didn't want to imagine how much Mattia must be hurting right now.

"Let's move you to your bed, Tia," Leo soothed, patting his back. "You should sleep. It's been a long day."

Leo would make sure to be the best friend, and family, Mattia could have. Even if it meant putting his feelings second. Forever, if he had to. *Damn, this was going to be tough.*

Chapter Nineteen

Wake Me Up Inside

Mattia woke to the sound of *someone* breathing, the tingling sensation of *someone's* breath caressing his bare skin. Turning his head slowly on the soft pillow, he found Leo sound asleep next to him, his cute, pointy nose pressed against Mattia's bicep. There was no way he would not *not* smile at the sight. For a brief moment, the world—everything—appeared to be well again. Then he remembered yesterday and wanted to scream and shout, cry, and just run away.

Fuck. So much crap went down.

When Leo stirred, his cold toes touched Mattia's ankle underneath the blanket they shared, his warm hand sliding around Mattia's bare chest. Looking at Leo's peaceful expression he could feel his spirit lifting again. He wouldn't want to run away if he could wake up next to that person and his sweetness every morning. The warmth Leo's skin provided soothing to his soul, and the weight of his hand on his chest grounded him.

Mattia took a deep breath and moved a little. He was still tired, exhausted even, but he was twitchy and couldn't lay still for too long, even with Leo next to him. Perhaps, especially not with the way Leo's body pressed into him, his fingers tickling the hairs on his chest as they slowly slid downward. When he moved, Leo stirred, and Mattia quickly felt his cock twitch and harden—oh yeah. Shit, he *was* aroused. He could feel that he was also wearing his comfy underwear. Thank God.

Gazing at Leo's face, he once again admired just how peaceful he looked in his sleep. And so beautiful, with his full lips, rosy and slightly parted, and his wavy hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks and slightly tangled at the nape. Mattia's fingers itched to move, to brush an errant curl out of his face, maybe even caress his cheek, just to feel how soft it would be right now.

Admit it, you want him. Of course, Mattia still wanted to be with Leo; it would be perfect with him. But Leo was his best friend, what if he lost him too?

You won't if you do it right, man. Which meant he shouldn't rush into anything.

Just don't screw it up.

“Morning,” he whispered when Leo cracked one eye open. Pools of warm, deep brown met his gray-blue gaze. Leo blinked once, twice, and then groaned, squeezing Mattia’s chest for a moment, before letting go. He quickly withdrew his hand, pressing it against his own body, hiding it underneath blanket and skin.

I won't screw it up.

“M sorry,” Leo mumbled into his shoulder, his feet shuffling underneath the blanket they shared, before inching away from Mattia. Did he just apologize? What for?

Mattia nudged him.

“Said sorry,” Leo grumbled and tore his head away from where it had rested against Mattia’s shoulder. With one swift move, he buried his face under the pillow that lay next to his head, probably unused all night.

“What?” Mattia prompted when Leo peeked out from under the pillow and glared at him, his cheeks redder than they’d been before. *Noted, Leo is definitely not a morning person.*

He couldn’t help but smile sleepily, watching Leo glare and grumble at him. “I didn’t mean to use you as pillow and mattress. I’m sorry.”

Mattia chuckled. “No harm done, really.”

When Leo let himself fall back into the mattress, face-first, Mattia asked, “Want to go back to sleep or get up? I don’t feel like moving yet.”

A few moments later, Leo threw back the blanket and yawned. “I’m gonna make coffee.” He smiled at Mattia. “You. Don’t move.”

“Aye, aye captain.”

“You, mister, are way too chipper at this ungodly hour,” Leo muttered and dragged his sleepy butt out of bed. He turned to glare at Mattia once more. “Considering we’ve never woken up together, I’m going easy on you today, but don’t get used to it.”

He waved his finger in the air, pointing at Mattia after swiveling it around a few times as if to summon something, or someone.

“You don’t want to talk to me when I am half asleep, okay? I’m not taking responsibility for what the hell ever happens before I’ve had at least two cups of coffee.” He grinned then turned to slip into the jeans he wore yesterday.

“Got it.” Mattia laughed. “I’ll zip it.”

Mattia watched him curiously, as Leo shuffled about, randomly opening his closet drawers, probably in search of a shirt to put on. He remembered that Leo hadn’t worn anything underneath his coat last night. He must’ve hurried to get to Mattia, after he’d woken Leo up in the middle of the night. Mattia felt a pang of guilt for causing Leo trouble and being such an inconvenience.

“You don’t have to get dressed on my account,” Mattia said, cringing a little when he remembered Leo didn’t want him to talk. *Well, tough luck, man.*

For some odd reason, he didn’t mind Leo rummaging through his closet without asking, and it felt sort of good, thinking that Leo guessed he’d be allowed to do as he pleased. They were friends, after all. But Leo was so much more; he was a friend like one he’d never had, and Mattia was glad that he was here with him today and, hopefully, for a very long time.

“Nice try.” Leo winked and pulled a white tank top over his head. Strangely, it fit him rather well, considering Mattia’s height and slightly heavier build. “Fits me better than you, huh?” Leo asked, but laughed out loud and turned around, heading for the kitchen before Mattia had a chance to reply.

“It does,” Mattia called after him.

He’d never really done anything in Mattia’s kitchen; it was bigger than his but not by much, he guessed. Leo opened his fridge and was instantly impressed by how filled it was. Leo knew Mattia could have quite the appetite, but he hadn’t thought to find his fridge filled to the brim with anything you could desire. He reached around the juices to grab the milk. While he preferred his coffee black and without sugar, Mattia liked milk and two packets of sweetener with his.

A shiver ran down Leo’s spine as he stood before the stainless steel sink, watching the rest of the water disappear down the drain. The air was a little chilly, raising goose bumps on his exposed arms. Leo suppressed a groan. Mornings sucked, and he wanted to go back to bed for a while.

Mattia’s bed.

Leo shuddered.

Last night had been horrible. Closing his eyes, he could still see Mattia’s tear-stained face and his dead eyes. Remembering any moment from that night

was painful, and the urge he'd felt to kiss Mattia made him cringe and feel ashamed. Even if it might not have had led to anything, Leo wouldn't forgive himself if he'd taken advantage of the situation.

Leo wouldn't deny that he was glad that Richard was out of the picture, or rather, out of Mattia's life, but what the bastard had done to him was unforgivable. Richard was as much a disgusting piece of trash as he'd thought and hoped for. Leo just wished Mattia did not have to go through all of this right now.

Could he really ever want me?

I'm just a friend to him, aren't I?

Leo wasn't sure how to go on from here. He wanted Mattia so badly it hurt. At the same time, it mattered a lot more to him that Mattia would be okay. He wanted him to recover from the shock, and get over his broken heart. He also wanted to stay Mattia's friend. Leo had never done relationships; he didn't know if they could even function as a couple.

Much as he wanted Mattia, Leo couldn't bring himself to do anything about it yet, but would there ever be a right time? There was something else that bothered Leo; he didn't want to be a freaking *rebound*. Maybe they were supposed to be just friends after all. No matter what, Leo would be there for Mattia; there was no doubt about it. Their friendship came first, definitely.

A persistent meow and nudge to his foot drew him from his thoughts. Leo looked down to find a purring Prince pawing at his bare feet.

"Ouch, that tickles, mister!" He laughed and tried to catch the cat, but it was faster and dashed away. With one smooth jump, it landed on all fours on the marble kitchen counter.

"You hungry, little man?" Leo asked, and was rewarded with a loud meow.

Leo looked around the kitchen for where Mattia kept his cat food.

"Just a moment, I'll find you something delicious."

At least, Leo hoped he would.

Mattia wondered what Leo was doing. It felt like he was gone for a long time, and Mattia almost drifted back to sleep a few times. When he thought Leo would never return, he poked his head around the door to Mattia's bedroom.

“Breakfast in bed?” Leo asked with an amused, sleepy smile.

Even from afar, he could tell Leo looked dead on his feet, but adorably so.

“Not really my kinda thing, but thank you,” he replied with a stifled yawn. It really wasn't. Mattia would rather eat in the kitchen when there was time, and he felt like eating. Most days he'd survive on coffee and apples in the office until lunch break.

“Thank God.” Leo laughed, before he disappeared again.

Mattia had the faintest impression that Leo wasn't a breakfast in bed kinda guy himself. A smile forced its way to his lips. Or Leo was simply too tired and lazy to do anything right now, especially not prepare breakfast.

Mattia yawned and stretched then settled back into his usual position, drawing his knees up to his chest and hugging them lazily. He watched Leo walk back into the room with two steaming cups of coffee that smelled like heaven on earth. Leo handed him one before rounding the bed, placing his cup on the nightstand, and finally crawling onto the side he'd been sleeping on earlier.

“Mmm. To be honest with you, coffee in bed isn't so bad.” Mattia smiled. “I could get used to that.”

“Of course you could.” Leo laughed and snuggled under the covers, sitting with his back against the headboard, looking all cozy and cute. Mattia took a drink from his coffee before putting it aside.

With a sideways glance, Mattia studied the colorful tattoo on Leo's arm and the tiny bit of the skull on his chest that poked out from underneath his tank top. His hand itched to reach out and let his fingers brush over the inked skin. He'd never touched someone's tattoos before the time he rubbed sun lotion onto Leo. Of course it felt like any other skin, but it was a strangely exciting feeling to trace the colorful lines.

He *really* liked Leo's ink. It looked incredibly hot on him. A thought he hadn't let himself ponder much before. But the more he looked at Leo's body, the more he realized just how insanely hot Leo was. And those tattoos did nothing but make him even more gorgeous and irresistible.

Mattia knew this wasn't the right moment to ponder his attraction toward his friend, and perhaps far from the right moment to want to kiss him, or touch him. It didn't stop his confused heart from aching or his cock from becoming

painfully aroused. Dammit, just when he'd thought he'd gotten rid of his morning erection.

Leo poked his arm and looked at him with a funny expression.

"Tia, there is cake on the floor in your living room."

Shit. The fucking cake!

He had totally forgotten about the thing.

"Oh, yeah. Shit. Prince didn't eat any, did he?" Mattia asked, ready to get out of bed if needed.

"Considering he was quite a hungry kitty, I'd say no," Leo said, with a smile that turned into a yawn.

"Thank God," Mattia sighed. The last thing he needed was a cat emergency.

Leo gave him a melancholy look then dropped his hand on top of his. Before he could ask what he was holding in his palm, Leo opened it, and he caught sight of his stupid engagement ring. The small golden item brought back all kinds of memories, causing his chest to ache.

Shit. Richard.

"You dropped that last night," Leo's voice was barely a whisper, his eyes searching Mattia's face. "Thought you should put it away before you lose it."

Mattia guessed Leo must feel uncomfortable, but he smiled at him nonetheless. Mattia himself felt terribly embarrassed and much like a fool for even telling him about the proposal that never happened. But Leo always made him feel safe and drew out his confessions. He made him say stuff Mattia wouldn't normally feel comfortable enough exposing.

"Thanks," he croaked his weak reply.

Lovely. There were a whole bunch of new emotions he wanted to get rid of, memories he'd rather forget, and things he didn't want to talk or think about. Would there ever be a happy ending to all of this?

Mattia observed Leo watching him. "My birthday is in about two months. Can we do something fun together?" Mattia eventually asked, not surprised by the confused look on Leo's face.

"Of course." A smile quickly found its way back onto Leo's lips. "We have to do something great."

Mattia surprised himself though, for bringing it up. He'd planned on the usual, quiet dinner with Richard, nothing out of the ordinary. He suddenly felt the urge to go out and do something bigger and better. With Leo.

"I've always wanted to go to Disneyland, you know," Mattia hinted, batting his eyelashes as well as he could. He'd never done that on purpose before. The rapid blinking quickly made him feel dizzy. *Shit.*

"Whatever you want, Tia." Leo laughed. "You want to take photos with all the princesses, don't you?" he teased with a snicker.

"Absolutely." Mattia rolled his eyes, loving the sound of Leo's laugh. It was impossible not to join in.

Leaning in closer, Leo asked curiously, "Who's your favorite, huh?" He pondered his question for a moment, giving Mattia his sweetest smile, one that made his insides melt. "Come to think of it, there is still a lot more I need to learn about you."

"For example, who is my favorite princess?"

All of a sudden, Mattia felt ridiculously nervous and afraid to say anything wrong.

"That," Leo whispered sweetly, "and a whole bunch of other things."

"We'll get there." Mattia poked him in the chest. "We have time, right?"

"Time we have."

Chapter Twenty

A Thousand Years Would Be Worth the Wait

“Come on in.” Mattia waved Leo inside. They’d made plans to spend the day out on Leo’s boat. “Give me a minute to feed Prince, then I’m all yours for the day,” he said with a wink and followed Leo into his living room. A shudder ran down his spine when he saw the piece of furniture that recently haunted his sleep.

While Mattia had gotten over the initial pain Richard caused him, he wasn’t any closer to figuring out what the future could hold for him and Leo. In fact, not much had changed since that night of his breakdown. They still worked together and talked almost daily. Often, Leo would stop by at his office with lunch or just to talk and keep Mattia company. Sometimes, they went out to grab a burger or pizza and walk along the Navy Pier like they used to. Most days, everything seemed oddly normal between them, Leo always doing his best to cheer Mattia up to make him forget about his ruined relationship with Richard.

Leo was determined to take care of Mattia after the guy had come back for his belongings the other night, surprising them on their way out to dinner. They had run into Richard in the parking lot, and in order to keep Leo from punching the guy’s lights out, and Richard from saying anything hurtful or stupid that would have aggravated Leo only further, Mattia had personally escorted Richard upstairs. Leo had been ready to pounce the second he saw him arriving in his silver BMW convertible. Leaving Leo behind had proven to be a smart move.

Richard hadn’t bothered shutting his big mouth, even for a minute, his poison tongue as insulting and unthoughtful as ever. Thankfully, Mattia had already boxed his ex-boyfriend’s designer jeans and shirts as well as the few accessories he’d left behind, and thus avoided further drama. In the end, despite his endless accusations, Richard didn’t show further interest in Mattia. After getting his valuable belongings back, Richard was out of his life faster than Mattia had dared to hope. Fortunately, Richard handed over his key without further discussion, turned and left.

Mattia still couldn’t fully comprehend seeing this heartless side of Richard, but after all that had happened, Mattia realized that he was better off without him.

“Prince! Time for your lunch!” Mattia called for his cat, who followed him into the kitchen to be fed, then Mattia rushed down the small corridor into his bedroom to get his scarf and maybe something a little warmer to wear over his rather thin, blue crewneck T-shirt. The weather had gradually become colder, and it would be quite windy out on the water. God, he looked forward to an entire day with Leo. Though they were spending a lot of time together, he hadn’t wanted Leo to visit him at his apartment since the incident happened. Mattia himself hadn’t been able to stay, even a moment longer than necessary, in his living room, and sitting on that damned couch like nothing happened was simply impossible. He’d camped out in his office almost all day and night for over a week now.

Mattia shortly returned from his bedroom, his black scarf and a gray sweatshirt slung over his arm, Prince—who liked to follow him anywhere—wrapped around his other, meowing quietly. His heart sped up and his chest tightened uncomfortably when he saw Leo sitting cross-legged in the center of his couch. Prince jumped off his arm when Mattia freaked and dashed toward Leo. “*Please* get up,” he pleaded with a shaky voice.

“What’s wrong?” Leo asked, giving him a confused look, carefully stepping aside, and holding out his arms when Mattia thrust his clothing toward him. Mattia didn’t hesitate and gripped at the furniture he loathed so much, eagerly pushing it toward the balcony door.

“This is it! Shit!” Mattia cursed, frowning at Leo who watched him with a pained expression. “Can you open the door for me, please?” he asked through gritted teeth, pushing the furniture with all his might. “*Move* goddammit!”

“What are you doing?” Leo looked from him to the glass door and back. “You’re not going to do something stupid, are you?”

“I wouldn’t call it stupid,” Mattia muttered. “I need you to help me, though.”

“Mattia, stop! You can’t just throw the sofa off of the balcony. Shit, you can’t just throw it out like that,” Leo pleaded, trying to talk some sense into him, but Mattia felt like there was absolutely no way around it; he had to get rid of that thing, right this moment. Thinking about Richard, who had been fucking that stupid twink almost two weeks ago on that very same couch made him sick to his stomach, and he just couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Oh, I can, and I will. Watch me!” Mattia growled and gripped the arm of the sofa with both hands, pushing it further toward the double glass doors. At

least, he tried to. The damn thing was *really* heavy. He might not be able to get rid of it like this right now, after all. *Dammit*. A series of earnest curses left his lips before dropping the heavy thing with a loud thud onto the floor.

Leo let out a frustrated sigh, walking around the ugly furniture, until he stood before Mattia. "I think I might have an idea. Let me give you a hand here." He wound his arm around Mattia's shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze. "Do you trust me?" he asked with a sincere smile, and Mattia nodded. Maybe he needed to calm down. Leo was right; he couldn't just throw a piece of furniture out of the fifth floor balcony.

"But, I really need it gone." Mattia grimaced in disgust. "It's giving me nightmares, Leo. I can't take it any longer. I swear." He kicked the furniture with all the strength he had. "It stinks, too. Can't you smell it? Disgusting!"

"What happened to your plan of ordering a new sofa? Wait, don't tell me." Leo paused dramatically, waving his hand about. "You couldn't choose, could you?"

"Exactly," Mattia confessed. "I looked at a million sofas, but they are either fucking expensive, extremely ugly, look terribly uncomfortable, or I just didn't like them."

Leo smirked. "And it has to be gone right this second?" he asked, brushing Mattia's shoulder as he leaned, beaming Mattia a warm smile, like he understood exactly what he was feeling. The simple smile felt much like a promise that whatever his problems were, Leo would make them go away.

"Trust me, Tia." Leo patted his shoulders affectionately. "You'll like my plan."

And Mattia did. He had the sudden realization that he'd trust Leo with his life.

"What do you say?"

Leo called from where he pattered around in Mattia's small kitchen, gathering the rest of the plates and cutlery. Mattia couldn't stop himself from watching his swift movements, as he twirled around, picking up dishes and dancing back into the living room. There was always something breathtakingly beautiful in the way he moved. Leo's black cardigan fluttered about, the tight white jeans hugging his behind just flawlessly, fitting snugly.

“Doesn’t it look just perfect?” Leo beamed him a bright smile then bent to fix the cloth on the glass table in front of them. He hadn’t noticed how fast the table had filled itself with pizza, chips, all kinds of dips and sauces, veggie sticks, and wine.

“I can see you like it,” Leo said, grinning cutely. “Tell me I’m a genius?” He batted his eyelashes then burst out laughing. Mattia nodded, not knowing how to express his gratitude or tell Leo just how amazing he was or how much he loved the *new* couch. The way Leo’s curls fell into his brown eyes, and how his tiny dimples still showed was also quite distracting.

“Yeah. You are,” he eventually got out. “But—”

“No *but*’s,” Leo scolded him with a frown, Mattia instantly wished away. “Sit down and eat.”

With one quick step, Leo was right up in his face, a bright smile on his lips. Leo placed both hands on his shoulder and gently guided Mattia down onto the leather sofa.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Tia.” Leo winked at him and for a long moment, and Mattia was lost in his own little world.

How could he not have seen it?

The way Leo looked at him, with pure adoration and affection. And all the things he did for him.

It was fucking obvious how much Leo actually cared about him. It wasn’t just that they carried his disgusting piece of furniture outside, together, instead of throwing it recklessly off of the balcony. It surely was a much better plan than his, and they actually managed to get it down the flight of stairs. Leo then went to get Sam and some of his other friends. Apparently, they took Sam’s uncle’s moving van and got rid of the filthy thing. Leo had sent Mattia on a mission to buy *a lot of groceries* and ordered him to stay out until he called.

Mattia did as he’d been told. He spent the afternoon food shopping and half an hour at Starbucks. Turned out to be a good trip. Mattia found a bunch of delicious-looking things to snack on, and got a handful of kitchen utensils. Not that he’d needed them, but they looked like they would come in handy someday. Maybe he could pick up baking once again.

When he got back to his home, after Leo’s call, of course, Mattia almost had a heart attack when he saw the beautiful piece of white furniture sitting, perfectly so, in the middle of his living room. Large, U-shaped, white leather.

Small, round throw pillows neatly aligned from one side to the other. Some black, others leopard-printed.

At first, he'd thought Leo had gotten him an identical sofa to his own, but he fast dismissed that possibility. How in the world would he have paid for it? Then he wondered whether Leo had snatched his credit card from his wallet, but remembering that he didn't have a limit higher than one thousand dollars made that seem impossible, as well. It wouldn't have paid for a quarter of the thing.

Leo pushed his butt back against the soft leather, sitting cross-legged next to Mattia. Mattia turned to look at him, wondering how he could possibly thank Leo for all the trouble he went through, not just to stand by his side as a friend, but also to go so far as to *lend* him a freaking sofa. And all that only because Mattia had been an idiot and too worked up to choose something for himself.

I only wanted it to be something amazing. Like Leo's sofa.

He always loved lounging on Leo's sofa when he was there, which sadly, hadn't been very often.

As if reading his mind, Leo reassured him, "It's okay, Tia. Keep it until you find something you *really* want."

"You know I love your couch, Leo. It's incredibly comfortable and just plain beautiful," Mattia admitted. "But don't you need something to sit on? I mean, you can't sit on the floor because of me. I should be the one going all Japanese-style for a while."

Beaming him a brilliant smile, Leo snorted, "Yeah right, you hate sitting on the floor."

"Well..." Mattia grinned. Damn. Leo knew him too well. "But still, I can't possibly let you do things like that."

"Seriously, it's fine. I will just stay with you a lot more often now, so I won't miss not having a goddamn couch in my home." Leo grinned. "Now, open up, wide!" he said, waving a carrot stick in front of his face. "Try this dip. It's heavenly!"

"Are you sure we are supposed to eat things like carrots and celery?" Mattia made a face, refusing the offered piece of vegetable. He loved to eat, very much so, but vegetables were not what he'd call comfort food. "They grow in dirt you know." Mattia laughed. "That's kind of disgusting."

Leo's expression turned sour, and Mattia thought for a second he'd punch him. "Of course, we are supposed to eat them, idiot. They're fucking healthy *and* delicious. Now open your potty mouth and have some dirty veggies." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Mattia couldn't help but laugh and eat whatever Leo decided to shove into his mouth. Leo really was the best thing that ever happened to him, but as much as Mattia wanted to wrap his arms around Leo and kiss him dizzy, he just couldn't cross that line after everything that happened recently.

"Tia?" Leo's concerned voice tore him out of his thoughts, but his mind was still swimming in dangerous waters when he looked at his friend. The sudden lust and want and need he felt for Leo might not be healthy and was barely under control.

"Ouch!" A firm punch to his left shoulder brought him back one hundred percent. "What the? Leo!" Mattia rubbed his arm and winced with emphasis. "That *hurt*, dammit."

"Good." Leo smirked at him, a carrot stick in his hand and a purring Prince on his lap.

"Good?" Mattia asked with a raise of his eyebrow, as he reached for the glass of wine on the table before him and took a swallow of the fruity beverage.

Leo snickered. "Yeah, you looked like you needed it." He grinned that sweet demonic grin he seemed to have stored for special occasions.

Mattia rolled his eyes. "I looked like I needed to be smacked?"

"Absolutely." Leo never stopped grinning, and Mattia loved that about him. "Now you look like you need some more food," Leo added, smile in place, and his pretty brown eyes locked on Mattia's.

His chest began to swell, and his heart ached, begging to be filled with Leo's love, through and through. He'd really like for Leo to kiss him right now. If Leo didn't want him the way he wanted Leo then Mattia would do *nothing* to find someone else. He had come to realize that Leo was everything he ever wanted. With Leo, he could have a best friend, a lover, and a *family* in one person.

"Open up wide," Leo singsonged, holding out a slice of pizza. "Hurry, it's gonna drip if you don't—"

Mattia leaned forward and caught the end of the slice with his teeth, slowly biting off the biggest piece he could manage. His skin tingled where Leo's

fingers curled around his wrist resting on his knee. Cheesy flavor burst on his tongue, followed by tuna, olives, and more cheese. As he chewed, Mattia watched Leo take a bite off the slice of pizza as well, his face merely inches apart from Mattia's. He observed Leo chew and smile and swallow. Mattia almost lost fighting the urge to lean in closer and sharing the rest of the piece with both their mouths, together—teeth and lips nipping, tongues swirling, tasting and sharing—God that would make it the best pizza, ever.

“What are you looking at?” Leo asked, his voice teasing a little. The corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled at Mattia.

“You,” Mattia said matter-of-factly. Leo blinked, looking somewhat dumbfounded. Mattia then laughed and reached out to pull Leo close, hugging him loosely, causing Prince to jump off the sofa with an annoyed hiss.

“Stop fooling around,” Leo scolded. “You are going to get pizza all over the couch!”

Squeezing Leo tightly, Mattia then tickled him, until his addicting laughter was the only thing bouncing off the walls.

Chapter Twenty-One

Words Don't Come Easily

Leo took a deep breath, bracing himself before knocking on Mattia's apartment door, the sound of his knuckles against the dark brown wood echoing through the narrow hallway. He had already rung the bell downstairs, and Mattia told him to come on up over the intercom. Finding the door still closed when he reached the fifth floor, Leo decided to annoyingly knock a few times to let Mattia know he was already here.

"Hey, Leo, come in," Mattia greeted him with a wide smile, holding Prince in his arms, as Leo entered his friend's apartment. It hadn't gone unnoticed how cheerful Mattia recently seemed, despite everything that had happened over the last couple of months. Of course, Leo was thankful for Mattia's good mood. He'd been praying for things to go back to normal fast and that Mattia would recover from the emotional devastation of finding Richard on his couch with that twink. Thank God, he seemed well now.

Leo was still hurting for him, though. He didn't know what he'd do if a two-year relationship with someone he'd loved—if it was anything like what he was feeling for Mattia—went up in smoke. Leo had tried to imagine it all, what it would've been like sharing a bed with Mattia for two years and then suddenly having it ripped away. The thought alone made him want to curl up in a ball and never move again. He wondered how Mattia managed.

"Are you doing okay today, Tia?" Leo regarded his friend, once they were settled on the sofa. As always, he had instantly made his way toward his spot on the left side, where the couch formed a large U. "Is there anything I can help you with? Work? Do some shopping?" Leo eyed the plate with chocolate cookies that always sat on Mattia's round glass table, his fingers itching to reach out and grab a handful.

Mattia sat across from him, far enough away for them to properly look at each other, yet so close that they could touch if they wanted. Which they shouldn't.

"I'm doing great, and no, thank you, but there's nothing I really have to get done," Mattia said with the same blinding smile, observing him closely, making Leo feel a little uncomfortable under his intense gaze. Sometimes, those mysterious and mesmerizing pale gray-blue eyes could still get to him.

Mattia's eyebrow rose as he said, rather concerned, "You are looking a bit flushed, Leo. Are *you* feeling all right?"

"I was wondering." Leo tried for a confident smile, hoping that would take Mattia's thoughts off of his health. He was fine, but then, he wasn't. Leo didn't want to show any weakness, though. "You still haven't picked out your own sofa, and—"

Oh, God, he couldn't say it.

"Right, I'm sorry, Leo. I should have given you back your couch already," Mattia said regretfully, slumping back against the leopard-printed cushion.

"There's no need to..." Leo swallowed with difficulty "...to get your own now," he eventually managed, unable to look directly at Mattia. He didn't want to see the disappointment in his friend's beautiful eyes that he knew was coming, instead, studying the cookie-filled plate.

"Please, don't be mad, Leo." Mattia leaned forward and placed his hand on top of Leo's, which he hadn't realized he'd balled into a fist, resting on his crossed legs. "I promised I'd give it back. And I will. It's just, you've been here a lot, and you kept saying how much you liked my apartment, and I thought—"

"No, no stop! Mattia, just stop right there," Leo raised his voice and spoke too firmly, which wasn't his way, and it obviously surprised Mattia. He looked at Leo with concern, his pale eyes narrowed at Leo's. Leo swallowed. "I mean, of course I'm not mad. I want you to keep it. Please, keep it."

"Oh-kay," Mattia said, sounding dumbfounded, giving Leo's hand a squeeze as he crawled closer, resting on his knees merely a breath away from Leo. Leo's heart rate sped up significantly, and he thought he might faint.

"What's going on, Leo?" Mattia asked in a soothing voice, obviously knowing that something was up. The scent of his spicy cologne reached Leo's nose, and he felt a chill down his spine. Feeling intimidated, Leo dropped his gaze nervously from Mattia's stormy gray-blue eyes. His fist opened and his fingers relaxed while Mattia rubbed his thumb all over and around his turned wrist. Leo stayed silent, watching Mattia's finger ghost over his palm.

"I can tell there's something that's bothering you, and I know for a fact that you love that couch." Mattia took his other hand and pulled it out from under his knee. "I'm so sorry I kept it for so long without even asking if you wanted it back." Mattia took a deep breath, watching him closely. "And then I just assumed and again—I didn't use my head."

Leo wanted to say something but his throat felt too dry, as if it hadn't been used in years. He didn't dare speak for fear of breaking down like a little boy.

Leo had to tell him now.

He withdrew his right hand, reached out and touched his palm to Mattia's cheek just as Mattia beat him to it, speaking first. "I never meant to upset you, Leo," he said with a sense of guilt. "I was stupid. God, I've been stupid all my life."

"You were never stupid," Leo rasped. "You're brilliant, Tia. You're wonderful."

Mattia turned his face in Leo's loose hold and moved his lips to touch them firmly to his open palm. A gentle kiss followed, and the gesture alone warmed Leo's lovesick heart.

He swallowed hard. "And I want you to keep my couch because..." Leo took a deep breath, watching Mattia's pale eyes widen "...because I won't need it anymore."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke with their voice, but they did with their eyes—pale blue and gray collided with walnut-brown—and the zing Leo felt wasn't the good kind. Leo knew that Mattia knew he wasn't talking about getting a new one for himself, but he couldn't tell what exactly was going on in Mattia's head. He was at the point of no return. It was time to spill the beans.

God, please help me. Forgive me.

I promised him.

"Santa Barbara. I'm going to move," Leo croaked out, his voice heavy with pain and guilt. "It'll be a hassle to drag that thing all the way there, and I didn't lie. My baby looks better in your apartment than it ever did in mine. It fits."

Having finally let it out didn't make him feel any better; the guilt still wore him down as if he'd been carrying it around for years, instead of days. The stunned look on Mattia's face only added to the heaviness within his chest. But he knew it was the right thing to do, at least, that's what he'd been telling himself. Perhaps, it was the coward's way out.

"You fit here too, Leo," Mattia whispered, the corners of his eyes glittering like tiny silver stars had been caught in them.

When he didn't say more than that, when Mattia didn't freak out, tell him off, or whatever Leo imagined could possibly come from his confession, Leo knew he'd just hurt his best friend more than he could have possibly imagined.

Mattia would never forgive him.

"Maybe," Leo said. "But maybe, I don't."

Leo felt like a child, young, scared, alone. Lost. He'd never meant for this to happen. He wanted to be found so badly that, in the end, he was about to lose everything he'd ever wanted. Was he doing the right thing? How could this be the right thing if Mattia hated him?

"What does that mean, Leo?" Mattia's voice was small and vulnerable. He touched Leo's hands, which somehow found their way back into his own lap.

He shrugged.

With one swift movement, Leo was gathered up in strong arms, and squeezed so tightly he thought his lungs would stop functioning any second now. Mattia pressed Leo's head against his shoulder, and he shuddered when Mattia's lips brushed his ear, his comforting, cinnamon scent stronger than before.

"You promised." Mattia's breath tickled his lobe, but he wasn't in the mood to laugh. Leo didn't feel anything but the expanding pain in his chest and the growing nausea threatening to bring his breakfast back up. Leo wiggled a little, trying to get himself free. The last thing he wanted was to throw up on Mattia and his couch.

"I won't let you go, Leo. I won't."

Leo was being held captive, pressed tightly against his friend's chest. He could hear Mattia's heart beating vigorously against his own body, and the nausea grew stronger, harder to fight.

"You promised."

The last words left his lips on a sob, then Leo was suddenly pulled back. "Why do you want to go to Santa whatever you said?" Mattia glared at him, confusion as visible on his face as the anger.

"It's a promotion, of sorts," Leo whispered guiltily. He tried to avoid Mattia's glare, but his eyes were glued to those unique, mesmerizing pools of gray-blue. *I'm so sorry.*

“Is it because of the money?” Mattia asked, his voice low and pained. “Shit, Leo, do you need more money? If that’s a problem, I’m sure we—”

Leo cringed. “I don’t,” he interrupted Mattia sharply. “I don’t need money,” he said in a softer voice, trying for a smile but failing miserably. Leo felt his lips twitch and his eyes burn.

“Good.” Mattia regarded him. “Don’t ever choose money or a job before friendship and love.”

Leo wanted to tell him that this wasn’t what it looked like, but Mattia didn’t give him a chance to open his mouth. He kept on talking, furiously so.

“And don’t you dare say something like, *‘It’s going to be okay, you will make new friends’*, because it won’t be okay, if you are not here.” He took a deep breath. “And I won’t be making any friends. I don’t need friends, and I most certainly don’t want to have anyone replacing my best friend.”

Please, don’t make me feel even guiltier. I know I’m an idiot.

He’d originally applied to their headquarters in Santa Barbara, but they thought he’d be a better fit for their Chicago branch instead, so that’s where he ended up two years ago. Now that he’d helped them to get on their feet again, they’d offered him a position in Santa Barbara. Leo guessed it could be a higher-paying job, but that hadn’t mattered to him.

His dream had always been to live in a warmer place, California preferably. Leo also hoped being away from Mattia for a while would help them both, because the way Mattia had been acting lately confused him in too many ways, and he didn’t think that it would do them any good if they gave in to their attraction or whatever the hell it was that was threatening their friendship.

Mattia leaned in closer. “Nobody could anyway, and I won’t try finding someone else,” he whispered. “If you leave now, I’ll rot to death all by my lonesome self.”

“You don’t need me, Mattia,” Leo breathed, but was cut off by Mattia’s lips as they pressed against his in a firm kiss. He could tell how pissed off Mattia was and that he struggled to hold back, not kissing him too deeply or with the passion he could imagine lying beneath those barriers. A simple, lingering press of lips was all it was, as if Mattia was hoping it would, magically, make him change his mind. But Leo had to do this; he had to go.

“You’re right. I don’t need you, Leo,” Mattia said, when he pulled back and gently eased Leo away from his body, as far as he could go. It was impossible

to move much, his back immediately bumping against the soft throw pillows lined up against the back of the sofa.

“But I want you, Leo. I want you here with me,” Mattia spoke matter-of-factly, his expression sobering up, and he was actually smiling at Leo now. A small, weak smile, but a smile nonetheless.

Suddenly, Leo's stomach heaved, and he tasted something bitter on his tongue.

Crap.

“I need to use the toilet,” Leo mumbled, stumbling over his own words and feet, as he got off the sofa and hurried into Mattia's bathroom. For a moment, he thought he wouldn't make it in time, his stomach feeling as if it was going to burst.

Mattia had been wondering what was going on with Leo lately; he'd seemed a bit off the entire week. Mattia longed to see his friend's bright smiles that seemed to be missing for days. Now he knew what had been going on with Leo, and he didn't like it. Moving to Santa Barbara? No, Mattia selfishly couldn't let him do that.

I just found you. I can't let you disappear again. I just can't.

When Leo stumbled out of the bathroom, long minutes later, Mattia was right at his side, holding out a brand new toothbrush. He watched Leo's cheeks flush a nice shade of red. With careful fingers, Leo took the item out of its plastic wrapping and mumbled an embarrassed, “*Thank you,*” before he fled the scene once again.

Despite everything, Mattia smiled to himself. It took a lot to make Leo feel embarrassed, but he guessed that throwing up at a friend's place would easily make anyone feel uncomfortable.

A friend. That's all he was to Leo, still, wasn't he?

Mattia instantly smiled when Leo emerged from the bathroom again. His hair was slightly damp where it touched his face, so were his jeans and the front of his purple T-shirt. Mattia didn't give Leo any time to apologize—because he knew that's what he'd do—when he quickly cornered Leo and scooped him up in a tight hug, startling his friend. Leo had avoided Mattia's gaze as he walked back toward the living room, which added to Leo's surprise.

He heard Leo harrumph, his breath tickling his neck—Mattia loving the feeling. He squeezed Leo tighter, drawing a soft giggle from the other man, reassuring Mattia that Leo would be fine, eventually. Mattia only had to play his cards right this time. Leo cared about him; that was a fact, like the sun being yellow.

For a moment, they stood like that, arms wrapped around each other, soaking in one another's body heat. Leo being too quiet didn't sit right with Mattia for long. They should be having a good time, for crying out loud. For all he knew, nothing was standing in their way to be happy, together. Perhaps, it was time to finally talk. Mattia took in a deep breath and withdrew from their embrace, reached for Leo's hands, and held them close to his chest. Leo lifted his head, those brown eyes looking sad and tired as they met his own.

"What's got you so frightened, Leo?" he asked, speaking softly and calmly. "You know you can talk to me, right? We will work it out. Whatever it is," he promised, with a firm squeeze to Leo's hands.

Leo looked as if he wanted to say that he wasn't afraid of anything, but they both knew it would be a lie. He kept his mouth shut, lips pressed to a thin line, a look Mattia didn't approve of seeing on his face. He stepped forward putting his feet onto Leo's—gray socks covering brown—pinning him to the ground with a fond smile.

When Leo lifted his gaze from their joined feet back to his eyes, Leo grinned too.

Mattia squeezed his hands tighter.

"Do you love me, Leo?" Mattia whispered, watching the smile slip from Leo's face. He expected it would, and it frustrated him. He didn't know how to do this, but he couldn't screw it up. He just couldn't.

"I- I don't—"

Mattia didn't let Leo finish his sentence. Whatever he was about to say would be a lie. By now he knew Leo loved him, and if he wanted to say he didn't *know*—which Mattia guessed would most likely be Leo's response—it would be as bad as if he'd simply said that he hated him.

Mattia's fingers on his cheeks startled Leo, as did Mattia's lips when he took Leo's with an unintended urgency. He moved fast, almost toppling them both over, but Mattia quickly relaxed into the kiss, as did Leo. Not wanting Leo to pull free, he slipped his hands over his cheek, down his neck, and gripped

him as firmly as he dared without hurting him. Mattia gently nipped at his lower lip, adjusting his feet on Leo's, keeping them in place.

The way Leo now slowly but surely kissed him back, and as quickly as Mattia had, with as much want and need, told him it had been the right move. At least for now. Mattia's head was spinning and his heart hammering inside his chest. He gasped as their mouths met in a collision of lips and tongues, Leo claiming him again and again.

For a short moment in time, everything was perfect.

Mattia stepped off Leo's feet and with firm hands, took hold of both of Leo's jeans-covered butt cheeks and urged him to move—any way would be good, but preferably in the direction of the couch. Faster than even he could comprehend, he had Leo wound tightly around his waist. When had he pulled him up? God, he was losing his mind.

With their lips locked tightly, caressing, and tongues nudging and stroking, Mattia turned around, took a few steps, and then lowered Leo onto the leather beneath him. Hovering over the guy he adored to bits, Mattia sighed.

"I can see it in your eyes, you know, not just now but always," he whispered, stroking Leo's heated cheek with one hand, holding him upright with his other. He brushed the side of his waist when he tipped slightly, his fist pressing hard into the soft furniture behind Leo. Perhaps this wasn't the best position to keep himself steady and avoid crushing Leo.

"It's not enough. It will never be enough," Leo breathed, the pupils in his unfocused eyes blown and damp, glittering. Mattia felt Leo's hand close over his, the gentle rub of his thumb soothing and perhaps an attempt to distract.

Mattia broke the contact their fingers had made and now used both hands to leverage himself on top of Leo. Straddling his lap effectively, he gripped Leo by his shoulders, gently but firmly at the same time.

"It will be enough, and it will be perfect, wonderful, amazing," Mattia whispered, lowering his head until they were nose to nose. "If you let me love you, too, I promise it will be everything we ever dreamed of."

Leo's breath tickled his dry lips when he inhaled and exhaled in small, harsh gasps. He brought both hands to Leo's still warm cheeks and just held him for a moment, reveling in the close contact, the warmth of his skin underneath his fingers, and the hot breath colliding, mingling, with his own. Mattia wanted to kiss him so badly he could taste it, and he wished like hell it would convince Leo that they were perfect where they were right now.

Together.

Before he could touch his lips to Leo's, Mattia felt something wet on his left thumb. A tear.

Dammit, Leo. Don't do this. Mattia was at a loss. He had never seen Leo crumble to pieces; he'd never thought it possible to watch him come apart in his arms, not like that. Leo had always been so strong, happy, and simply positive in whatever he did. How could he have closed himself up so much right before his eyes?

How could I have not done anything to prevent it?

With a brush of his finger, Mattia wiped the tear away and embraced Leo in a hug, hoping there was a way to comfort him with soothing strokes to his back and careful whispers. It wasn't anything Mattia was good at, comforting others. He'd never had siblings or anyone who depended on his hugs and love. But he wanted Leo to be able to depend on him, all of him. Mattia wanted to give him everything he had to offer, and he'd be damned not to try his hardest to do just that.

"Let me open your eyes, Leo," he breathed close to Leo's ear, pressing him tighter against his chest. "Please, let me show you that I can love you, with all my heart and soul, because I already do, and you can't do shit about it."

Mattia felt a strong and important connection to Leo, and he wouldn't let anything in the world get between them now. This connection couldn't be broken, but being apart now would bleed him dry from the inside out. It wasn't a death he looked forward to.

"I don't know what's got you so frightened about this, us, but if it's about, I don't know, Richard—I've told you many times that I am over it, there is nothi—"

Leo suddenly pushed him back, both hands on his chest, hard enough that it almost made him topple over backwards.

"Whoa," Mattia gasped when he steadied himself, luckily still sitting on Leo's lap. Only the furious look on Leo's face made Mattia wonder just how fortunate that position was right now. He didn't anticipate a blow to his face or anything. Leo wouldn't hit him, would he? God, what had gotten into him? Mattia almost didn't recognize his friend today.

"But that's just it!" Leo shouted, probably louder than he intended, because he frowned immediately after his words left his lips. "How can you be over

him? Tell me? I tried to understand but, for the life of me, I can't. Mattia, I cannot understand it."

Mattia cringed. He didn't like it when Leo used his *real* name.

"I am. I swear," Mattia said, "I don't feel anything for—"

Leo cut him off. "How, if you loved him?" he said angrily, glaring at Mattia with what looked a lot like hurt in his deep brown eyes.

"I don't know how, but it's true. Just, believe me," Mattia pleaded. "All the love I feel is for you, and only you."

"Oh geez, Mattia," Leo muttered. "Since when do you talk crap like that?"

"Hey, watch it!" Mattia harrumphed. "I'm telling you how I feel, and all I am getting as a thank you is a shove in the chest? Come on." His voice went lower. "You know very well that I don't do this shit easily."

"I know." Leo's face sobered up gradually, but still he sounded seriously upset. "It's just that I can't see how that's possible. I know what he did to you was terrible and that you are angry. Of course, you have every right to be."

Leo shook his head, his slightly damp bangs falling into his eyes. "If you'd cheated on me, Mattia, if we'd been together, and you'd done what Richard did, I would forgive you in a freaking heartbeat."

Mattia tried to digest what he was saying, and he sort of understood, even if it didn't make a lot of sense. Not only would Mattia never fuck around behind anyone's back, but if he did, he'd never deserve Leo's love in return afterward. A strange part of him felt like he might actually forgive anything Leo himself did, if it came down to it. Or perhaps, it was more like together they would be able to work out whatever differences might come their way, because he felt so much more for Leo than he'd ever felt for Richard. The thought of losing Leo nearly killed him, while he'd mostly just felt hurt and betrayed by Richard.

"That's how badly I want you in my life," Leo sighed. "I don't know if my love is stronger or if I'm just plain stupid, but I'd do anything to have you love me too. And if you didn't, I would still stick around like an idiot and take whatever you'd offer me." Leo gasped, and took a deep breath, his eyes never straying from his. "So, forgive me if I don't understand how you can be so clearly over Richard. It was one mistake, wasn't it?"

"I don't know, Leo. I'm guessing he's the kind of guy who made many mistakes while we were together, if you get what I mean," he said matter-of-

factly. It really didn't hurt anymore, even thinking about all the guys Richard must have slept with behind his back. Disgust and a little leftover anger was all that he felt. They never would have worked out anyway. He could see that now, clearer than ever. It was Leo he wanted—only Leo would make his world go round.

“Oh, shit.” Leo cringed. “I'm sorry.”

Mattia shook his head. “It's okay, like I said, and let me repeat myself just for the fun of it. I am over it.” He reached out a hand and pressed it to Leo's neck, his thumb gently rubbing against his skin. “Those feelings for you have always been there, Leo. Please trust my word.”

Being able to touch Leo felt wonderful, the warmth he hadn't known before spreading across his chest and all around his stomach in swirls and bubbles. Making him feel like he could walk on water or fly with the birds across the autumn sky.

“But you've been in love with Richard. He meant a lot to you, and he will always mean something. And I, I just can't... I don't want—” Leo's brows furrowed, and he cringed again before his gaze dropped to where their bodies met. “You're getting heavy.”

Despite the thick air around them, Mattia laughed. What the hell ever was going through Leo's mind, it did nothing to make him appear any less sexy in that adorable way of his. Ruffled chestnut-brown hair, curls stuck to his forehead, disheveled shirt, and a bright flush on his soft cheeks. Leo had gotten a little chubby lately, and it looked good on him.

“Maybe I never was really in love with Richard. At least, it was never the same kind of love I feel toward you,” Mattia whispered, watching Leo's face closely. Leo remained silent, so he continued to pour his heart out.

“You know, once I thought only *one* kind of love could possibly exist. Then I met Richard, and it felt right at that time. It was good, and I felt safe and almost comfortable. I'd never felt like that with anyone before, so I thought that must be it, you know, love in its full glory. Like a fairy tale or something.”

Mattia studied Leo, his expression changing from flustered to confused, perhaps. He didn't look too pleased, though, with Mattia's story; that much was obvious. He went on anyway, because maybe it would make Leo understand his feelings better.

He hardly understood his own feelings, but it was now or never. Mattia had to get it out, and maybe talking would help. The last time Leo had made an

advance toward him, he'd only dismissed his friend in a way he didn't deserve, and they hadn't talked about it since. Of course, back then, the time hadn't been right, but it was now.

"When I thought my life was perfect, I told my family how happy I was, and well, you know how that ended. At least then, I had Richard who I thought had my back. Everything was fine, we never fought or anything." Mattia paused for a moment, squeezing Leo's hand. "But then you came back into my life, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Leo's lips turned up at the sides and formed a bittersweet smile. It was true, every word he said was true, and he hoped Leo would see it.

"I quickly understood that you were the missing piece in this goddamn puzzle, Leo. I care about you more than I ever cared about Richard, but it took me forever to see that you were more than that lost friend I needed. I never had a real friendship with Richard. We were just, I don't know, together." Mattia sighed. "If you'd ask me now what had me so blinded and kept us together for so long, I could only guess that maybe I was afraid to be completely alone. I don't know."

Leo's finger found his T-shirt and tugged slightly. Oddly, the innocent gesture made his stomach flutter again. Maybe it was the way Leo looked at him, with his cheeks flushed, and his lower lip drawn between his teeth. He hadn't said a word, though, and it frightened Mattia a little.

"What I know, Leo, is that you mean a lot to me and that won't change, no matter how you feel about me, or wherever in this world you will be. Perhaps, love isn't just black-and-white, but colorful instead. Red, green, orange, blue, and yellow." Mattia grinned. "Maybe even a little bit pink and purple."

"You're saying love has seven colors?" Leo asked, with a smile that looked almost like his usual bright, eye-crinkling one Mattia loved so much.

"I would like to think so, yeah."

They stared at each other for a long while, not saying anything, just taking in one another. Maybe adjusting to a few new perspectives, ideas, and understandings. Mattia was certain that they would find their way somehow.

"You're not getting any lighter." Leo chuckled softly, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. Mattia smiled and lifted off him, carefully twisting and turning until he sat lengthwise on the sofa, Leo securely seated between his legs. Leo shook his head and giggled more cheerfully once he was in place, and nodded when Mattia asked if he was comfortable.

“Do you believe that nobody ever made me feel like you do? That I am happy with you, and that whatever we do feels like an adventure?” Mattia whispered, pulling Leo closer by his hands. “Actually, being with you feels like I’m on a high I never want to come down from. You’re my best friend, Leo, you know that, but you are also that one person who’ll always have the most special place in my heart. I think you *always* have.”

Leo nodded. “I would like to believe you, yes.”

“You can. Trust me. I love you for so many reasons, but mostly because you are you.” Mattia took a deep breath. Never had he spoken so openly about his feelings, and even with Leo’s accepting smile, he was fucking terrified. But he wanted Leo to know all of it.

“Your friendship and love made me finally see what I almost missed.” He drew Leo in by his arms, held his breath until Leo met him the rest of the way, then curled his hands behind Leo’s neck. They held on tightly to each other while lips met lips and hearts and souls cheered and danced and *loved*.

“Whether you want it or not, my heart is yours and always will be,” Mattia whispered against Leo’s parted lips. His warm breath made his mouth tingle, his head buzz, and his heart race. Finally, he felt sure that Leo understood, welcoming his love, and a future together seemed possible.

“I want it.”

There. Leo said it. Confirmed it. Mattia thought he might cry and laugh, sing and yodel, all at once, maybe even jump up and dance. Instead, with a quick nip to his chin, Mattia said, “Good, ’cause you’re not getting rid of it now.”

He grinned and leaned back, watching Leo closely. “You’re stuck with my heart for all eternity.”

Mattia admired his features for a while longer. Leo looked awestruck, with flushed cheeks and parted lips, as if he’d like to say something but couldn’t get out the words. His hair, obviously, was still a cute mess, as was his shirt. It had partly ridden up on his sides and was actually more like a *wrinkled* mess.

A laugh escaping him, Leo pressed his lips together in a thin line before opening his mouth to say something. Mattia was faster and pulled him in by his knees until he toppled over and almost all of their body parts touched in one way or another. After some shuffling around, loud giggles and snickers, Mattia ended up fully on his back with Leo hovering above him, a beautiful smile on his red lips.

Life could be truly amazing.

Please, Gods, if you are listening—and you all better be—don't take Leo away from me again. Ever.

“Thank you, Tia.” Leo gazed down at him, wetting his lips with his tongue. “I’m glad we finally talked. A future with you honestly means the world to me.”

Mattia nodded, as much as he could, while lying down.

“I never want to make the mistake of not sharing something, anything, with you.” He couldn’t bear the thought of keeping secrets from Leo. “Sometimes you might have to give me some time, especially when it’s about emotional stuff; it might not always come so easily. But I want us to have a future together, without secrets or lies.”

“Me too.”

Leo bent down and kissed him, slowly and sweetly, in a way only he could. Mattia’s heart was beating fast, but in a pleasant way, and the steady tingling in his stomach had nothing to do with how their bodies were touching, turning him on.

Liar.

Okay, so maybe the swelling and tingling in his cock and the constant *zap* down his spine might be a slight indication that it was, but Mattia didn’t want to do anything about it if it meant he’d lose Leo’s weight on him. Or Leo’s fingers in his hair, and his lips and tongue on his own.

Perhaps if they did it right, and Leo didn’t freak out—which he hoped would never happen when Mattia asked for *more*—then maybe he didn’t necessarily have to lose any of it.

Especially not Leo. They could even press the repeat button, over and over again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Where You Stop I Begin

For the next two weeks, it quickly became their routine, picking up one another from work, and either going out to grab a quick dinner or ordering in. But whatever they did, they always spent the rest of the night together. Usually it would be Leo who stopped by Mattia's office, reminding him there was such a thing as working too hard and too long. Luckily, it never took much persuading—the moment Mattia saw him, he'd drop everything. Before, Leo never minded getting lost in his own job, but for the first time in his life he had a pretty damn good reason to leave on time. Nothing was worth wasting even a minute of his day if he could be spending it with Mattia.

Like every single day the previous week, Leo'd dragged Mattia out of his office; today with the promise of a romantic dinner at one of the nicest seafood restaurants in the city. And just like every other night, they found themselves back at Mattia's apartment.

"Can we get inside first?" Leo whispered, his breath coming out ragged, while his heart was furiously beating away within his chest. His eyes fluttered shut when Mattia pressed him against the door, grinding up against his thigh, gasping when his lips were caught in another searing kiss. A kiss so wonderful and intense he wouldn't mind dying from it. Okay, perhaps he would mind a little. His hands caressed Mattia's neck, moving until they found his hair. *Yep, definitely not done yet.*

Leo wanted more.

Tugging at the soft strands between his fingers, Leo deepened the kiss with everything he had, grinding in response to Mattia's movements, until he knew they had to break for air, which as always, came too fast.

Mattia took his lower lip between his teeth and gave it a firm tug before withdrawing so they could look into one another's eyes.

"Maybe." Mattia grinned down at him with heated affection. Leo's chest ached as if he'd been denied air for hours, if that were possible. He wrapped his shaking arms tightly around Mattia's neck and dropped his head onto the other man's much stronger chest, closing his eyes for just a moment. Every time in the past weeks, whenever Mattia held him close, his emotions seemed to burst

out of control, and today was no exception. He loved being able to hold on to Mattia and knowing that's where he—finally—belonged.

With one hand fumbling for the key in the pocket of his jeans, Mattia tugged him close by his waist. His fingers gave him a firm squeeze, right where his anchor tattoo lay beneath his clothes. Memories of the night before, when Mattia's tongue traced the colorful skin, caused Leo to shudder. He'd spent almost every night of the past three weeks in Mattia's bed, and the man seemed not to get enough of Leo's ink. Whenever Mattia got the chance, he would trace the lines of his tattoos with his fingers, lips or teeth.

"Gotta move your pretty butt, *sweet-cheeks*," Mattia said teasingly, as he reached around Leo and gently guided him out of the way before giving his neck a wet kiss. A soft click indicated the key had found its way home. Leo hummed, and moved together with Mattia through the threshold into Mattia's apartment.

A firm squeeze to his ass, and nine steps later, Leo's lips found the warm skin of Mattia's neck and nibbled at his pulse point. He just couldn't help himself, his mouth was drawn to the man's skin like a moth to light.

Making Mattia moan in delight made Leo smile. It always did. But even in moments like these, when he felt perfectly happy, wanted, and *loved*, Leo still wondered whether Mattia was really okay with *this*, with having Leo in his arms, instead of Richard; having Leo's finger gripping his hair and *his* lips feasting on Mattia's throat.

Leo didn't have much time to ponder the doubts he couldn't seem to let go of. He jerked a little when Mattia tugged at the hem of his T-shirt but leaned back and moved out of his embrace to allow Mattia to pull it over his head. He quickly discarded the unwanted item then went straight back to kissing Leo fully on the mouth. So lost in the sensations of Mattia's demanding tongue exploring the far reaches of his mouth, and the gentle play of his fingers at the back of his head, Leo only noticed that they were moving when his back hit the bar table. He was left dizzy and breathless when Mattia withdrew reluctantly.

"God, you taste so much better than any dinner," Mattia murmured, his lips tickling the side of Leo's neck, the aftereffect of his breath on his skin making Leo's groin tighten.

"So do you." He gasped and tightened his hold on the other man's waist.

Mattia lifted his head and grinned down at him, a hint of satisfaction twinkling in his eyes. Leo was amazed at just how often he'd witnessed those expressions of happiness and excitement on him lately. It felt incredibly good.

Stop doubting yourself.

You can be enough for him.

You are what he wants.

He hoped like hell the voice in the back of his mind was right.

With one hand hooked in Leo's belt, Mattia reached for his chin with his other and squeezed. Three fingers tipped his chin up, and soft lips touched his, caressing and reassuring. His stomach tightened when Mattia's tongue lapped at his lower lip. His hand slipped from his chin, smoothed down the side of his throat, and squeezed the nape of Leo's neck. Gripping Mattia's silky black shirt, he stood on his toes and pressed his naked chest against the cold fabric of Mattia's shirt, kissing him deeply. With tongues meeting and lips caressing, he poured all the love and passion he felt deep within him into their kisses.

"Leo," Mattia panted. "Just, what have you done to me?"

Leo gave him a questioning look, his eye twitching involuntarily. It was hard to focus on anything right now, especially answering questions he guessed he'd have no answers to.

Mattia slid his hand down Leo's exposed chest and whispered, "I can't get enough of you." The slight roughness of his calloused fingers sent shivers down Leo's neck. He didn't see how this was a bad thing. A smile found his lips, before Mattia dipped his head and kissed him soundly.

"I hope you ate your veggies tonight," Leo asked breathlessly when they parted. His head was spinning, his cock pressed uncomfortably against the confines of his tight pants, and he wondered briefly how long he was going to last. Mattia simply drove him crazy. He closed his eyes, trying to keep his emotions at bay just a while longer.

Mattia gave his butt a squeeze and nipped at his chin. "I sure did," he replied with a grin that Leo could feel against his cheek. Mattia's hot breath ghosted over his skin when he continued, "Care to share why you forced them into me?"

Leo chuckled, then gasped when Mattia bit his ear. He gripped Mattia by his shoulders and lifted himself up on his toes again. "You need your strength tonight, Tiger," he whispered, his voice coming out a little shakier than he'd intended. *Crap*. He was absolutely on edge, buzzing with excitement and sweet anticipation. He couldn't wait to have them both naked and writhing, panting, sweaty, and wrestling together.

While kissing Mattia's neck, he ground his hips, causing their groins to touch in the most delicious way possible. Mattia tightened his grip on Leo's ass and wordlessly pulled him up against his body. Leo jumped up and wound his legs around his waist and held on tightly as he was carried into the bedroom. He liked to think Mattia knew that was what he had wanted. Leo always loved it when Mattia would hold him, his strong arms squeezing him and, better yet, pick Leo up and carry him to bed. There was something incredibly sexy about being manhandled that turned him on.

In the bedroom, Mattia lowered him onto the king-sized bed then crawled after Leo. He welcomed Mattia's warm hands on his chest, the teasing fingers trailing down his sides and back to tweak his nipples. Leo arched his back at the stinging pain his fingers caused by tugging too harshly. He scooted back for Mattia to kneel between his opened legs. With his thumb soothing Leo's nipple, Mattia leaned forward, touching his lips to Leo's stomach. When fingers tugged at the pants he wore, and teeth scraped over Leo's hip bone, nipping where the anchor tattoo was, he gasped, squirming when Mattia's tongue lapped at his skin there, raising goose bumps everywhere.

He wanted to be touched *all over* by this man. Needed it more than he needed air to breathe or blood to pump his heart.

Kissing a path up his chest, Mattia hummed, the vibrations of his lips and the heat of his tongue and breath made Leo wriggle and gasp. Biting the back of his wrist, he tangled the fingers of his other hand in Mattia's hair and stroked, unable to suppress the moan that escaped him when Mattia's teeth grazed his left nipple.

Oh yes, that's it.

Leo's skin tingled as Mattia's sucking kisses interspersed with gentle bites and the promise of so much more. He hardly noticed his belt coming undone, and he barely registered the swift movements as Mattia held his butt up, removing his tight pants and underwear. Leo's eyes fluttered shut when warm exhaled air hit his cock, and a strong fist stroked upward in a tantalizing rhythm.

Shit, he was already *so* close to losing his mind.

Overcome with sensation, when Mattia fluttered his tongue over the slit, Leo shuddered. The need to let go and come grew stronger with each lick and stroke of Mattia's tongue, boiling under the surface of his skin. Mattia took his balls into his hands, fondling them while that talented tongue licked up his

shaft, suckled at the head, and then dragged hotly down the crease of his groin. Leo opened his legs farther. Soft hair tickled the inside of his thighs, and a hot mouth sucked on his balls.

Fuck, yes.

Leo couldn't stop the moan slipping from his lips; that teasing tongue tickling his sensitive skin was too much. Mattia hummed and pressed a chaste kiss to his sac before nibbling his way up the length of his shaft. He moaned again when Mattia lowered his mouth over Leo's cock, the warmth and wetness of it driving him insane. Mattia suckled on him leisurely. With agonizingly slow licks, playful tugs, and pulls, he made a game out of teasing him to completion. Leo loved it.

"You sound so hot when you moan," Mattia exclaimed, letting go of Leo's cock long enough to voice his thoughts.

Heat rose in Leo's cheeks, and he grinned.

So do you.

Reaching for Mattia, he tugged at Mattia's neck, asking him wordlessly to move up and give him a kiss. Which Mattia did. Pressing down on Leo's body, he claimed his mouth in a tender kiss. The salty tang on Mattia's tongue made the hairs on the back of Leo's neck stand up, and shivers erupted down his spine. Leo pressed himself up against Mattia's groin, wanting more friction, but even more so, wanting to feel Mattia's skin on his.

Leo wanted to touch, kiss, and lick this man *all over* too.

Lifting himself off the mattress, Leo guided Mattia into a sitting position with gentle hands, then reached for his shirt. Mattia complied wordlessly as Leo undressed him, the heated look in his stormy gray-blue eyes making him feel all the more lightheaded.

"You are so handsome," he whispered as he slowly opened button after button, admiring the beauty before him. Strong but gentle features, dark stubble on his jaw, heated deep-set eyes, and the blackest hair he'd ever seen. This stunning man was all his now. Would he ever get used to that thought?

Mattia's hands rubbed along his lower back, and Leo shivered.

"I want to sit here and just stare at you for days, Tia," Leo whispered affectionately.

His cock was still hard and throbbing, painfully asking for more attention, but Leo wanted to take in the love of his life. Having Mattia's eyes on him,

looking at Leo like he meant the world to him and more, felt better than any orgasm could.

For a moment longer, he was allowed to take in the sight, studying Mattia's content smile as it grew wider, and the fire in his eyes deepened. Before he could finally slide the shirt off Mattia's shoulders, Mattia moved swiftly and gathered Leo in a fierce embrace, toppling them both over, laughing. His eager mouth latched onto Leo's throat, and he sucked eagerly, licking at the juncture of his shoulder.

"You can watch me while I'm asleep," Mattia murmured against his skin, punctuating his words with a nip to Leo's neck.

Leo gripped the fabric that clung to Mattia's shoulders and gave it a good tug. Rolling fully on top of Leo, Mattia slipped out of his shirt, his lips never leaving Leo's skin.

"You bet I will." Leo chuckled. And he would. For as long as he could stay awake.

Leo ran his hands up Mattia's arms, swearing at the white tank top he wore underneath the silky shirt that now lay crumpled somewhere on the floor. With every intention of having Mattia's jeans follow suit, Leo reached between their bodies and tugged open that one button holding together the tight fitting pants. The sound of a zipper opening died somewhere between Leo's moans and Mattia's gasps as they twisted and rubbed and kissed and tugged at each other, eventually losing the jeans in the action.

Supporting himself on both arms, Mattia hovered merely inches above Leo. Licking his lips, Leo admired the beautiful, flushed, and extremely sexy sight above him. Slipping his hand inside Mattia's black boxer briefs, Leo wrapped his fingers around the hard, hot flesh that greeted him there. Mattia let out a low moan when Leo began to stroke and caress his erection, rocking with the movements of Leo's hand.

"Oh, God. Leo," Mattia gasped, the hands supporting him shaking and almost giving out under him.

"That good, huh?" asked Leo with a teasing voice, licking his lips and watching Mattia's expression closely, cataloging each and every line on his face—the tiny wrinkle on his forehead, the creases in the corner of his eyes, and the adorable tiny beauty spots near his mouth.

Mattia nodded, gazing down at him with hooded eyes and a sly smirk on his full red lips. More than anything, he wanted to kiss those lips again and again.

As if reading his mind, Mattia lowered his head and a hot tongue swept into Leo's mouth. Leo gripped the back of Mattia's neck, pulling and tugging, grinding his throbbing erection against Mattia's trapped cock.

Time to turn this game around.

"Move," Leo murmured against his lips, pulling up his knees until Mattia collapsed onto him. Leo then wrapped his arms around Mattia's waist and flipped him over. "Turn around for me?" Leo asked, patting Mattia's butt as his lover moved to lie on his stomach.

"I didn't think you'd have the patience for a massage," Mattia said with a chuckle, wiggling his Calvin Klein-clad bum in the air.

Grinning, Leo said, "I don't think a massage is what you want."

"You did promise me one the other day, though, do you remember?" Mattia said, smirking, looking over his shoulders to see Leo straddling his ass. Bending down on Mattia's backside, Leo kissed the nape of Mattia's neck, the fine hairs tickling his nose as he inhaled his addictive scent—musky and rich, with a hint of oriental spices. *Mh-hm.*

"But I think," Leo whispered, "you'll like what I have in mind anyway."

With hungry lips and teasing teeth, he then kissed and nibbled his way down Mattia's spine. Reaching the waistband of his briefs, Leo dragged his tongue hotly along the silver band of fabric. Mattia wiggled his ass, and Leo felt him shiver under his touch. Leo couldn't stop himself from smiling as his teeth tugged at the waistband of his underwear. Sadly, it wasn't as efficient in removing the unwanted item as it was sexy.

Nuzzling his fabric-covered ass, Leo inhaled deeply. He kissed Mattia above the waistband and squeezed his cheeks, massaging them as he pleased. At one point, Mattia cursed loudly and asked him to *fucking do something*—something other than teasing his ass—which only made Leo laugh and playfully smack his behind.

Mattia moaned. "Are you done teasing?" he asked with an amused smile.

Was he?

Leo smirked, considering his boyfriend. "Lie back, head on the pillow. Relax," he said, guiding Mattia into the center of the bed. When Mattia's head hit the soft pillow, Leo moved to his side, lay his head down, and nuzzled Mattia's neck affectionately.

“I want you so badly it hurts, but at the same time, I don’t want the night to end,” Leo whispered close to his ear, running his hand down the other side of Mattia’s neck to his chest. He pressed kisses under his lover’s ear, nipped his cheek, and licked toward Mattia’s stubbly chin.

“Mmm,” Mattia hummed. “I know what you mean,” he mumbled and pulled Leo closer, tugging at his thigh with one leg. Sliding his hand under Mattia’s white tank top and finding his chest, Leo lingered there, slowly, teasingly, circling his palm over and across the expanse of hairy skin. With soft murmurs and encouraging noises, for a while, Mattia let him do as he pleased.

Holding himself up on his elbow, Leo shuddered slightly. He’d learned that Mattia didn’t like his nipples to be touched that much, so he skipped the pinching and tugging he personally loved. Lowering his head downward, he kissed Mattia’s right nub through the thin white fabric, then moved to his exposed collarbone and the top of his shoulder. Lifting Mattia’s arm, Leo peppered the length of it, down to his hand, with lingering kisses.

Mattia rubbed his free palm soothingly up and down Leo’s back, moaning when Leo suckled eagerly on one of Mattia’s fingers, then another and another. Sitting up, Leo slid his free hand across Mattia’s stomach, reaching for Mattia’s erect cock peeking out from the waistband of his briefs. Leo slid his hand inside, wrapping his fingers around the base. The feeling of Mattia’s hard and throbbing flesh under his fingertips, as he tugged firmly at the shaft, made his stomach flutter in anticipation. Mattia gasped, his hands falling to his sides, when Leo leaned forward and kissed, then bit, the inside of Mattia’s thigh.

Nipping at his skin in between placing small kisses from Mattia’s thigh upward toward the crease of his groin, Leo stroked him with gentle movements. Leo shuffled closer, lifting one of Mattia’s feet so he could kneel between his legs. Easing his tugs and pulls to teasing caresses, Leo’s actions drew the sexiest noises from his lover’s lips. Though unwillingly, Leo had to let go long enough to fully undress Mattia. Once his tight briefs were gone, Leo dropped to his elbows. Lying between Mattia’s spread legs, he trailed his tongue hotly over Mattia’s balls, excitedly lapping at the soft, fuzzy sac. Tickling his thigh with one hand, Leo brushed his lips over the sensitive part of Mattia’s body, kissing and suckling, and loving the way the velvety skin wrinkled under his lips.

They exchanged heated looks when Leo lifted himself up into a kneeling position, and rubbed his palms over each side of Mattia’s hip bones. Leo licked his lips, Mattia moaning encouragingly when his eyes locked onto the tip of Mattia’s neglected cock, where drops of pre-come threatened to trickle down if

Leo didn't catch them. Leo's eager lips tingled and his mouth watered at the incredibly hot sight. Mattia's cock was gorgeous—slightly dark, thick, and strongly veined and just perfect in all the right places. He needed to taste Mattia like he needed to breathe.

Reaching for Mattia's delicious erection, the rock-hard, heated cock twitched the second Leo's fingers came in contact with it. Leo flashed Mattia a wicked grin before he lowered himself down and touched his wet tongue to the plump head, lapping at the salty flavor. Mattia lifted his ass as Leo tightened his grip around Mattia's cock, tugging and teasing as he drank in every bead of fluid he was rewarded with, his eyes never straying from his lover's flushed face.

“Shit. Leo!” Mattia groaned, his body trembling uncontrollably when Leo swallowed him whole. He only got a few good, deep moves in before Mattia's hips bucked a bit too forcefully, threatening to choke him. Easing his lips around the throbbing flesh, Leo exchanged his mouth for his fingers, wrapping them tightly around the base. He quickly found a tantalizing rhythm, stroking and suckling for long moments, before Leo abruptly pulled Mattia's cock from his mouth just to hear Mattia complain.

“You're fucking killing me,” he hissed, and Leo laughed.

God, it felt good to be this intimate with the man his whole world seemed to be revolving around lately.

Leo tried to move out of his way, laughing hard, when Mattia pushed himself onto his knees, wobbling slightly as he reached for Leo. He didn't make it far before Mattia had a good hold on his arm and pulled him close, not that he really wanted to get away. With a playful growl, Mattia toppled them both over, rolling Leo around until he had him lying underneath his strong body. His hand slid down Leo's chest, and he tickled a slow trail down his sides and moved his teasing fingers around to his ass. Mattia squeezed his bare cheek firmly, kissing and licking Leo's neck while his other hand nudged his own leaking, throbbing cock. Fingers wrapped around Leo's shaft, and he shivered. *Too close, too excited, too much.*

Leo felt Mattia shiver when their eyes met, and he closed the small distance between their mouths, kissing Mattia. One gentle kiss, then another and then deeper and more possessive, gliding his tongue over and under Mattia's, kissing him for all he was worth. In return, Mattia, first gently, then more eagerly, massaged Leo's balls and stroked him to the rhythm of their kisses. His effort

was rewarded by thrusts of Leo's trembling hips, jerking forward as a series of low moans escaped Leo's lips.

"Fuck. You're incredible, Tia," he almost whimpered.

Mattia's hot breath, as he panted in response, tickled his lips. Then he grunted, "You're *better*, sweet-cheeks."

And Leo felt the smile on Mattia's lips as he kissed Leo sweetly. Loving kisses quickly turned eager and more passionate once again.

Leo slid his fingers up Mattia's chest and into his hair, tugging at the soft strands, encouraging him to take this further, before he passed out from all this built-up pleasure. Blinking his eyes open, Leo saw his lover's red lips parting, panting and excited from their kissing and touching. His brain zapped like something short circuited, and he knew that this was *it*. This was what they both wanted, needed, and would fight for. They belonged in each other's arms—sweaty and slick, panting, holding each other, loving.

With one arm around Leo's waist, Mattia ground his hips against his as he pressed his throbbing cock into Leo's. Leo moaned, pulling Mattia's head down to his, long enough to brush his mouth over Mattia's in a chaste kiss, before dropping his head back onto the pillows and blankets, groaning, as Mattia's strong body pressed against him. The tingling sensation coiling deep within his stomach was a good reminder that this wasn't going to last forever. Leo was close to losing his mind; Mattia's fingers wrapped tight around Leo's cock, while his lover's erection pressed flush against his, felt amazing. Moving his hand in the same rhythm as Mattia bucked his hips had Leo cursing and panting as Mattia tugged and pulled at both their dicks.

His other hand now cradled Leo's neck, and Leo gripped Mattia's shoulder, while he spit in his other hand, then reached for their cocks, using spit and pre-come to work their bodies together until they were both slick, hot, and trembling. Mattia dropped his head next to Leo's, his hot breath tickling Leo's ear. When Mattia pressed a chaste kiss to Leo's burning cheek, Leo knew he wasn't going to last any longer. Mattia then moved faster, frantic even, as if he were inside Leo, taking him for all he was worth.

Leo *had to* let go now. There was no need to draw this out further, even if it were possible, which he doubted. This wasn't the end—they could make love again and again.

More than anything, he wanted to come right now. With his mind spinning, his head buzzing, and the rest of his body humming in sweet agony, Leo lifted

his body to meet Mattia's in the best angle possible, until they both cried out and let go in each other's arms, spilling their fluids onto one another's bodies.

Leo felt the nudge of a nose, then a chin, the tickling sensation of eyelashes brushing his cheek, and the warmth of someone's breath on his neck. He blinked his eyes open to find Mattia kissing his collarbone, his arms squeezing Leo so tightly, it stole his breath. Or perhaps that was the aftereffect of what they'd just done.

Mattia kissed him again, letting his lips linger on Leo's skin. "Let's get a bath," he suggested, then brushed a kiss across Leo's cheek. Loving the way their spent cocks rubbed together, Leo sighed. "I'd love to," he said, tugging at Mattia's shoulder, asking wordlessly to be moved, maybe even lifted up.

Cradling the back of his head, Mattia kissed his way down Leo's jaw and caught Leo's lips with his in a sweet, consuming kiss.

Leaning comfortably against a pile of pillows, Mattia watched Leo stroll back into the bedroom, carrying bottled water and a plate with chocolate cookies. He set both on the nightstand and crawled back into bed, snuggling close to Mattia who threw his arm around Leo's shoulders and pulled him close. Leo hummed when Mattia pressed a kiss to his forehead.

Thinking back on the last two hours, Mattia could hardly believe that he was still awake and breathing. They'd hardly made it out of the bathroom in one piece when wet, teasing touches led to even wetter, consuming kisses and to Leo bent over the bathtub with Mattia worshipping him from behind.

Their eyes met when Leo lifted his head, giving him a funny look.

"What is it?" Mattia asked, feeling his cheeks turning hot and probably flushing red.

Leo slowly rubbed a hand across his own neck, and when he pried his fingers apart he asked with a wicked grin, "When did you do that?"

Mattia squinted his eyes, lifting the hand off his lover's throat. "Oh, those look good on you, Leo," he replied with a low chuckle, when he saw the angry red and purple marks covering Leo's neck and shoulder.

"My mom!" Leo almost shouted in horror. "Shit. We are going to have dinner with her tomorrow, remember?" he gasped, then covered his mouth with his hand.

Mattia smiled, caressing his exposed shoulder. "She won't mind," he whispered soothingly. "You're not exactly sixteen anymore."

Leo's eyes widened. "That's just it. She won't mind," he raised his voice, "she will fucking love it!"

Mattia could have sworn he felt Leo shiver in his arms.

Dropping his head onto Mattia's chest, Leo murmured against his skin, "She will want to know all the dirty details about our relationship! It's gonna be so *baaaad*, Tia."

"You're kidding, right?" Mattia stared at the back of Leo's head.

When Leo laughed, the sound vibrated through his own body. "I wish I was," Leo said, when he lifted himself off Mattia and turned around to reach the water.

Mattia grabbed the bottle when Leo handed it to him, taking a long drink as he watched Leo munch on a cookie, grinning at him with a full mouth. Mattia felt his chest swell, and the love he felt for the man in his bed almost made him weep.

"You really don't mind having dinner with my mom?" Leo asked, when he took the bottle out of Mattia's hands, leaving it unscrewed.

He shook his head. "Of course not, Leo," he said, smiling. "Your mom is great. I can't wait to see her." Mattia reached out and pushed a strand of wet hair out of Leo's eyes and bent forward to kiss him briefly on the mouth, Leo's lips tasting just a little chocolaty.

He remembered the one time he'd met Barbara, and the way she had treated him still made his chest ache a little. He really did like her a lot, and to think that he could be part of their family felt absolutely wonderful.

"Good," Leo said, and put the bottle back onto the nightstand. Looking at Mattia with sparkling eyes, he added, "'Cause you know, *Tia bear*, she adores you."

Leo licked his lips and flashed him a wicked smile.

"Oh, does she?" Mattia asked, playfully tugging Leo closer.

"Uh-huh." Leo grinned at him with the sweetest expression he'd ever seen—brown eyes glowing, pointy, cute little nose scrunched up, and his tiny dimples showing.

Chuckling, Mattia grabbed Leo by his arms and pulled him on top of his chest. Leo bent to touch his lips to Mattia's, kissing him sweetly. "Do you want to know something else, *Tia bear*?" Leo asked, with a dreamy look on his perfect face.

Mattia nodded. "Do tell, *sweet-cheeks*."

Leo grinned and lowered his head. "I think, maybe..." he whispered close to Mattia's ear, his breath tickling Mattia's skin, "...maybe, you'd like to keep my sofa after all."

Mattia snickered, because it tickled, not because he thought it was funny, and he hoped like hell Leo got that. Leo abruptly leaned back, holding himself up on both arms and glaring down at Mattia.

Mattia schooled his expression. "But it's your sofa, Leo. We've talked about this many times. I can't just keep it *forever* and—" Then it hit him. "You're not moving away after all, are you?"

He knew it didn't make sense. Leo wouldn't just leave after successfully talking his bosses out of transferring him to Santa Barbara. As Leo had told him it took quite a bit of begging to keep his position here, after accepting the transfer so enthusiastically at first. And just where would he go all of a sudden?

Instead of getting off of Mattia, as Mattia imagined he might, Leo pressed closer, drawing a low moan from him. The way Leo's naked body pressed flush against his felt so good and wonderful in all the right places. He didn't want to lose *this*, ever.

"I'm not," Leo whispered, stroking Mattia's cheek affectionately, then bent to nip at Mattia's lower lip, drawing a low moan from him when Leo moved back. He smiled down on Mattia, with the most contented look he'd ever remembered seeing on Leo's face.

When Mattia returned his smile, because it was impossible not to, Leo flushed and blinked nervously when he spoke. "Maybe..." he whispered close to Mattia's lips, "...maybe, you'd like to keep me too?"

A smile grew on Mattia's lips, and he kissed Leo quickly.

"Are you saying?" Mattia said, his voice trailing off when Leo's smile grew wider. Shit, he couldn't believe it!

"Uh-huh." Leo lifted himself up on his arms and grinned down on him. "I'm saying, after all, I really *do* love my couch, and I'd like to see it more often than a few times a week."

Leo felt his chest swell and ache with too many emotions as Mattia regarded him with the most insanely cute grin on his beautiful, full lips.

Yep, no more regrets. No more waiting and no more wasting time. He'd thought about it many times, chewed it over and over, but Leo couldn't find a reasonable explanation as to why they couldn't, or shouldn't, plan a future together in the same place. After Mattia's insanely long and absurdly amazing and simply wonderful speech a few weeks ago, they'd talked about literally *everything* a few more times, and as far as Leo was concerned, they came to the same conclusion.

They were better together. Together, they would be strong and happy, and maybe they could finally feel whole only if they were together. Yes, it was cheesy as hell, but Leo didn't care. He had never felt this *right*. He loved Mattia, always had, and he finally believed that Mattia could, and would, love him the same way in return. Maybe there were all kinds of love and whichever kind it was that kept them together now, he hoped would also keep them together in years to come.

"If your *unspoken* offer still holds, that is," Leo smirked, but he couldn't say anything else even if he wanted because, with one swift move, Mattia had him wriggling and writhing on his back and took his breath with the most intense kiss he'd ever felt. Leo was sure he whimpered at one point—those strong arms never failed to overwhelm him in more ways than one.

Maybe they were rushing it, maybe they should take it slower, but they didn't have to move in together right away—just, hopefully, soon and preferably forever.

Leo wiggled some more, welcoming each stroke of Mattia's tongue as well as every nip of his teeth; it was impossible to simply hold still. Leo felt the excitement of not only right now, but also of a promising future with Mattia buzzing through every cell of his body, leaving him dizzy and breathless.

"You'll never have to ask me if you want to move in, you know," Mattia said, regarding him with a happy smile. With a heady feeling, he looked up into Mattia's warm and loving eyes, but he wasn't given time to reply just yet. Mattia closed the distance between them once more to feast on his lips. Leo reveled in the intense caress, absorbing every bit of Mattia's love for him.

"Who should I ask then?" Leo finally got out a little breathlessly, smirking at Mattia hovering above him. "Prince? Oh right, Prince! Of course, I will have to ask his majesty the next time he decides to—"

Leo ended up laughing before he could finish his sentence; Mattia's naughty fingers tickling him below his waist didn't help the matter.

As if Leo's voice summoned his cat, Prince appeared by their side, jumping on Leo like the insane cat he just might or might not be. Of course the cat's persistent pawing and meowing caused Leo's laughter to rise tenfold, and for a long time, Mattia could only stare at the two crazy creatures in his bed.

Someday soon, they would be able to replay this scene every morning and every night, hopefully every day of their lives. He didn't want to rush it, but Mattia would make sure that they would bring as much of Leo's stuff as they could fit into his apartment, as soon as they could. Then they would start looking at the possibilities of buying or renting something bigger and better. He only wanted the best for Leo.

Mattia waited until Leo's eyes met his.

"Had enough fun with my cat?" Mattia asked teasingly, pulling Leo by his arm. Leo slowly leaned forward and took Mattia's lips with his own. He felt Prince's soft paws on his legs, as the cat made its way to where their feet were and curled up in a ball. Leo grinned against his lips before deepening their kiss and turning it into one long exchange of saliva, filled with desire, love, and promise. When at last they pulled apart, Mattia enveloped Leo in his arms and whispered into his ear, "I love you."

"Love you more," Leo whispered back, giving his lips a quick kiss and squeezing him tight. "You are mine now, forever."

The way Leo touched him, the way he kissed, always made Mattia feel like he was the only thing that mattered. The intensity of it caused Mattia's heart to beat faster, and he pressed closer yet, wanting more of the man in his arms.

"That I am."

Now there was only one thing Mattia really wanted to get out. He'd held it back for way too long and finally just wanted to say it out loud. Mattia hadn't considered it as a secret between them, at least nothing that would threaten their relationship. It wasn't an easy topic, but as much as Mattia wanted, he couldn't forget about it.

Brushing his fingers up and down Leo's arm, he whispered, "I never told you why I sent you away that day."

Leo stopped kissing his chest and lifted his head. "You don't have to say anything," Leo said, his eyes sparkling with sudden emotion. "It doesn't matter. It *never* honestly mattered."

But it did to Mattia. He considered Leo with a smile. "What if I told you I hated your guts back then?" he asked teasingly.

Leo grinned. "You didn't," he said, before pressing his lips to Mattia's chin.

"How d'you know?" Mattia was unable to stop smiling. It was amazing how happy this man made him.

Leo snuggled closer and purred, "I just do."

"Oh yeah?" Mattia snickered and nipped at Leo's ear.

"Oh yeah," he chuckled in return.

"Seriously though," Mattia sighed. "It was my father. He..."

"I said it's okay, Tia," Leo whispered soothingly.

Mattia shook his head. "No, Leo it's not. What I did wasn't okay." He squeezed Leo tighter. "I still feel terrible for being unreasonably mean to you, when you were nothing but nice. I never wanted to be that person. I swear."

Leo looked up at him with that endearing half-smile that made his heart beat faster. "I know you're not," he whispered and pressed closer. *If he only knew how comforting his closeness was.*

"He didn't like that we were together every day, and that time when he saw us coming back from the lake, all drenched and dirty, undressed down to only our underwear, he kind of freaked out on me and swore he wouldn't let me see you again." Mattia shuddered at the memory of his father shouting and throwing things. "Of course, I complained and told him that we were friends and that he should be happy for me that I found someone to spend time with, but he wouldn't hear any of it. When he threatened to make sure that we wouldn't be hanging out anymore, I knew there was no way I could disobey him. You don't know him, Leo. He could be so scary when he wanted."

"Oh, Tia." Leo hugged him tight and nuzzled his neck. "I'm sorry that your dad is such a lunatic."

"You bet he is," Mattia muttered. He wanted to forget any of those things ever happened, but sadly, he couldn't completely erase those memories. They happened, and they would stay with him forever. "I just knew I couldn't let anything happen to you, you know."

“You’re so wonderful, Tia.” Leo kissed his forehead then his cheek. “You had your reasons, and you did what you had to do. I love you for it, and I hope you can forgive yourself like I have a long time ago.”

Mattia nodded and bent to kiss his lover’s nose. “No more secrets,” he whispered close to Leo’s lips.

“No more secrets,” Leo agreed, before he kissed him fully on the mouth. Mattia put his hand to the side of Leo’s face and pressed their foreheads together, savoring the sweet sensation of his lover’s skin on his.

They continued to kiss dreamily, when Mattia suddenly remembered something: a question probably quite irrelevant, but so mysterious Leo had always dodged answering it since the first time Mattia’d asked. He brought his palm to Leo’s cheek and brushed his thumb over his lips as they slowly parted.

“Talking about secrets,” Mattia whispered, withdrawing further. “Is there anything you’d like me to know? Now is your last chance to come clean.”

Leo looked at him with a puzzled expression. “What are you talking about?”

“Your boat? You still haven’t told me its name,” Mattia prompted. “Wouldn’t this be the perfect opportunity to finally let me in on your secret? Since we’ve just established that there wouldn’t be any more secrets between us, you know.”

“Tia.” Leo let out a nervous laugh. “This isn’t the kind of secret we actually have to tell each other about, is it?”

“I didn’t know there were different kinds of secrets.” Mattia raised an eyebrow, watching Leo sit back against a pile of pillows, his lower lip between his teeth. Leo always chewed on his lips when he was either nervous or having naughty thoughts. Right now, Mattia was quite positive he could rule out the latter.

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s just, well, it’s not something that’s actually of importance, you know?”

“If it isn’t that important, can’t you just tell me?”

Mattia really didn’t get why Leo made a big deal out of it if it didn’t mean anything to him. He reached for Leo’s waist and drew him in closer, holding him, stroking his bare shoulder for comfort. Leo looked noticeably nervous. Mattia didn’t want to think that there was a reason for Leo to feel uncomfortable, especially not in his arms.

“I never meant for it to have a name.” Leo sighed, squeezing Mattia’s wrist before entwining their fingers. “I suck at picking names and such. I was afraid that I’d get bored with it. That’s why there is no actual name on the boat, not anywhere.”

“But it does have one.” Mattia remembered that Leo’d told him so, the first time he asked.

“Sort of.” Leo’s brown eyes became watery as he gazed into Mattia’s. “Guess I named it mostly for myself. Since the day I got it, it was T to me.”

Leo probably saw the confusion in Mattia’s eyes, because he clarified, “That’s its name. T.”

“Tea?”

“T. Like the letter T.” Leo avoided looking at Mattia as he added, “In the alphabet.”

“Just that? T?” Mattia squeezed Leo’s shoulder and pressed himself closer. “That’s not really a name, sweet-cheeks.” He said teasingly, pressing a lingering kiss to Leo’s cheek, and rubbing his palm across his lover’s flat stomach in smooth circles.

When Leo withdrew his head, and their eyes met, Mattia’s chest swelled, and it felt as if a billion butterflies were dancing deep within his stomach. There was something about the look on Leo’s face that stole his breath away and made his spine tingle and his skin feel like it was slowly catching fire.

“It’s good enough for me.” Leo smiled. “The most wonderful memories are connected to that letter. Always were.” With his hands on Mattia’s chest, Leo gently pushed him onto his back and lowered himself down. Their knees bumped into each other’s, and the blanket tangled itself around their bodies as they moved into a comfortable position.

“That’s all I’m gonna say, Tia,” Leo murmured against his lips before he caught them in a searing kiss, Leo’s fingers kneading his shoulders and his weight pressing Mattia into the soft mattress. Mattia could live with this. He didn’t need more of an explanation. Resuming their kisses, he sighed happily. No more secrets.

The End

Author Bio

Riina Y.T. currently resides in Germany. She spent countless exciting days in the UK and US and lost her heart in Tokyo.

She would be thrilled if one day her stories could brighten someone's day in the way those beautiful romances always lighten up her dull everyday life. Riina is looking forward to sharing many more stories with the world.

When she doesn't daydream about boys in love, and isn't glued to her Kindle, Riina loves to travel the world and explore the unknown.

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