

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

UNEXPECTED HOMECOMING

A.J. Henderson

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

UNEXPECTED HOMECOMING

By **AJ Henderson**

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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Photo Description

Two men in a pool, one man sitting on the other's shoulders. A golden retriever stands in the water next to them. A house and trees are visible in the background.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

After being dumped by his boss-lover and losing his job, Ben is forced to pack his stuff and his beloved dog and return home to stay with his Dad and grandmother. Ben is not too happy going back to the small-town since it has been his dream to get out of there.

Until Ben finds out that his high-school crush, Matt, is still around, now working as a town veterinarian. And to his surprise Matt is out and currently single. Now it seems that his own dog, his supporting Dad, and the rest of the nosy town residents, especially the elderly bingo-gang lead by his own grandma, are playing matchmaker for Ben and Matt. Guess going back to his home town might be the best decision for Ben after all.

Sincerely,

MsMiz Tina

P.S. No BDSM. No homophobic or bigotry remarks. Some of the small town residents may not understand the "gays" but they should rally behind Ben and Matt simply because the boys are their own.

P.S.S. Feel free to change the name of the characters and create a fictional small-town.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family, matchmaking, men with pets, past crush, small town, sweet/no sex, veterinarian

Word Count: 13,627

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The shrill ring of the desk phone jarred Ben from his dark thoughts.

“Ben Wilson,” he answered, confused when he realized it was Jillian, his lover’s and boss’s administrative assistant. She never called him. Lucas always called himself.

“Good afternoon, Ben,” she said quietly, and the tone of her voice instantly put him on edge. “Mr. Branch would like to see you in his office.”

“S—” Ben had to pause to clear his throat, “Sure. I’ll be right there.” He hung up the phone and ran his hands through his hair. Things had been weird for weeks. His workload at the financial consulting company Lucas owned had dropped significantly until Ben was spending hours upon hours a day staring into space and surfing the Internet. When he’d asked Lucas about it, he’d been evasive, telling him that things would pick up again soon.

Things at home had been strained for even longer, Lucas becoming more and more distant until they were living more as roommates than as a committed couple.

Ben straightened his tie as he stepped out into the hall, almost colliding with an intern who was standing just outside the doorway with an empty box in his hands. The kid looked all kinds of uncomfortable, and Ben felt his stomach tighten, and a cold sweat break out across his body. Whatever was going on, it was not good.

Jillian wouldn’t meet his eyes as she showed him into Lucas’s office, quickly backing out and shutting the door behind her.

Lucas was looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the wall behind his huge mahogany desk, a tumbler of Scotch in his hand. “Have a seat, Ben,” he said without turning around.

Ben took a step toward a chair but hesitated. “I think that I’d rather stand,” he said quietly.

Lucas shrugged before turning around, a small, fond smile on his face. “You’ve always done things on your own terms.”

Ben shoved his hands into his pockets, hoping to hide their trembling. “What’s going on, Luke?”

“It’s time to move on,” he said simply, as if that explained everything.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that it’s time for me to start thinking about my future. Settling down, starting a family, expanding the business.”

“I thought that was what we were doing.”

Lucas gave a short, cold laugh. “Don’t be naïve, Ben. You had to know that this was temporary. You’ve met my family. They have certain... expectations. Expectations that I share.”

Ben gave up the pretense of acting like Lucas’s words weren’t affecting him, and dropped into a chair. “I-I don’t understand.”

Lucas sighed. “You didn’t realize did you?” he asked sadly. “That’s my fault. I should have made my intentions clear, but I thought you understood.”

“Understood? We’ve been together for over two years! I thought we were building a life together,” Ben said, fighting to keep his tears at bay.

“Don’t be so dramatic. You’re young. You’ll find someone else.”

Ben’s eyes snapped to Lucas’s. “Have you? Found someone else?”

Lucas swirled the liquid in his glass, looking uneasy for the first time.

“Have you?” Ben asked, barely able to spit the words out.

“She’s the daughter of an old family friend. We dated for a while in college. I ran into her at the club a few months back. We have so much in common, and she’s as eager as I am to start a family.”

“Oh my God,” Ben whispered. “You’re leaving me for a woman? You’re cheating on me with a woman?” Whatever he’d thought might happen when he’d entered the office, it was nothing in comparison to the reality of the situation.

Ben didn’t even know what to say, and an awkward silence fell over the room. Ben stared down at the carpet, trying to make sense of it all. After a minute Lucas came and knelt before him, taking Ben’s hands into his own.

“Ben, I’m sorry. I thought you understood, and I truly regret not making things clearer.”

“But I love you, Luke, and I know you love me. Can’t we make this work? Can’t we try?”

Lucas brushed away the tears from Ben’s cheeks. “No. It’s over. You’ll find someone—”

Ben pushed Lucas away and sprang to his feet. “Don’t be so condescending,” he snapped as his temper flared. “You might be ten years older than me, but I know that I deserve better than this.”

Lucas smiled at him sadly. “You’re right, you do.”

“So that’s it,” Ben said flatly. “I’m fired, right? And what about the house? Am I homeless, too?”

“I’m not that much of a bastard,” Lucas said, having the audacity to look offended. “I’ve written you a glowing letter of recommendation and put together a more than generous severance package for you. I’ve taken the liberty of having your things packed up from the house and have reserved you a suite at the Four Seasons for the next three weeks. The dog and your things are there waiting for you right now, and the personal items from your office are being collected as we speak. Everything is taken care of.”

Ben looked at Lucas incredulously. “Everything is taken care of? I’m unemployed and living with my dog in a hotel room apparently, and you think that everything is taken care of?”

“Ben—”

“No,” Ben said, holding up a hand. “Don’t ‘Ben’ me, Luke. You *are* a bastard. I can’t believe that you’re choosing to end things this way. Hell, I can’t believe that you’re choosing to end things at all, but I guess I’d better catch up pretty quickly.”

“Enjoy your *wife*,” Ben said as he turned and walked out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Ben groaned as the door to his bedroom swung open, and his two-year-old golden retriever, Max, jumped on his bed, nosing under the covers and attempting to lick him to death. He groaned louder when the curtains were thrown open, and light flooded his room. In the two weeks since Ben had moved back home, this was the first time someone had woken him up.

“Up and at ’em, boy,” his seventy-two-year-old grandmother, Pearl, said way too cheerfully.

“Gran,” Ben whined.

“Quit with the whining, young man,” she said as she shooed Max from the bed before pulling all of the covers off Ben and dropping them to the floor.

“Gran!” Ben squeaked, hands flying to cover himself.

Pearl rolled her eyes. “You’re wearing boxers, and it’s not like I haven’t seen your ‘equipment’ as they say, before.”

“When I was a baby! I’m twenty-seven!”

“Same stuff there now as was then. Just bigger, I’d hope,” she replied.

“Oh my God, Gran,” Ben grit out as he relocated his pillow from under his head to over his crotch. “Why do I need to get up? It’s not like I have a job to get to,” he added bitterly.

Pearl sighed and sat down on the bed next to him. “Baby, I love you, and I know you’re hurting, but you’ve got to get out of this bed and get on with your life.” She brushed the hair from his forehead. “I’ve let you wallow, and I’ve let your father let you wallow, but it’s time to start living again. Plus, you stink, and so does this room.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Ben asked, feeling once again like a little boy who had run to his grandmother when he’d scraped his knee.

“For starters, you’re going to get up, shower, and go to bingo with me.”

Ben started to protest, but Pearl was quick to cut him off.

“You’re going. All the ladies have been asking about you, and you will be putting in an appearance this morning. You have twenty minutes to shower and dress, so you’d better get a move on. But first, I want you to think about something. Are you truly brokenhearted, or are you embarrassed by the way that fool treated you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I know that you cared for that rat, but you haven’t seemed happy in a long while. Were you still in love with him, or were you in love with the idea of him?”

“I... I don’t know. I never thought about it like that.”

Pearl patted him on the cheek a little harder than necessary. “That’s what I’m here for. Now get going. I’m ready to show off my handsome grandson.”

Ben got in the shower, knowing arguing with his grandmother was futile. He thought over what she'd said and decided that maybe she was right. He had loved Lucas, but the last year of their relationship, they'd been more going through the motions than anything. And yes, his heart was broken, but he was embarrassed, too. Humiliated. He'd not only lost his job, but his relationship and his home as well.

He'd spent three weeks at the Four Seasons, only leaving the room when he had no choice, ordering room service and arranging for walks for Max through hotel staff. He'd avoided his family and what few friends he had in LA, drinking too much and trying not to think.

His father had finally shown up, gotten him sober and cleaned up and moved back into his childhood bedroom in the small town he'd grown up in. The one he swore he'd never do more than visit again.

There wasn't anything wrong with Carver City, a town of twenty thousand about an hour southeast of Los Angeles. It was actually a progressive, picturesque city, and Ben knew that he'd been lucky to grow up there. It was just that he'd always dreamed of moving to the big city and making a name for himself. In Carver City he was known for either being the little boy who had survived the horrific car crash that had taken the lives of his mother and grandfather, or the son of the handsome and respected widower who was also one of the top thoracic surgeons in the area.

He attended undergrad and earned a degree in graphic design at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and then went on to earn an MBA at UCLA. He'd dated off and on in college but never had a serious relationship. Then he met Lucas Branch.

Lucas was looking for someone to do marketing and assist with clients for his small but prosperous financial advising company. The work wasn't really what Ben had been looking for, but if he could work for someone like Lucas, it was a compromise he was willing to make.

Lucas Branch was ten years his senior. He was tall and thin with close-cropped dark hair that was just beginning to silver at his temples. He had icy-blue eyes and a wide, generous mouth, and Ben had been instantly infatuated.

He'd worked for Lucas for six months before anything happened, but once it did, their relationship progressed quickly, and after ten months Ben was living with Lucas, and Lucas had gotten Ben a puppy as a "welcome to your new home" gift. Ben had been thrilled and had named him Max.

Ben shook his head as he stepped from the shower, thinking that maybe his gran was right. He had loved Luke. He still did love Luke, but he'd known deep down where things were heading for a while, and if he was honest with himself, he was more embarrassed than heartbroken now that the initial sting had faded away.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and wiped the condensation from the mirror with his hand, staring at his reflection. His six-foot-one frame was thinner than normal, and his perpetually suntanned skin was pale. His hazel eyes were dull with purple bags underneath them. His curly, chestnut hair was in need of a cut, hanging in his eyes and down over his ears.

"Five minutes, mister!" his gran yelled from downstairs.

He quickly finished in the bathroom and dressed. He knew that he'd never hear the end of it if he made his grandmother late.

He was tucking his blue button-down shirt into a pair of dark jeans when he met up with his grandmother in the foyer.

"My, you do clean up nicely, young man," she said as she reached up to smooth his still-damp hair.

As always, she was impeccable. Her short, silver hair was professionally coiffed, and she was wearing a light-green suit that on anyone else would look ridiculous, but on her it made her look chic and sophisticated. She barely came up to Ben's shoulders, but her presence always seemed to fill a room.

She handed him her car keys and took his arm. "I'll let you drive."

Bingo was held at the Church of the Holy Trinity, where Ben's family had been members since his grandmother and grandfather were married there. The Women's League held bingo twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday mornings. The women did play bingo, but it was mainly just a cover for a gossipy coffee klatch. There was rarely anyone under sixty-five in attendance, and the junior priest, who was assigned to call the numbers, always looked like he was one step away from throwing in the towel.

Ben braced himself. He'd been to bingo with his grandmother enough times to know how it would go. He'd be cooed over and scolded, talked about as if he wasn't there, and then they'd start attempting to fix him up with all of their granddaughters and grandsons, even though they were all well aware that he fell squarely into the "grandsons only" category.

Pearl ruled over the bingo hall in a way that made it seem as though she wasn't really in charge, but everyone knew that she was. Even the junior priest deferred to her in most things. When she walked in on Ben's arm, the overly loud conversations of twenty-five senior women stopped, and Ben inwardly groaned as every eye in the room, even those cloudy with age, locked onto him.

Pearl didn't break stride, just continued regally to her seat before turning to the group. "I'm sure you all remember my grandson, Benjamin."

Ben nodded as the conversations once again picked up. The thing about being in a room with a bunch of senior citizens was that even when they thought they were being quiet, they really, really weren't. It was impossible to pretend that they weren't all talking about him. He tried to tune them out and instead focused on his bingo cards.

Thirty minutes and two semi-successful games later, the priest excused himself. The women barely noticed, instead shifting their focus back to Ben. Ben looked at his grandmother pleadingly. She smiled, and he was sure that she was enjoying his discomfort a bit too much, but she did take pity on him.

Her three best friends were at the table with them, and to Ben's short-lived relief, Pearl suggested that they head across the street to the diner for breakfast. He quickly found that being surrounded by twenty-five women talking about his love life was actually preferable to being trapped at a table with four with no way of escape.

He'd grown up around these women, and not one of them had blinked an eye when he'd come out during his junior year of high school. In fact, one of them had, discreetly of course, collected twenty dollars from another. They'd been Ms. So-and-So to him back then, but after he left for college, they insisted that he call them by their first names. It was still a little disconcerting.

"I never liked that man," Doris told him.

"You never even met him!" Marie said.

"I didn't have to meet him. He was too old for our Benjamin."

Ben shoved a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"My grandson—" Judy started

"—is not gay," Pearl interrupted. "We've had this discussion before, Judy."

Seeing an eighty-year-old woman pout was, unfortunately, not a new experience for Ben. They *had* had that discussion before. "Well, maybe if I talked to him," she said. "He needs to be thinking of settling down."

Pearl just flapped a dismissive hand and, seemingly, changed the subject. “Didn’t you say Reggie needed to visit the vet, Doris?” she asked, giving Ben what he thought was a reprieve. He should have known better.

The table went silent for a little too long, and Ben looked up to see his grandmother exchange a pointed look with Doris.

“Yes, yes he does. I just have such a difficult time getting him there by my lonesome. It’s too bad, really, because he’s in desperate need of a nail trim,” she said, directing the last of her comment at Ben.

He stared back blankly until his grandmother nudged him with her elbow.

“I could take him for you?” he offered slowly. He was being played, but he couldn’t figure out how.

“Perfect!” his grandmother said as she pulled her phone from her purse. “I’ll call and set up an appointment right now.”

Doris looked supremely pleased.

After she completed the call, Pearl turned to Ben. “Eat up, young man. You need to get Reggie to Dr. Campbell’s in an hour.”

“Why do you have the vet’s number in your phone?” he asked suspiciously.

“To be prepared, dear, now that Max is living with us.”

“That’s not the only reason,” he said as he took in the various looks of excitement from the women around the table. “What’s going on?”

“Dr. Campbell just opened his practice here a few months ago. I believe you might know him, darling. Matthew Campbell?”

Ben choked on the orange juice he’d just tried to drink. “Matt Campbell?”

“Oh good, you do remember him!”

Oh yes, Ben most certainly remembered Matt. Two years older than he was, and the first boy he’d ever been attracted to. Matt had been the captain of the lacrosse team, on student council, and seemed to be friends with everyone. He had obviously been totally, straight much to Ben’s disappointment and relief. Matt wasn’t available, so Ben didn’t have to try. He simply admired him from afar. And he’d admired him a lot, often with his hand down the front of his boxers while he was lying in bed.

“Uh, yeah, I remember him,” Ben said, sure that his cheeks were pink. “But I doubt he’d remember me.”

“They’d make a stunning couple,” Marie said somewhat dreamily.

Ben looked between Marie and his grandmother with a confused expression. “Maybe we’re not talking about the same Matt Campbell, because the one I remember would make a stunning couple with a woman, not with me.”

“Things change, darling,” Pearl said. “I know for a fact that he’s been on two dates with one of the sheriff’s deputies. One of the *male* deputies.”

“And you’re way more handsome than that deputy,” Doris interjected.

Ben boggled for a moment. Matt Campbell was back in Carver City and was apparently bisexual. He didn’t doubt his gran’s story for a minute. No one knew what was going on more than the four women he was having breakfast with.

Pearl signaled for the check. “We’d better be going. We don’t want Reggie to be late.”

“How long have you been planning this?” Ben asked once he was back in the car with his grandmother.

“There was no plan. We had simply discussed a few of your options, and Dr. Campbell was at the top of the list. Things just seemed to fall into place today.”

Ben shook his head, not at all surprised. “Gran, you know I’ve told you that I don’t want another relationship. At least not right now. And who’s to say that Matt would even be interested in me?”

“Why wouldn’t he be interested in you? You’re handsome and smart. He’d be lucky to have you.”

“Says my *grandmother*.”

“Anyway, it’s not like I’ve set up an arranged marriage. Just take the dog in and say hello. What can it hurt?”

“Fine, but no more scheming.”

“Of course dear,” Pearl replied, looking anything but agreeable.

Ben pulled up in front of the companion animal clinic, Reggie squarely in his lap. Reggie was a two-year-old, white Scottie, who was full of enthusiasm

and used to getting his way. Ben had tried to get him to sit in the passenger seat, but that had been a no go.

The clinic was small but well cared for, with a brightly lit reception area.

The woman behind the desk recognized Reggie immediately and came around to give him a treat. “I hope that Doris is okay?” she asked as Reggie tried to climb her leg. “She usually brings this little guy in herself.”

Ben flashed back to Doris telling him how difficult it was to get Reggie to the vet and shook his head, smiling at the woman. “She’s fine. I’m just doing her a favor.”

The woman gave Reggie one last pat and stood, extending her hand to Ben. “I’m Mindy, it’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. I’m Ben.”

“I haven’t seen you here before, have I?”

“No. I just moved back to town a few weeks ago.”

“Any pets of your own?” she asked as she took her place back at her computer.

“Yes, I have a golden named Max.”

“Well, now you know where we are if you need us,” she said with a smile. “Our tech is out this afternoon, so Dr. Campbell is taking care of all of the appointments, and he’s just a bit behind schedule. He’ll be with you soon.”

“Thanks,” Ben said as he took a seat.

It wasn’t long before one of the exam room doors opened up, and a middle-aged man with a cocker spaniel emerged, followed by a tall man in a white coat. Ben sucked in a breath. If he’d thought that Matt was attractive in high school, it was nothing compared to him now. He was tall, at least two inches taller than Ben himself, and muscular without being too bulky. He had short, dark hair swept up in the front, and a pair of thin, black-framed glasses perched on his nose. His features were sharp and classic, his movements confident and graceful. Ben suddenly felt like a dorky high school kid again and frantically tried to think of a way to get out of the building.

Matt exchanged a few words with his client while trading off some paperwork with Mindy. Before Ben could think of an escape, Matt was crossing the room toward them. He had been looking over the chart in his hands, and when he glanced up and saw Ben with Reggie, his steps faltered just a bit, and

his eyes widened in surprise. He regained his composure so quickly that Ben thought he might have imagined it.

“Ben? Ben Wilson?” he asked, as he bent down to pick up a wriggling Reggie.

Ben stood up, trying to wipe his sweating palms on his jeans as inconspicuously as possible. “Uh, yeah. That’s me,” he said as he shook Matt’s hand. Matt’s huge, warm, slightly rough hand, and *oh crap pull it together, Ben* he thought to himself.

“I’m not sure if you remember me,” Matt said. “I was a couple of years ahead of you in school.”

That shocked a surprised laugh from Ben. “I remember. I didn’t think you’d remember me.”

They stared at each other for a moment until the bell over the door rang, signaling another client coming in.

“Right, so let’s get Reggie here taken care of. Just a nail trim today?”

Ben followed Matt into an exam room. “Yeah, thanks.”

Matt pulled out the clippers and got to work. “So how did you get put on Reggie duty?”

“My grandmother made me escort her to bingo this morning, and then things just... I really don’t know.”

Matt laughed. “Pearl does always seem to get her way.”

“You know my grandmother?”

“Everyone knows Pearl. I may have just moved back here, but most of my family is here, so I’ve been around plenty since high school. My grandmother passed away a few years ago, but she used to be a regular at bingo.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother.”

“Thanks,” Matt said with a wistful smile that soon turned into a smirk. “But I was never dumb enough to let myself get wrangled into bingo.”

Ben groaned. “Tell me your secret, because I don’t think I can go through that again.”

Matt laughed as he set down the clippers and pulled a treat for Reggie from his pocket. “All set.” He handed the dog back to Ben and indicated for him to follow him back to reception.

He once again exchanged paperwork with Mindy before turning back to Ben. “I hope I’ll see you again soon, Ben.”

“Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

Ben’s father, Richard, brought Thai home for dinner that evening, and they sat around the kitchen table as his father talked about his day.

“Ben had an interesting day today as well,” Pearl said, making Ben roll his eyes.

“Really?” his father asked, looking surprised.

“He escorted me to bingo—”

“Sucker,” his father said under his breath.

“—and then he took Reggie to see Dr. Campbell.”

“Oh, really?” his father asked with way too much interest.

Ben groaned. “Not you too.”

His father chuckled. “I’m not trying to set you up, but you could do a lot worse than the Campbell boy.”

“I’m really not interested in a relationship.”

“It’s just nice to hear that you’re getting out of the house a bit,” his father said, and Ben was relieved when he changed the subject.

Ben woke up the next morning feeling more like himself than he had in weeks. Months, if he was being truthful to himself. It wasn’t like him to be directionless, and the events of the day before seemed to have woken up a part of himself that had been asleep for far too long.

He dressed in running shorts and a T-shirt, and slipped into his running shoes before clipping Max’s leash to his collar and heading out for a run. Max was obviously thrilled to be outside with his owner and hopped and pranced alongside Ben, making Ben feel guilty that he’d been so neglectful over the past weeks.

It was early enough that the streets were still mostly deserted, so Ben ran through the downtown area toward the lake that bordered it on the north. Dogs weren’t allowed on the public beach, but there was an area just beyond that which was perfect to let Max swim, something he loved to do.

Ben unclipped the leash, and Max headed straight for the water, jumping and splashing. Ben did a few stretches to cool down before settling in on a bench to watch his dog play. It wasn't even ten minutes later when Max yelped, and then limped as quickly as he could toward Ben.

"What is it, boy?" Ben asked as he knelt in front of the dog, who was holding his front left paw up in the air, blood dripping from between the pads.

Ben tried to get a closer look, but a whimper from Max halted him. It seemed like there was a lot of blood, and Ben hoped that was just his panic. Still, he knew that he needed to get the dog to a vet. Matt's clinic was about four blocks away. Max was heavy, but Ben could carry him that far. He pulled off his shirt and hastily wrapped it around Max's paw, then scooped him up in his arms and started walking as quickly as he could, knowing that they probably looked ridiculous.

It was just before seven, and Ben hoped that there would be someone at the clinic that early. He rounded the last corner, panting a little from his exertion, his worry growing as blood soaked through the makeshift bandage, and Max didn't attempt to get out of his arms.

Luckily, Matt was just unlocking the front door when Ben approached.

"Matt!"

"Ben?" Matt said as he turned around, his eyes going wide as he took in the scene before him. "Come on in," he said, holding the door open and directing Ben to the treatment area in the back of the clinic.

"Set him down on the table. What happened?"

Ben carefully settled Max on the table, keeping his hands on him as reassurance to both of them. Max's tail started to wag a bit when Matt stepped over, and Ben felt a little relief at the sight.

"He was swimming, and I think that he stepped on something? I'm not sure. He just yelped and started to limp, and there's blood..."

Matt looked up as Ben trailed off, taking in his pale appearance and noticing that he was shirtless. He stared for a couple of seconds.

"Matt?"

Matt shook his head, his cheeks flushing a little. "Right. Sorry. There's, uh, some scrub tops in that cabinet by the window." He gently unwrapped the T-shirt from Max's paw and started to examine him while Ben hastily pulled on a shirt.

“Is he going to be okay?” he asked as he stepped back toward the table.

“Yes. I think that he stepped on some glass. Unfortunately, I think that there’s some embedded between the pads, and to remove that and stitch him up, I’m going to need to sedate him.”

“I... okay, whatever you need to do.”

“Is he current on all of his vaccines and heartworm medication?”

“Yes. He had all of that done about four months ago.”

“Good. Good.”

Just then a slender woman with long dark hair and dark skin came in. She was dressed in scrubs and though obviously surprised to see them, quickly set down her things and came to assist.

“Ben, this is my technician, Cassandra. Cass, is Mindy out front?”

“Yes. Are we sedating?”

“Yes, can you get things together?” He turned to Ben. “You met Mindy the other day when you brought Reggie in. Why don’t you head out front and tell her what’s going on. She’ll have some paperwork for you to fill out, and I’ll come and get you as soon as we’re done.”

Ben hesitated, looking between Max and Matt.

Matt stepped closer to him and put his hand on his forearm. “I promise he’ll be fine. This is a quick procedure, and I don’t anticipate any complications.”

“Right, okay,” Ben said. He ran his hand over Max’s head and leaned down. “I’ll be right out front, okay big guy? Matt is going to take great care of you.” Max licked his hand, comforting his owner when Ben was sure it should be the other way around.

It wasn’t even thirty minutes later that Matt called Ben into an exam room.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s great. We did an X-ray first, and he did have a pretty large piece of glass embedded in his paw. Luckily, it was long and shallow, so nothing that a few stitches couldn’t fix.”

Ben dropped down onto the bench, exhaling slowly. “Sorry, I just...”

Matt leaned against the exam table, facing Ben. “No worries. Our pets are like our kids. I’d be more concerned if you weren’t upset.”

Ben gave him a grateful smile.

“He’s still asleep, but he should be awake before too long. I want to keep him until late afternoon, just to make sure everything is okay. His paw will be wrapped, and you’ll want to keep the bandage clean and dry. Keeping a sock over it will help. I’ll send some extra supplies home with you in case you need to change it. If he licks at it, we’ll have to make him wear a cone, but a sock will help with that, too. He’ll need to come back in two weeks to have the stitches removed. I’m going to send home some pain medication, too, for the next few days.”

“Thanks, Matt.”

Matt reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a card, hastily scribbling on it before handing it over to Ben, not quite meeting his eyes. “That’s my business card. I wrote my personal number on it, just in case. If you want to call... about Max I mean. Or if you just want to call,” he finished, looking sheepish.

Ben smiled. If high school him could see himself now, he thought.

Cass knocked on the door before sticking her head in. “Dr. Campbell, you have a phone call.”

“Excuse me,” he said as he headed for the door. “Plan to come back about four to pick up Max.”

“Okay, thanks again.”

“You’re welcome,” Matt said before he stepped out of the room.

Ben was turning to leave as Cass handed him his shirt. “I think this is a loss,” she said.

Ben was back at the clinic right at four, anxious to see Max and make sure with his own eyes that he was okay. He was also kind of looking forward to seeing Matt again, though he tried not to examine that thought too closely.

“Hi Ben,” Mindy greeted him. “Your boy is anxious to go. I’ll let Dr. Campbell know that you’re here.”

It wasn’t long before Matt was ushering Ben into the back, where Max was wiggling in excitement in a large cage. Matt let him out, and Ben squatted down, rubbing behind the dog’s ears and cooing at him. He clipped Max’s leash to his collar and stood.

“Thanks again for taking care of him. How much do I owe you?”

“Mindy will get you checked out,” Matt said as he handed Ben a bottle of pills. “Give him one of these twice a day with food, and be sure to keep his paw clean and dry. You’ll need to come back to have the sutures removed; Mindy will schedule that. And don’t hesitate to call me if you have any concerns. Or, just to call,” he added shyly.

Ben grinned. “Okay. Thanks.”

Max made the best of being the center of attention that evening. Ben had to stop his Dad twice from giving him food from the table during dinner.

“So, how is our handsome veterinarian?” Pearl asked as she served them each a slice of pie.

Ben rolled his eyes. “He’s fine. It’s not like I spent the day with him. He was very professional.”

“Maybe we should invite him for dinner later this week, to thank him for taking such good care of Max.”

“Uh, no. Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“Why not? It’s the polite thing to do.”

“I told him thank you, and I paid my bill. I think that covers it.”

“Hmmm... we’ll see.”

Ben turned his eyes imploringly to his father, who chuckled and shrugged. Once Pearl got an idea in her head, it was next to impossible to get it out.

“The new office manager I hired is working out well,” Richard said, changing the subject. “She thinks that we need to make a few updates though.”

Ben laughed at that. His father was not a fan of change. “Like what?”

“Redecorating the office for one thing.”

Ben tried to hide his smirk. “I’ve been telling you that for years, Dad. Your office looks the same as when I was in elementary school.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the way my office looks,” he said, sounding a bit offended.

“Sure, if you’re into the ‘vintage but not in a cool way’ look.”

His father glared at him. “If you’re going to be like that, maybe I won’t tell you what else she suggested.”

Pearl laughed. “Don’t pout, son.”

“Fine. Melissa suggested that we redo our logo and marketing materials. I told her about your background, and she suggested we hire you.”

“Really?”

“You don’t have to act so surprised. You’re a talented artist. It’s not like I have any doubts that you’ll do an amazing job. And maybe this could be the start of something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s not that I mind you staying here. You’re welcome for as long as you need or want to be here, but have you given any thought to what you’re going to do?”

Ben shook his head. He’d thought of nothing else since he’d moved back home, but he never came up with an answer. He didn’t know what he wanted to do. Lucas had never really been a big supporter of Ben’s creative endeavors. He hadn’t even picked up his sketchbook in months.

“Have you thought of going into business for yourself?”

Ben had, but that was before Lucas. “Not for a long time.”

“Maybe it’s time to revisit the idea. You’re talented, son. Start out with this and see how it feels. We can go from there.”

Ben mulled the idea over as he finished his pie, and the more he thought about it, the more excited he became. Art had been his passion for so long, and he’d let Lucas push it away. Being his own boss, doing something he loved, was a dream he’d held through undergrad, and he was surprised to find that the idea was still as appealing as it had been back then.

“Okay, what do I need to do?”

“Stop by the office tomorrow. I’ll introduce you to Melissa, and you two can work it out.”

Ben’s phone rang later that evening. His grandmother and father had gone to bed, and Ben was curled up on the couch with Max, a beer on the coffee table and a baseball game on the TV.

“Hello?”

“Hi Ben, it’s Matt. I hope I’m not bothering you?”

“No, not at all.”

“I just thought I’d check on Max. How’s he doing?”

“He’s fine. Limping a bit, but not too badly.”

“Good. That’s good.”

There was an awkward silence, and then both men spoke at once.

“Thanks again for—”

“Call me if anything—”

They laughed, and Ben continued, “Thanks again for taking care of him this morning.”

“You’re welcome.”

The tension broke after that, and the conversation turned from Max to what each of them had been up to since college. Ben was surprised when they got off the phone and an hour had passed.

The day for Max’s suture removal arrived quickly. Ben had met with Melissa twice and had worked up a whole new marketing plan for his father’s office. It had felt so good to be working again that he’d even spent a good portion of the afternoon in the back yard, sketching. The idea of opening up his own graphic design business filled him with an excitement that he hadn’t felt in much too long, and he had an appointment with both a lawyer and a real estate agent later that day to discuss options.

He’d also spent time each day either texting or chatting with Matt. They really seemed to click and found that they had a lot in common. Ben was still sure he wasn’t interested in a relationship, but it was nice to have a friend who didn’t know him just as Luke’s boyfriend.

Ben chatted with Mindy while Cass took Max in the back to remove his sutures. It was only moments before Matt called him into an exam room.

“Good as new,” he said as he handed the leash over to Ben.

“Thanks again.”

“Anytime. I was wondering...” Matt trailed off, looking a bit self-conscious.

“What?” Ben asked, intrigued.

“Well, maybe if you wanted to have dinner with me tonight?”

Ben was surprised, although he probably shouldn't have been. He felt a pang in his chest at the thought of turning down a date with Matt. He pushed it down and tried to steel his resolve. “Dinner would be great, but as friends? I'm just not...”

Matt looked disappointed but hid it quickly. “I get it. How about Sal's? Six thirty?”

Ben gave Matt a grateful smile, ignoring the disappointment he felt himself. “That's perfect.”

“So you're going out to dinner with Dr. Campbell, but it's not a date?” Pearl asked when he got home.

“Right.”

“Well, that's the most idiotic thing I've heard in a long while.”

“What?”

“Benjamin, I love you, but you can be an idiot sometimes.”

“Gran, I'm just—”

“—not ready. Yes, so I've heard. I've also never seen you happier than you have been these past two weeks, when you've spent all your spare time talking to that boy. And that includes the time you told us you were moving in with Lucas.”

She was right, and Ben knew it. But the thought of putting himself out there, of taking that risk again so soon, was just too much. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't do it. Matt was turning into a great friend, and that was all it was. Maybe sometime in the future things would change, but for now, friends was all they could be.

“I have to go meet the lawyer. I'll talk to you later, Gran,” Ben said as he dropped a kiss on her cheek.

Ben could not wait to get to dinner that evening. His meetings with the lawyer and the real estate agent had been a success, and he was anxious to share the news with Matt. He had the paperwork started to establish a liability

company, and he'd found a condo to rent just a few blocks away from his father's house. It had two entrances, which would make it perfect for seeing clients.

It wasn't until they were splitting the check that Ben realized that he'd monopolized the entire conversation during their meal, and that Matt had been quieter than normal.

"Man, I'm sorry. I haven't let you get a word in edgewise. Is everything okay?"

Matt smiled ruefully. "I'm really happy for you, Ben. And even if it's just a six month lease on the condo, I'm glad that you'll be sticking around. It's just," he paused and studied Ben carefully before continuing, "I think I need to take a step back."

"A step back?"

"Yeah. I really like you, and I get that you're not ready to date, I really do, but I want to date you, and I think I need a little time to accept the 'just friends' route."

"Oh."

"Can I tell you something?"

"Anything."

"I know you said that you didn't think I knew who you were when we were in high school, but I did. I didn't really understand it back then, but I'm pretty sure you were the first guy I ever had a crush on."

Ben was floored. "You're joking."

"No. I dated Becky through most of my senior year. You had designed that huge banner for Homecoming that year; that's when I first noticed you. Apparently, Becky got fed up with me talking about you because she asked me if I wanted to take you to the dance instead of her. That scared me, and so I shut up about you. The next year I heard that you'd come out, and well, it gave me a lot to think about."

Ben had no idea what to say, and he just shook his head helplessly. The waitress came back with their change, giving Ben a moment to collect his thoughts.

"You were my first crush, too," he blurted out and then cringed.

Matt's grinned wistfully. "I guess it's just not in the cards for us to date. I mean it when I say that I want to be friends though. I just need a little time. Is that okay?"

"Of course." And if it felt like his heart was breaking a little, he tried his best to ignore it.

The next few weeks passed quickly. Ben wanted to get the necessary legal and financial steps to start his business completed before moving into his new condo at the end of the month. Thankfully, the condo was fully furnished, so it was just a matter of waiting for it to be available.

He and Matt texted occasionally, but they hadn't seen each other, and they hadn't spoken on the phone at all. Ben was surprised by the force with which he missed him, but when a box of books that had been accidentally left behind at Luke's arrived, and along with it a slew of painful memories, he renewed his intent to not get involved with someone again.

His grandmother convinced him to go to bingo with her the Friday before he moved, insisting that she'd hardly ever see him once he was back on his own. His argument that he'd be less than a mile away fell on selectively deaf ears, and he knew that trying to get out of it was a losing battle.

The junior priest gave Ben a smile that was a mixture of both pity and glee, and Ben thought maybe he should get Pearl to send the poor guy a gift basket or something.

They played an entire game without any of the ladies commenting on Ben's love life, or lack thereof, and he was starting to relax. He should have known better.

"Benjamin, I'm sorry," Judy said. "I spoke with my grandson, and he's just insistent that he's not gay. It's nothing personal, dear, but he's just not interested in dating a man."

Ben glanced at Pearl who was rolling her eyes. "That's okay?" he answered hesitantly. "Um, thank you for asking."

"You're welcome."

"Well, I wasn't going to bring this up," Marie said, "but I saw your young man having dinner with that sheriff's deputy again this week."

"Matt?"

“Yes. And they looked pretty cozy.”

Ben didn't know what to say to that, and he tried to hide the jealousy and disappointment he felt at the news. He did *not* want a relationship, and maybe it would be easier on him if Matt did get a boyfriend.

Pearl gave him a knowing look. “That's okay, Marie. Benjamin isn't looking for a relationship. He and Dr. Campbell are just friends.”

“Not looking for a relationship?” Doris asked. “That's nonsense. You need to be settling down, young man. Giving your father some grandbabies.”

“Um, that's not—”

Doris waved a hand at him. “You know what I mean. Adopt or get a surrogate. There are ideas all over the TV about that sort of thing.”

Ben wondered just what kind of TV Doris was watching.

“My point is that you can't let one lousy experience dictate your entire life. Everyone gets their heart broken a time or two. It just makes finding the real thing that much sweeter.”

Ben didn't have anything to say to that.

Ben was packing up the last of his clothes that evening when his phone rang, and a surge of excitement zipped through his veins when he saw that it was Matt.

“Hey Matt.”

“Hey. How are you?”

“Good. Just packing up the last of my things.”

“You're moving this weekend?”

“I get the keys tomorrow.”

“I'll bet you'll be glad to be on your own.”

Ben sat down on the edge of his bed, looking around the room. “Yes and no. I'm going to miss it here a little, and I know Max is going to miss the extra attention.”

“I get that. At least you'll still be close by.”

“So how are you?”

“I’m doing well. I was actually calling to see if you’d be interested in playing some basketball in the morning. One of the guys on my intramural team is out with a sick kid, so we’re a player short. I didn’t realize this was moving weekend.”

“What time is the game?” Ben hadn’t played ball since he’d left LA, and the prospect of getting back on the court sounded good.

“We play at nine.”

“That would work. I can get my keys at eight. I really only have a couple of loads of boxes to move, and I can do that after the game.”

“Yeah? That’d be great. I’ll even help you when we’re done.”

They chatted for a few minutes, and Ben went to sleep with a smile on his face.

The YMCA where the guys played ball was only a few years old, and Ben had never been inside. Thankfully, Matt was waiting for him at the door.

“Got your keys?” he asked with a smile.

Ben held them up. “I’m officially a grown-up again.”

Matt laughed as he led Ben to the locker room. “Let me introduce you to the guys. Guys, this is Ben, Ben this is Alec, Brandon, and Troy.” They all shook hands, then changed and headed for the court.

An hour later and Ben was dripping sweat and having a great time. It felt good to not only be back in the game, but to be socializing with people his own age. He’d agreed to a pickup game on Tuesday evening, and he was really looking forward to it.

He decided not to shower and change; he was just going to have to do it all over again after hauling his boxes, so he grabbed his stuff from the locker and got ready to head out.

Matt caught him as he was leaving. “I can meet you at your Dad’s place in about thirty minutes if that’s okay?”

“That would be great if you’re sure you have time.”

“Absolutely. See you in a few.”

Ben got all the way to his truck before he realized that he’d left his cell phone on the shelf in the locker. The locker room had in and out doors at

opposite ends. He grabbed his cell phone and rounded the corner only to stop short at the sight that greeted him.

Troy had Matt pinned against the wall by the out door. Matt's hands were in Troy's hair as they kissed. Troy broke the kiss and moved his lips along Matt's jaw to his neck, and that was when Matt opened his eyes and found Ben staring at them. His eyes went wide with shock, and he started to push Troy away, but Ben shook his head and left the room as quickly as he could.

His heart was pounding in his chest, and his blood was boiling with jealousy. He chided himself; it was what he'd wanted, right? Matt was obviously off limits now, so friends was the only option. He repeated that to himself over and over as he drove home.

He pulled up in front of his father's house and took a few deep breaths before pulling out his phone and sending a message to Matt.

Don't worry about helping me move. I appreciate the offer, but I don't have that much, and you don't need to give up your Saturday.

He shoved the phone in his pocket and headed inside where his father was waiting for him. "Ready, kiddo?"

He forced a smile on his face. "Yeah." His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it and started loading his truck. It wasn't ten minutes later when an SUV pulled up in front of the house, and Troy and Matt got out. Ben and his father were just coming out of the house, and Ben scowled as the pair crossed the lawn toward them.

"Good morning, Dr. Wilson."

"Matt, it's nice to see you son. Please, call me Richard."

"This is my friend, Troy."

Richard and Troy shook hands. "It's nice to meet you, sir," Troy said. "You were my uncle's surgeon last year. Vince Getting? You saved his life."

Richard and Troy started to discuss how Vince was doing, and Ben pulled Matt aside. "Didn't you get my text? I've got this covered."

"I did, but I said I'd help. Sorry about Troy, about what you saw earlier. It's not really what it looked like—"

Ben cut him off, "You don't need to explain yourself to me."

"I know I don't, but I want to. Troy and I—"

Just then Pearl and Max came out of the house. “Matthew, how lovely to see you!”

“You too, ma’am,” Matt said as he kissed her cheek.

“Such a gentleman.” Troy and Richard joined them. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” Pearl said as she held her hand out to Troy.

“This is Troy. Troy, this is Pearl Wilson.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

“And you as well. You’re a sheriff’s deputy?”

Troy looked surprised. “Yes, ma’am. How did you know that?”

Richard and Matt laughed as Matt explained that there was very little in Carver City that Pearl didn’t know about.

“It’s so nice of you boys to help. I’m going to pick up lunch and meet you at Benjamin’s condo.”

“Let’s get to work,” Richard said as he headed back inside for another load of boxes.

Matt grabbed Ben’s wrist and held him back. “Look, we can leave if you want, but I’d really like to help.”

Ben once again repeated to himself that this was what he wanted—just friends. He plastered on what he hoped was passable as a genuine smile. “Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.”

Two hours later and they had all of the boxes unloaded into Ben’s new condo, and Ben hated to admit it, but Troy was a great guy. It made him dislike him all the more, even though he knew it was unreasonable.

Pearl showed up with lunch, and they sat out on Ben’s small patio to eat. Max was busy sniffing out his new yard and barking and racing up and down the fence line with the neighbor’s mutt. Ben was quiet, and Matt kept shooting him concerned looks.

Once they were done eating, Pearl and Richard excused themselves. Pearl had a nail appointment, and Richard had a tee time, but both promised they’d be by the next day to help with the unpacking.

“I have to get going, too,” Troy said. “I have the overnight shift tonight, and I need to get some sleep.”

“Yeah, sure. Thanks for your help, both of you,”

Matt looked torn. “I could stay, but Troy gave me a ride.”

Ben could tell that Matt was hoping that Ben would offer to give him a ride later, but Ben didn’t think he could spend the afternoon alone with him after what he’d seen in the locker room. “Hey no, you’ve done enough already. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Matt looked disappointed but smiled anyway. “Yeah, sure. Call if you need anything though.”

Ben nodded, and Troy looked curiously between them but didn’t comment.

Once Ben was alone, he dropped down on his couch, a beer in one hand, while his other scratched Max behind his ears. His mind was spinning. He’d convinced himself that he didn’t want a relationship, or at least that’s what he’d tried to do. The scene in the locker room was running on a loop through his mind, and if he was brutally honest with himself, he wanted it to be him kissing Matt, not Troy. After he admitted that, he felt a crushing wave of disappointment. He was too late. When his phone rang a while later and Matt’s name flashed on the screen, Ben sent it to voice mail.

Ben avoided Matt’s texts and calls for the rest of the weekend, focusing instead on settling into his new home. He thought about canceling for the pickup game Tuesday night, but decided he was being ridiculous. He’d had crushes before and gotten over them, and Matt was a great guy who was becoming a great friend. The other guys seemed nice enough, even Troy, and if Ben was going to stick around Carver City for a while, he could use some friends.

Ben tried to act as normally as possible, and by the time he was halfway through the game, he was feeling comfortable and glad that he’d agreed to play. After they cleaned up and changed, they all decided to head to a nearby bar for drinks and dinner.

Troy and Matt didn’t really act like a couple, but they did sit next to each other, and Ben noticed Troy stealing fries off of Matt’s plate a couple of times. By the end of the meal, he was feeling as though he could really become friends with the group.

“How’s your business going?” Matt asked as the waitress cleared dirty dishes from their table.

“Really well, actually. I’ve even picked up a client who isn’t my Dad,” Ben joked.

“What do you do?” Brandon asked.

“I’m a graphic artist. I just decided to go into business for myself.”

“Ben’s a really talented artist,” Matt said, surprising Ben.

“Dude, you haven’t seen any of my work since high school!”

Matt flushed a little. “Well, you were really good back then, so I assume you’re even better now.”

Ben glanced at Troy, who was looking between Matt and Ben with a smirk, but Ben couldn’t really read his expression.

“You’re right. I’m an amazing artist,” Ben said, putting as much arrogance into the statement as he could before he burst out laughing. “Really, I’m not bad, and my goal after school was to go into business for myself, so I’m pretty excited about it.”

“What did you do after school instead?” asked Alec.

“I went to work for a financial consulting firm, got caught up in a bad relationship,” Ben answered, feeling uncomfortable.

Thankfully, Matt was quick to change the subject, and the conversation moved on.

They paid their bill and got up to leave, saying good-bye and making plans for another game Saturday morning. Once they were in the parking lot, Matt asked Ben to hang back for a minute.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he said once they were alone.

“Getting right to the point,” Ben tried to tease. Matt didn’t look amused, and Ben sighed. “Okay, yes, I have. I know it was my decision to be friends, and I do want that. Just, seeing you with Troy, I don’t know...” he trailed off, not knowing how to continue.

“But that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. There is—” the sound of Matt’s phone, loud and insistent, cut him off. He silenced it as he read the screen. “Damn it, I have an emergency. I have to get to the clinic. This conversation isn’t over,” he said over his shoulder as he jogged to his car.

As Ben walked to his car, he thought to himself that he hoped that it was over.

Tuesday and Saturday ball games became a regular thing, and Ben fell back into texting and talking to Matt on a regular basis. However, he did whatever he

could to keep things light and friendly and kept all talk of relationships off the table.

Matt had tried to press the issue a couple of times, but finally let the subject drop, although Ben could tell he was frustrated about it. He didn't understand why it was so important for Matt to tell him how great his boyfriend Troy was.

He'd picked up a handful of clients and spent his spare time getting his condo organized. Max had adjusted to yet another move without incident, and Ben enjoyed having him with him while he worked.

He'd finished up the project for his father's practice, so he was surprised to hear from Melissa, the office manager.

"How are you, Ben?"

"I'm doing well. What can I do for you?"

"The annual Literary Council fundraiser is coming up, and I've convinced Dr. Wilson to be this year's featured sponsor."

"That's great! What can I do to help?"

"I was talking to their fund-raising director, and he told me that the sponsor usually helps choose the theme and then takes care of the marketing aspect. I thought maybe you could help us out."

"Of course. What's the theme?"

"We've decided on a masquerade ball. I'm working with a planner at the event center. I was hoping that you'd be able to meet with us sometime later in the week to discuss invitations, printed menus, things like that."

"Sure. My schedule is really flexible, so just let me know what works for you and I'll be there."

Ben had dinner a few nights later with his father and grandmother.

"Melissa told me that things for the fundraiser are coming along nicely," Richard said.

"I've never worked on a project quite like it. It's exciting. I think you're really going to like what we've come up with."

"Perhaps Dr. Campbell would like to accompany you to the event," Pearl said.

“Gran, if Matt goes, I’m sure that he’ll be taking his boyfriend with him. Besides, I already have a date.”

“You do?” his father and grandmother asked at the same time, both sounding shocked.

“Of course, I’m taking my lovely grandmother.”

“You’re a charmer, young man, but I still think you should talk to Dr. Campbell. Doris told me that—”

Ben cut her off, “I don’t want to hear any gossip about Matt, okay? Please?”

Pearl sighed and shook her head. “It’s a good thing you’re so cute.”

Ben, Matt, Troy, and Brandon went out for a late breakfast after their Saturday ball game.

Brandon’s wife was a librarian at the local community college. She was very involved with the Literary Council, and Ben had met her at the final planning meeting for the fundraiser just a few days earlier.

“Was this masquerade ball your idea?” Brandon asked accusingly. “Because if it was, I don’t know if we can be friends anymore. Jenny is making me wear a tux! I feel like I’m going to prom!”

Ben laughed. “No, it wasn’t my idea, I just came up with the designs.”

“Last year was some type of Hawaiian thing. I got to wear shorts and eat roasted pork. This year it’s a monkey suit and dancing.”

The guys all laughed at Brandon’s grumbling.

“Are you two going?” Ben asked Troy and Matt.

“I am,” Matt said. “I was actually wondering if you’d be interested in going with me.”

Ben shot a look at Troy, who shrugged. “I’m on duty next weekend, so I can’t go.”

The spark of excitement Ben had felt at the invitation quickly dissipated. Matt was only asking because Troy would be at work. “Sorry, I’ve already got a date.”

Matt looked disappointed. “Who are you going with?”

“My grandmother.”

“It *is* just like prom,” Brandon teased.

“I did not take my grandmother to my prom!” Ben said, laughter in his voice.

“Well, if she finds a real date, let me know. We could still go together,” Matt said.

“Uh, sure, maybe.”

Matt was quiet and only picked at his food after that, and Ben felt like it was his fault but couldn’t figure out why. To make matters worse, Troy kept glaring at him. Thankfully, Brandon seemed oblivious to the odd tension and moved the conversation to a new topic.

Matt got up to leave as soon as he was done eating, throwing some money down on the table. Brandon and Ben looked at him in confusion, and Troy stood up to follow him out after putting down his own money.

“What was that about?”

“I have no idea,” Brandon answered.

Ben didn’t hear much from Matt in the coming week, but he was so busy that he hardly had time to worry about it. His professional involvement with the fundraiser was complete, but he’d somehow been volunteered for a whole list of jobs to help prepare for it.

He was driving to the venue with several boxes full of supplies when blue and red lights came up behind him.

“Shit,” he said as he pulled over. He grabbed his license and registration and rolled down his window as the officer approached his car.

“Sorry, officer, I—Troy? Was I speeding?”

“Yeah, but that’s not why I pulled you over.”

“Okay,” Ben replied slowly. “Care to tell me why then?”

“Put your paperwork away and come sit in my cruiser with me,” Troy said as he turned and started to walk away.

Ben was completely confused and hurried to comply. Traffic sped by, and he was sure that news that he’d been pulled over would be back to his grandmother in no time.

He climbed into the cruiser, a small part of him excited at the prospect of seeing a police car from the inside.

“I like you, Ben.”

“Thanks? I uh, like you, too?” He was getting more bewildered by the minute.

Troy turned toward him and pinned him with his stare. “I like you, but you’re being an asshole, and I thought maybe this way, which I’ll admit is a little dramatic, might be the best way to get my point across.”

“And what point is that?”

“You’re breaking Matt’s heart, and I don’t like it.”

Ben boggled at him before asking faintly, “Excuse me?”

“Matt and I are close. In fact, I consider him my best friend. When he told me that you’d moved back here, he was so excited. He’d told me about you. How he’d had a crush on you in high school, and how brave he thought you were for coming out so young. You guys started hanging out, and he would just not shut up about you, and I thought for sure it would only be a matter of time before he told me that our arrangement was over because you two were dating, but then you told him that you only wanted to be friends.”

“Hold on, what arrangement? What are you talking about?”

“Matt and I aren’t dating. We’ve never been dating. We’ve just been friends with benefits.”

Ben shook his head, hardly able to process what Troy was saying.

“So you told him that you wanted to be friends, and he accepted it. It took him a few weeks, but he did it. Then you saw the two of us going at it in the locker room and acted all jealous, and he got his hopes up, but then you started to ignore him, and now you won’t listen when he tries to set you straight.”

“I was just trying to do the right thing!”

“Well, what you’re doing is driving him crazy, which in turn is driving me crazy. He’s moping around, he won’t shut up about you, he’s whining to me every night, and I’m not even getting laid anymore! You’re all he’ll talk about. It’s worse than when my little sister broke up with her first boyfriend.”

Ben just stared at him for a minute, and Troy continued, “Do you want to date him?”

“Y-yeah. Yeah, I do.” It felt good to finally admit it.

“I mean really date him. Not just go out a few times before you get cold feet because you’re afraid to commit again.”

Ben didn’t even have to think about it. “Yes.”

“Good. Then get your head out of your ass and ask him out. But don’t fuck it up. He deserves the best. And if you tell him about any of this, I will not hesitate to use my Taser on you.”

That startled a laugh out of Ben. “Yes sir, officer.”

“Now, get out of my car before I decide to write you that speeding ticket.”

Ben hardly remembered the drive to the venue after that. Matt was free and still wanted to date him. He could hardly keep the smile off of his face. He wasn’t surprised when his phone rang just a bit later.

“Hello?”

“Benjamin Andrew Wilson, were you arrested?”

“Hi Gran, I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, young man. Doris just called and said she saw you in a police car.”

Ben laughed. “I was in a police car, but I wasn’t arrested. I didn’t even get a ticket.”

“Why were you in a police car?”

“Troy pulled me over. He wanted to tell me that Matt isn’t his boyfriend.”

“Really?” Pearl turned from agitated to confused to intrigued. “And why did he want to tell you that?”

“Because apparently Matt is miserable, and it’s all my fault.”

“Why do you sound so happy about that?”

“Because I can fix it.”

“Well, it’s about damn time. I’ve been telling you since you moved home that you needed to ask that young man out on a date. I don’t know why you never listen to me; I always know what’s best for you.”

Ben had wanted to call Matt right away, tell him that he'd been an idiot, and insist they go out right then, but he stopped himself. He could still be too late. Maybe Matt was tired of waiting. Maybe he didn't want to give Ben the opportunity to hurt him. Plus, the fundraiser was the next night, and Ben was going to be really busy. He came up with excuse after excuse. He knew that he wanted not only to date Matt, but to have a relationship with him. His grandmother had been right again; he couldn't let one bad relationship ruin his chance at happiness. He just didn't have quite enough courage to put it all out there right then. He decided to put it off just another day or two.

Ben smoothed his hair and straightened the lapels of his tux. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of a masquerade ball, but he had put so much work into it that he was looking forward to it. He was also looking forward to seeing Matt in a tux.

His grandmother looked stunning in a peacock-blue dress. They checked their coats and pulled on the feathered masks they were handed at the door. Ben immediately searched for Matt and was disappointed when he couldn't spot him.

He danced two waltzes with Pearl before getting her settled at a table with her friends and heading to the bar to place their drink order.

He pulled his mask off, glad to see that most of the guests were doing the same. He turned back to the table while he was waiting for his drinks, and thought that he saw Matt heading out the door on the far side of the ballroom, but he couldn't be sure.

He tipped the bartender and took his drinks, handing one to Pearl and taking a sip of his own.

"Thank you, dear. Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, Gran, what do you need?"

"I think that I left my day planner in the library down the hall when I was here earlier. Would you mind checking to see?"

"Of course not. Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"It just slipped my mind. The library is just down the hall, second door on the left."

Ben was happy to have a reason to get out of the ballroom even for a couple of minutes. He knew that his grandmother's friends would be asking him to dance before too long. He pushed open the door and stopped short.

“Matt?”

Matt spun around. “Ben, what are you doing here? Did Pearl send you to help me look for her planner?”

Just then Ben’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and read the text from his grandmother.

Just remembered I left it on my desk at home.

He shook his head. “We’ve been set up,” he said with a smile.

“What?”

“This is my grandmother’s not-so-subtle way of getting us together.”

“Oh. Why is that?”

Ben took a second to take in the sight of Matt in his tux and wondered how he’d ever thought he could resist the man. “Because I’m an idiot.”

Matt looked even more confused. “You’re going to have to help me out here, Ben.”

Ben slowly closed the distance between them. When he was standing toe-to-toe with Matt, he reached up and cupped his cheek before pulling him down into a soft, sweet kiss.

“Ben?” Matt asked in a shaky voice.

“I don’t want to just be your friend, Matt. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it.”

“Are you sure? Because I can’t seem to do halfway with you,” Matt said quietly.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Matt searched Ben’s eyes, and when he seemed satisfied with what he saw there, he pulled Ben into a passionate kiss. Ben clutched at his shoulders. He’d never been kissed like that in his life. He lost himself and was seriously considering seeing how comfortable the leather couch behind them was when his phone went off again with another text from his grandmother.

Take it home boys. You don’t want to cause a scandal at your father’s fundraiser.

Ben laughed as he grabbed Matt’s hand and pulled him toward the exit.

Ben stood leaning against his bedroom doorframe, sipping at a cup of coffee and watching his boyfriend sleep. Boyfriend. Sometimes that still surprised him, and he often wished he could tell his younger self how things were going to work out, just so he could see the expression on his own face.

They'd been almost inseparable since the night of the fundraiser two months earlier, and nothing had ever felt more easy or right than being with Matt. Looking back on his relationship with Lucas, Ben could see how unhealthy it had been. He'd never been as happy or as complete as he was with Matt, and he realized how foolish he'd been to let his fear control him.

Max's tail thumped against the door as he pushed his nose against Ben's hip. Ben scratched his head. "You want to wake him up, buddy?" Max's tail started going faster, and Ben laughed, "Go ahead. Wake."

Max was off like a shot, bounding onto the bed and littering Matt's face with kisses. Matt burrowed further under the covers in a futile attempt to escape. "Do you know how much I hate you for teaching him that?" he grumbled, his voice rough with sleep.

Ben laughed as he crossed the room, setting his coffee on the dresser as he passed. "Max, down." Max gave a pathetic whine but hopped down, and Ben took his place, pulling the covers back and peppering kisses across Matt's shoulders before laying down on his side, facing him.

Matt rolled over so that they were sharing a pillow, running his hand through Ben's hair as they exchanged goofy grins.

"Good morning," Ben whispered as he leaned forward to press a kiss to Matt's lips.

"Come back to bed," Matt said as he attempted to pull the covers over both of them.

Ben hopped up, landing a smack on Matt's ass as he did so. "Nope. Not that it's not a tempting offer, but you need to get in the shower. You know my gran will kill me if we're late to help her set up for the barbecue."

Matt groaned but rolled out of bed. "We do *not* want that," he said as he headed for the bathroom.

"It's cute how scared of her you are." Ben laughed.

Matt turned around and pointed a finger at Ben. "Reasonable people are smart to have a healthy fear of those in charge," he said before he closed the door behind him.

They pulled into the driveway of Richard and Pearl's house an hour later. Max bounded up the front lawn while they unloaded the last-minute groceries Pearl had asked them to pick up. Guests were scheduled to start arriving in an hour, and Ben knew he and Matt would be put to work as soon as they walked in the door.

Two hours later and the party was in full swing. Ben had invited Alec, Brandon, and Troy. The five of them were in the pool. Ben was on Matt's shoulders, trying to get Brandon and Alec to play a game of chicken with them. Max jumped in, not wanting to be left out of the fun.

Pearl, Doris, Judy, and Marie were in lounge chairs next to the pool, sipping mimosas and catching up on the latest gossip.

Judy sighed and shook her head as she watched the boys goof around. "My grandson is an idiot."

The End

Author Bio

Growing up, AJ always had her nose stuck in a book. Her vivid imagination made it difficult for her to decide what she wanted to be when she grew up. She has a B.A. degree in Political Science and spent twelve years working in management in the veterinary medicine field. She left her job as hospital director of a companion animal hospital a few years ago to devote herself full-time to her daughter who is on the Autism Spectrum.

AJ has always been creative and loves the way she can build worlds and characters in the stories she writes. She also enjoys jewelry making and paper crafts.

AJ grew up outside a small town in northern Michigan and currently resides in the southwest corner of the state with her high school sweetheart husband, her daughter, one cat, and one dog (both rescues).

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