

Caffe Latte

Love Like Coffee #1



Dee Aditya

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

CAFFE LATTE

By Dee Aditya

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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CAFFE LATTE

By Dee Aditya

Photo Description

A gorgeous man with black hair, thick eyebrows, and a seven o'clock shadow is looking out from the photo, amusement in his eyes. He has dimples, slight bunny teeth, and a teasing grin that stops your heart and makes you want to swoon and melt into a pile of goo.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Look at that smile. Isn't he gorgeous? I'm so lucky I've managed to snap this picture. That's the way he looks at me when we're alone. When no one else can see.

But... and yes, isn't there always a but? When anyone else is around, it's a different story. He acts as if he doesn't know me. He won't look at me. He won't even acknowledge I exist. And he sure doesn't stick up for me when his mates talk trash.

I know I should walk away. I know I don't deserve to be treated like this. Then he sneaks back in, making sure nobody has seen him and he'll smile at me again just like that. How can I tell him to get lost? What do I do?

Sincerely,

Shaz

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humorous, college, jock, artist, coffee, Pokémon, lethal smiles & dimples of doom, homophobia, atherosclerosis-inducing cheese

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CAFFE LATTE

By Dee Aditya

Prologue

The first time I set eyes on him, I was so blinded by his perfect grin that I walked straight into a table, bruised my hip, and spilled my latte all over myself.

The first time I heard his laughter across the cafeteria, I stubbed my toe, nearly tripped, and spilled my latte all over myself.

The first time I saw him take off his shirt to reveal the tank top he was wearing, putting his glorious arms on display, I stumbled right into a wall, almost broke my nose, and guess what?

Yup, I spilled my latte all over myself.

See a pattern? I did, too. I might have been too awed by the gorgeous specimen of manly man that was Francisco Ibarra to notice much of anything that wasn't him, but I *did* see what the pattern meant: that this man was a threat to my safety, both to my physical state and that of my clothes. But meh, who cared when you had a hot guy to look at and drool over from a safe distance? I certainly didn't...

...Until the first time he looked back.

Chapter 1

“Heyyy, Ben,” said Haylee, smiling too wide and slightly punching my shoulder. That was Haylee for you. No dainty gestures for her, nope.

I just gave her a suspicious look. Because Haylee didn’t smile like that. She twitched her lips now and then, sometimes she even curled her lips crookedly, but this toothpaste commercial act was just plain not done.

“Are you all right?” I asked, squinting at her. “Did you eat something? Some behavior-altering substances, maybe?”

She huffed and punched me again, in the same spot, glaring at me with this evil scowl. But at least she was back to normal.

“You haven’t found any jobs this semester, right?” She plopped down beside me on our sofa and reached for the other half of my sandwich.

I carefully tore the crusts away before I gave it to her. “No... Why?”

She gave me a small smile (ah, much better) as she reached for it. “Well, since I got the internship at Keller Design Co, I can’t work my evening shift at the café anymore, and they really need someone to fill that position. I thought, since you wanted a job, maybe you could take it?” She took a bite and chewed. “I already told them about you, and they want you to come by. The job is pretty much yours if you want it, I think, thanks to my glowing recommendation.”

“Really?” I was surprised, but I really shouldn’t have been. Haylee was a fantastic best friend like that. “When do they want me to meet them?”

“We can go tomorrow afternoon, maybe? You don’t have any classes, right? The sooner you can meet them, the better.”

I had only morning classes tomorrow, so I would be free in the afternoon, but Francisco would be at the cafeteria for lunch...

I mentally slapped myself upside the head. Was I really going to put off a job prospect to ogle a guy who was barely aware of my existence?

“Yeah, I can make it tomorrow. What time do I go?”

She smiled at me in that crooked way she had, and I swear, her dark eyes *gleamed*. “Meet me at the cafeteria for lunch. We can go after you’ve had your dose of Mr. Smiles-like-a-bullet-to-the-heart.”

I rolled my eyes, but I could feel the blush crawling up my face anyway. I shoved the crusts in my mouth to keep from answering her.

Well, *maybe* I'd clutched at my heart like that when he smiled that sexy dimple-revealing smile for the first time (It was a reflexive action!), and *maybe* I'd made that pathetic whimper-keening noise (It was reflexive! Reflexive!) in front of Haylee, her boyfriend, and pretty much everyone in the room, but that was *once*. That didn't give her any right to blow it up like it was such a big deal.

At least, not many people noticed me when I'd done that. Sometimes, being the quiet, nerdy guy is very convenient. I just blended in, despite my outrageously (dyed) purple hair.

“Shut up.”

She chuckled at me, swiped the cheese slice from my sandwich, and ate it before she got up and went back to her room.

I take my words back. She's the worst best friend ever.

I arrived at the cafeteria before Haylee did, so I got a can of soda and settled at my usual table to wait for her. I also stealthily looked around, under the pretense of drinking my soda, to spot if Francisco was sitting at the basketball team's table.

It's like an art form, see. I couldn't just directly look there. I had to take a sip, set my can down, and cast a casual glance out of the corner of my eyes, like I was surveying the room. Once I established that he was there, I picked up my soda and started drinking, looking at him over the rim of the can. It was like hitting two birds with one stone: I got to drink my soda *and* enjoy the sight of him laughing and talking with his friends, while going completely unnoticed. I was practically a pro at this. Very stealth, such covert.

Francisco, or Frankie, as his friends called him, was biting into his burger. His two front teeth were slightly larger than the rest. Bunny teeth. The man had the cutest bunny teeth. He was chewing with his mouth closed while simultaneously smiling at something someone said. It shouldn't have looked so good with his cheek bulging like a squirrel, but it did. He swallowed his mouthful and laughed, and I could see dimples on his stubbled cheeks. Those bushy eyebrows of his scrunched together, and laugh lines showed around his dark eyes. His broad shoulders stretched his white T-shirt, bright against his tan skin.

His tongue peeked out, licked at a smudge of ketchup on the corner of his mouth, and disappeared again behind his lips. He laughed again and used a knuckle to swipe something invisible away from his eye.

I swallowed a too-large gulp of soda and choked a little. I didn't spit it out, though, thank God.

I'd abandoned all pretenses of drinking my soda, and I was just holding the can to my lips as I blatantly stared at Francisco and his Dimples of Doom. Which was when he looked right at me.

He was looking at me looking at him. And he was *smiling*, a sexy little curl of his mouth, like he knew exactly what I was doing.

I turned away so fast it was a surprise my glasses didn't fly off my face. The freaking hell was that?

It sort of felt like a hallucination; I wanted to bang my head on the table to dissipate the image of his smile from my head. As it was, I just settled for lowering my head down on the table—gently, I didn't want to give myself a lump on my forehead—and hid my flushed face from his (and everyone else's) view.

I wondered if the reactions he provoked from me were natural, or healthy. Maybe I should talk to a therapist? I didn't like therapists, though. They gave crap advice that never worked, and on top of that, they were expensive. I've worked out my issues more by playing Pokémon, systematically defeating gym leader after gym leader with my badass Charizard and equally badass Mewtwo, than by lying on some stranger's couch and pouring my heart out.

"Ngghh." I ground my forehead on the cool steel surface. Which was frankly disgusting, because God knew how many germs were lurking on it, but it felt so good against my hot face.

I was saved from wondering if it was okay to lift my head when Haylee roughly yanked me up by my shoulder and locked her arm around my neck in a Haylee Hug. "Your seven minutes in heaven are up. Come on, time to go."

"Hold your horses. I don't think I even got seven minutes," I said, focusing my gaze at any place that wasn't the jock table.

She chuckled and picked up my abandoned soda can, downing what was left in one go, before tugging on my sleeve. "You can make up the minutes on Wednesday, stop whining. Besides, it's your fault you got caught staring anyway. With as often as you do it, one would think you'd know how to be more discreet by now. You disappoint me, young grasshopper."

“Why are you always in such a hurry? Dammit.” I yanked my arm away so she didn’t rip my sleeve clean off. “Your impression of your grandfather is appalling, by the way. And what do you mean by ‘all the staring’? When have I ever stared at another person before Francisco happened?”

She gave me a flat look. “Sophomore year at high school: Nate Petersen. Junior year: Aaron Veller. Senior year: Timmy Han. Freshman year at college: Scott White. Sophomo—”

I clamped my fingers over her mouth. “Please. They were just people I looked at because they gave me inspiration to draw. We’ve been over this already, Haylee. Don’t make me out to be some kind of stalker, okay?”

“You mean to tell me that you’re not?” Haylee’s smugness was evident in her eyes. I turned my nose up at her with a “hmpf” and increased my pace.

She caught up with me soon enough, lips pursed to keep from laughing.

As we walked, I felt anxious about the fact that he’d caught me staring. I bumped shoulders with Haylee. “Lee?”

She bumped back. “Yeah?”

“He saw me looking at him today.”

“I gathered as much.”

I pinched her arm. “Don’t sass me, woman. I think he’s on to me.”

“Benny boy, *everyone* is on to you. You just keep deluding yourself that your crush is a secret.”

“No way.” And then I paused, a little horrified. “You *are* kidding, right?”

“Jeez, you’re so easy.” She waved me off. “No, I don’t think anyone else knows. Why are you so worked up about this anyway?”

“Just something about his smile. He wouldn’t think I’m being weird or anything, right? I mean, I’m sure he catches a lot of people staring at him, since he’s pretty much a modern Spanish Adonis—” Haylee snorted at that, and I pinched her again “—but what do you think he thought about me?”

“Like you just said—” she looked at me pointedly “—he must catch a lot of people looking at him, because he is pretty good looking, though *Adonis* might be too much. And don’t you *dare* pinch me again.” She glared, and I tucked my hands into my pant pockets. “What if he does think you’re weird anyway?”

“See, I actually *like* him, and I don’t want him to think I’m a creep. Is that too much to ask for?”

“You don’t even know him!”

“I know enough,” I said, indignant. “I know he’s always calm even when everyone else is worked up, and I know he’s laid back and friendly. There’s just, there’s this feeling I get when I look at him, like butterflies in my stomach and—Haylee! Don’t laugh! I’m being serious!”

People turned to look as Haylee stopped in the middle of the pavement to clutch her stomach and chortle. “Good God, Ben, you’re hopeless, I swear.”

“Yes, go ahead and laugh while your best friend pours his heart out to you.” I pulled her out of the way so people would stop giving us irritated looks. “Let’s get moving; we’re going to be late.”

We started walking again, and I ignored the looks Haylee kept giving me. She was right. I was hopeless. I was the kind of guy who worked hard if I wanted to get things done, but when it came to guys, and people in general, I was a coward.

My gaydar was faulty at best, and my brain-to-mouth filter had apparently never gotten the memo that it was supposed to exist. I got chills at the prospect of approaching new people, because I always managed to say something that pissed them off. I never made the first move when it came to guys I found attractive, and they never made the move either, so my dating life was what you could call nonexistent. I had yet to find someone who was at least marginally interested in me, who didn’t mind that I was way too blunt, a little too short, and could recite, in Pokédex order, the entire list of Pokémon available in every game ever released. When Francisco transferred here during spring semester, I only had to take one look at him to feel like maybe he was the person I had been waiting for.

Except I knew nothing about him, and I was way too afraid to go and talk to him, and it sure as hell didn’t look like he was going to come talk to me. So there was a pretty good chance that waiting would be all I did.

Gosh, this sucked.

Chapter 2

I should've suspected something when I found the place was named *Café Café*.

The flooring was a dark wood, with what looked like thin strips of glitter inlaid here and there randomly. The section dividers were glossy, wooden bookshelves about three feet high and crammed with books, from encyclopedias to science fiction to Enid Blyton. The left wall featured framed typography posters and a large chalkboard that was like a testimonial / announcement scribbling space. A chandelier kind of thing was hanging from the ceiling in the center of the café, but instead of crystals or lights, it had Polaroids hanging from the frame. The pictures featured totally random things: ducklings, Siberian huskies, a vintage car, a group of fresh-faced children sitting on a picnic table, a five-tiered wedding cake, crumpled chocolate wrappers on an open picture book. The menu was displayed prominently right above the coffee machines behind the counter, hand-lettered in white chalk.

The best feature, though, was the large wall mural that spanned the whole right wall. It looked like it was done in watercolor and depicted a tree with a sprawling canopy. But if you looked closer, you could see words and phrases twisting through the tree.

I stood dumbly, not able to keep myself from caressing the curling words with my eyes. It was so beautiful, so detailed. I was following the branch that read "*I am the master of my fate:*" when Haylee caught my wrist and dragged me to the cashier. "Rain, here's the guy I was talking about, my replacement."

I was stuck dumb for the second time in five minutes. This *Rain*—the person I might have to call "Boss" if I got the job—had rainbow-colored hair. I kid you not. It was a riotous mass of color, but it looked amazing, and suddenly I wanted rainbow-hair too.

She smiled, no, *beamed* at me, with the genuine eye crinkle and all, and I could already tell that she was one of those rare people who were genuinely happy all the time. If this were an anime, Rain would be that character who had blooming flowers and sparkly clouds in the background whenever they made an appearance.

"It's so nice to meet you!" she said, stepping from behind the counter to give me a handshake. "I'm Rain. Rain Walker."

“Your hair is awesome!” I said, my usual fear of messing up introductions completely forgotten in the face of her smile. And then another thing struck me. “Wait. *Rain Walker?*”

Rain simply laughed and waved it off. “My mother had strange ways of amusing herself. I’m much better off than my brother, at least.” She pulled a section of her hair over her shoulder. “And the hair, it’s just chalk. I can teach you how to do it, if you want.”

I self-consciously tucked my longer, dyed, black bangs behind my ears and mustered up a smile in return. It would be nice to lay off the liquid dyes for a while—they didn’t really do much for my hair’s texture. “I would love that. Thank you.”

“Why don’t we sit down, yes?” She walked over to a low table that had two half-circle couches around it, and I followed behind her. There were two men already sitting there. I recognized Abel, Haylee’s boyfriend. He nodded at me and smiled reassuringly, and I smiled back. Rain sat down next to a guy with platinum blond hair and a dark brown apron over his black T-shirt, assorted pins on the neck straps, the biggest one bearing the café’s logo. Haylee perched on the arm of the sofa, right next to Abel.

That was when I realized I was on one side and the others were facing me. It made me nervous.

The blond looked mildly disgruntled, judging from the slight furrow between his eyebrows. Was I doing something wrong?

Rain cleared her throat, and I shifted my focus to her. She was easier to look at than the blond whose frown was way too intimidating. “Ben, these are Octavian and Abel, but I think you know Abel already,” she said, indicating to the blond guy and Abel in turn. Octavian gave me a nod, and Abel grinned and waved. “Octavian is the co-owner of Café Café. Why don’t you tell us something about yourself?”

Ah, no interview can be called an interview without this question making an appearance, can it? I gathered whatever confidence I had and infused my voice with it. “I’m twenty-one, and I’m studying game art and animation at the state university. And I haven’t ever worked in a coffee shop before.”

Rain looked at Octavian, who rolled his eyes and sighed. That seemed to be some sort of signal, because Rain turned back to me with a smile. “That’s all right, you’ll learn things as you go, and it’s not that difficult either.”

I nodded and smiled. “I’ll work hard.”

For the first time, I saw Octavian’s lips quirk slightly upward. Rain’s smile turned into a grin. “Since you’re essentially replacing Haylee, you’ll be taking over her evening shift. That’s five till ten p.m., Monday through Saturday and every second Sunday. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. All my classes finish before three, so I’m free in the evenings.”

She clapped her hands. “Great! You’re now an employee of Café Café. Congratulations!”

Abel and Haylee gave me two thumbs up each, and Abel cheered. “Welcome to the funhouse, Benny boy!”

Octavian shook his head at their antics and handed me a clipboard with some forms on it. His eyes were a stunning light gray-blue, and he looked like he was carved from marble; at first glance I could tell he was a very no-nonsense guy. I wondered what had possessed him to allow the place to be called Café Café.

Like, really. Café Café: the most café a café can be.

Ha! That’s actually not that bad a tagline. Maybe I should make it a button pin. Or a T-shirt? It had been a long time since I messed around with typography. Maybe I should do it tonight.

“—Ben!”

I blinked at the paper for a second before I snapped out of it and looked at the people sitting on the other side of the table.

“Good, you’re back.” Rain looked amused. “Fill those out and return them to me,” she said, indicating the forms. She handed me something soft wrapped up in sparkly paper. “You can start on Monday.”

Chapter 3

The evening rush had died down, and we were all relaxing. Rain was nodding her head and softly singing along with the radio as she fiddled with the espresso machine. Octavian was silently arranging the freshly washed cups in their racks.

I was on my break, sitting in one of the ridiculously comfy chairs that were placed against the wall with the mural, working on a Steve Rogers/Tony Stark fanart commission in my sketchbook. Personally, I preferred Stucky over Stony, but of course I wasn't going to let that get between me and cash.

It was almost 8:30, and the café was empty save for a couple who were sitting opposite each other in the wrought iron chairs with the cute, circular table that had flowers carved on its edges. My table had a glass top. The decor in this place was a bit of a mix, since the furniture was collected from various yard sales and thrift stores, all Rain's doing.

I sat with my book and pencils for a while till the couple left around half an hour later, hand in hand and laughing about something. I got up and gathered their mugs to take to the back: one displaying a Calvin and Hobbes comic, the other bearing the faces of Charlie Brown and Snoopy.

In the week that I had worked here, I'd completely fallen in love with the cute, quirky little café. They had some awesome coffee and pastries, and on top of that, their decor was cozy, if strange. Rain and Octavian were easy to work with, and I hadn't experienced any of my new person anxiety with them. I could even go so far as to count them my friends already.

Rain was always sunshine and smiles, and taught me how to chalk dye my hair the second day I came in. I now had pretty, red and dark yellow streaks—with the rest remaining an ashy, dirty blond from the black dye job that was almost washed out—a tribute to Blaziken, one of my favorite fire type Pokémon. She was also super patient with me as I fumbled around and tried to keep my espresso macchiatos and espresso con pannas straight.

Octavian didn't talk to me much, but Rain told me he just didn't talk to anyone in general. He hadn't spoken to me directly till the third day I worked there, and even then it was only to inform me that my apron string was undone.

Speaking of aprons... remember the packet Rain handed me when I joined? It had my employee apron. It didn't have the store name or anything on it. We

had a “five pins or more” rule, which I thought was much better. We weren’t given name tags, but we had to have pins that said something about our personality. Unsurprisingly, out of the ten pins I had, three were the compulsory “Café Café,” “Coffee is always the answer,” and “Chocolate is happiness” pins, and the rest were Pokémon. I had badges of my favorite gyms—the ones where I had to struggle to beat the gym leader—that I got on Etsy. They were proudly displayed along the neck straps, as well as a tiny PVC figurine of Mewtwo that I’d won in a bidding war on eBay. It was one of my favorites, and the first Pokémon collector’s item I had ever bought, so it was very special to me. I’d always loved Mewtwo; it was so kick-ass and it had some of the best specs, on top of which—

Damn. I should stop spacing out like that.

“Welcome back to the present.” My boss was holding out a notebook. I had the feeling she’d been doing so the whole time I’d been staring off into space.

“I’m sorry!” I hurriedly set the mugs down in the dishwasher and reached for the book. “What were you saying?”

Rain gave me this grin. I think it was supposed to be a leer, but it got waylaid at cute and never made it beyond that. I managed to not laugh. “Daydreaming about Mr. Smiles again?”

I felt my face warm. I had been, ahem, looking at Francisco’s Facebook profile on my phone during break one day, reading his latest status update and admiring his profile picture—he was in a black wife beater and ratty jeans, leaning against the hood of a car and generally looking like some sort of grunge deity—and modeling him in various clothes and poses in my head.

When I finally turned away from my phone, dissolving the imaginary photo shoot that had just happened in my head, I found Rain, Octavian, and quite a few customers giving me amused looks.

My life: Entertainment Central (for others).

The customers didn’t say anything, but Rain had wanted to see whom I was crushing on, and she even said please and everything. So I showed her, because I was a sucker.

So I ended up showing the picture to Octavian as well (in for a penny, in for a pound, right?). And they teased me about it—Rain, with her good-natured grin and wink, and Octavian, with an amused quirk of his lips every time he caught me looking at my phone.

“No, I was just thinking about my badges,” I said, and boy, didn’t that sound lame.

“That’s all right.” She patted my shoulder and moved to organize the back room for the next day. While she placed boxes of ingredients in their respective places (something Octavian was really strict about), I took the inventory notebook and made entries on what was running low and what needed to be ordered tomorrow.

“So, did you see him today?” Rain liked to ask me this every day.

“As a matter of fact, I did. And you know what? He actually winked at me!” I wasn’t even kidding. I’d walked around with a red face for a whole hour after, constantly saying “oh my God!” to myself.

“That’s a good thing, right? That means he’s interested.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “That’s what I thought too. But if he really were interested, he would have asked me out a long time ago. I think he’s just amusing himself by toying with the nerdy kid.”

“I resent that you say ‘nerdy kid’ like it’s an insult.” She gave me a disappointed look. It was the first expression that I had seen on her face that wasn’t some variation of happy.

I just shrugged and doodled in one corner of the book. “It’s the truth though, isn’t it? And he’s in some fancy position in the basketball team. Why would he even be interested in me when he could have pretty much anyone else, anyway? The whole ‘jock falls for the nerd’ thing only happens in romance books and boys-love manga.”

Rain gave me an odd look, the same one that Haylee gave me often enough when she thought I was being difficult. Except Haylee’s look was more angry, and Rain just looked sad. “And so you’re not even going to try?”

“I like to pick my battles wisely.” I smiled.

Rain regarded me with pursed lips, the “you’re hopeless” audible even when she hadn’t said it. I shrugged at her. I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I showed her the book, and Rain *hmm*ed and added in a small to-do list. When she was done, we walked back to the front of the store, and Rain didn’t say anything else.

We joined Octavian in the kitchen area, and I listened as my two bosses discussed what tomorrow’s special would be as we wiped the counters. They

were saying something about cake, and I let myself drift before I became way too hungry just listening to them.

Predictably, my mind wandered off to cavort with a sexy, muscle shirt-clad Francisco, all the while puzzling about what that wink had meant. I'd dismissed it as another illusion and had managed to forget about it, but Rain had brought it back up again. And now it wouldn't leave me alone.

All three of us looked up when we heard the door open with a squeak.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

There he was, walking into the café like he wasn't aware of the things he did to my body. Well, he wasn't, but that's not the point.

He got an armchair in a corner of the shop, right next to the window. Octavian and Rain didn't realize who he was at first, but they caught on quickly enough. And that was when it happened.

He looked up, right at me, and his eyes widened, as if he couldn't believe he was running into me here of all places. And then he smiled.

This was no hallucination folks, Francisco Ibarra was honest-to-God smiling at me. The very same lethal smile that had me tripping on myself on a regular basis, with his Dimples of Doom clearly showing and everything.

There was a *thump-smash-splatter*, and I tore my eyes away from the vision in front of me to see if my heart had finally exploded out of my chest. Nope, turned out that the noise was just two baristas getting the full effect of that smile for the first time. Octavian was cursing as he scrambled to collect the broken glass. Rain blinked rapidly as though she'd been looking directly into the sun for too long before she shook her head and turned to help Octavian with the mess. They might have been blushing, too. I knew I was.

Rain none too subtly pushed me toward him and shoved a pen and a small notepad in my hand. "What are you waiting for? Go!"

Wait, what?

I dug my heels into the carpet and gripped the counter so hard my fingers ached. "Don't make me! What if he laughs in my face?"

"None of that." Octavian gave me a level look and effortlessly pried my fingers off the wood. "Go take his order. Introduce yourself, so you can quit giving cow eyes to your phone every five minutes." And then, he added as an afterthought, "If he laughs at you, I'll kick him out."

With those encouraging words, I managed to make it to him without tripping and falling on my face, or passing out because of a lack of air to my brain, thank God. Now I just had to open my mouth and make words come out. “Um. Erm.”

Words! Sensible, intelligible words! Work, stupid tongue, work! “Uh, what can, um, what can I get you?”

He looked amused. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here. Ben, right?”

I felt my world tilt. Francisco Ibarra knew me? “How—I mean, yeah. Yeah. How do you know my name?”

“I heard your Asian friend—Kurosawa? I heard her yelling at you about something.”

“Really. Haylee doesn’t yell at me during lunch. And she never calls me by name when she yells, either.” I gave him a suspicious squint.

He laughed. “Okay, you got me. I saw it on this.” He placed a square, yellow game cartridge on the table. It had my name written on one edge with fine-tipped marker: BEN MALCOLM. “I found it this afternoon, and I figured it had to be yours. It was under where you usually sit.”

I nearly snatched the cartridge off the table. “I didn’t even know I was missing this! Thank you.” Hell. If he hadn’t found it, I might have lost it forever! That was the first cartridge I bought with money I saved up.

“Will you have a coffee with me to express your gratitude?” he asked, cocking his head at me slightly and smirking.

I blinked at him. “Me? Now?”

He nodded. “Sure, if it’s okay. If not, then some other time.”

“I’ll have to ask,” I said. Everything felt like it was happening to someone else. Had I hit my head somewhere? Had I fallen asleep while drawing again? “Tell me what you want to order, though.”

“Hazelnut latte. And you can get anything you want.”

I turned away, paused, and gave myself a little shake before I walked back to the counter. Rain was anxious, and Octavian looked mildly concerned. “A hazelnut latte,” I told Rain, and she printed out a bill for the order. “He wants me to have coffee with him. Right now. What do I do?”

“You have coffee with him,” Rain said, matter-of-factly, and I guessed if Rain said so, it would be right. “What do you want?”

“I’ll take a latte, too,” I told her, and Octavian pulled out a black mug with the café’s logo on it, and a white mug with a paw print design. I watched him pull espresso shots and prepare the milk. He handled the cup with easy precision as he poured the milk with gentle wrist movements, and a pattern of leaves emerged. I watched him intently just to calm all the random thoughts that were flying around my brain.

Was it some sort of coincidence that he’d come here? He did look genuinely surprised to see me, but then he’d had that cartridge with him. Had he just been carrying that thing around? And what was up with the flirting?

I couldn’t help but be suspicious of the motive behind his appearance tonight. And that winking thing he did this afternoon. And the smiles that had started a few weeks before.

I carried the tray back to his table and carefully set the mugs down. They were china, heavy and smooth, and my fingers were slightly damp from being in a fist while the coffee was being made.

I sat down opposite him and placed the tray on my lap. I pulled my plain latte closer to me and tried to not look like I was freaking out. The internal guessing game was not doing anything to make me feel better. “So tell me, why are you *really* here?” God, please don’t let him see how nervous I am. Please don’t let him take offense and storm off.

He laughed. With his bunny teeth showing and everything. Ugh. “I promise, it was just a coincidence. I had no idea you were working here.”

“So you were just carrying the cartridge in your pocket because...”

“I put it in my pocket and forgot about it. And then I saw you, and I remembered I had it, so I gave it to you before I forgot again.” His lips quirked to one side, teasing. “Do you always interrogate people when you first speak to them, or am I special?”

Oh, if only he knew just how special he was. “I don’t interrogate everyone. Just people who wink at me.”

“So I am special,” he said, grinning. He had an overbite and a faded pimple scar on his nose. One upper canine was slightly bigger than the other, and his dimple peeped through his stubble. I found myself charmed.

“Not really,” I fibbed, reaching for the sugar jar the same time as he did. I got there first. “Um, you have it.” I pushed it toward him.

He poured three sugars into his cup, and when I gave him a surprised look, he smiled shyly. “I like it sweet,” he said.

For some reason, that shy smile got me like nothing else did. All the nervousness I usually had when I met a person, that I’d successfully managed to hold off for so long, came rushing in full force. “Hey, I didn’t say anything.” I handed him a wooden stirrer before adding two spoons of sugar to my own cup and then adding another one. And another one. “I have a pretty bad sweet tooth myself. Octavian makes this chocolate dessert that’s super awesome. We call it ‘death by chocolate,’ and it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted, even if it looks like mud. It’s our café specialty, and he makes it very rarely because that makes it more special you know.” My mouth is not stopping. I swear to God, I cannot control my mouth. Someone help me please. “It has chocolate ice cream and brownies and fudge and crushed chocolate bars and other stuff. It always gets sold out pretty fast though, and sometimes people even call in advance to make us hold one for them and—” Stupid brain, abort mission, abort, *abort*—

“Whoa, hey, slow down,” he said, interrupting me and successfully getting my mouth to close, staying my hand before I could add a fifth spoon of sugar to my cup. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to add any more sugar.”

His fingers were touching my hand. And he was probably thinking I was some sort of nutcase.

Things had just been fine and normal. Oh GOD *WHY*. “I’m sorry. Sometimes when I get nervous, I tend to ramble, and when I ramble, I get more nervous, and then I overdo whatever it is I’m doing at the moment, and dammit I’m doing it again.” I pulled my hand away and clenched it into a fist on the tray handle.

“There’s no need to apologize. Though now I really want to try that dessert too.”

Was he serious or was he just placating me? “Octavian says he usually makes them on Mondays.”

He nodded. “I’ll try to be here on Monday, then.”

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped when his phone beeped loudly. He sighed when he checked the caller ID. “Damn. I have to get going now.” He gave me his teasing smile again. “It was fun talking to you, Ben. I’ll see you around.”

And then, with another wink, he was gone.

The bills under his now-empty coffee mug were the only proof that I hadn't dreamed the whole thing up.

What even.

Chapter 4

I walked home in a daze of confusion. Rain had been especially thrilled, and she had sent me off with a tight hug and exclamations about her café being the catalyst for a “beautiful romance,” and Octavian had just sighed and pulled Rain away from me before the threat of suffocation became real.

Francisco didn't come by on Monday, and I was thankful. It didn't stop me from spending the time till Wednesday in the same sort of disbelieving haze. Of course, Rain told Abel, and Abel told Haylee, so I was saved the effort of telling the story again.

Haylee was mad that she hadn't been there to see my first close-up encounter with Francisco. (“Did he really say all that? Are you sure you didn't just dream all that up after hitting your head somewhere and passing out?”) But I could guess that she was just angry about the fact that she wasn't the one to shove me at him.

Surprisingly though, there wasn't any teasing or jokes at my expense. I wasn't going to question my good luck, so I just kept quiet and refrained from asking, “Are you okay? Are you sure you're Haylee and not an alien?” And I filled sketchbooks with Francisco's gorgeous smile and his godly shoulders and arms.

I was pleased, but also mildly dubious of how things had unfolded. I didn't know what Francisco's intentions were, and I didn't know what to think about the fact that he seemed interested in me.

I got out my old Game Boy console, put in the Pokémon Yellow cartridge that Francisco had returned, and loaded a new game. When I felt confused and restless, Pokémon always made me feel grounded and not so overwhelmed. But it wasn't doing much to help me now.

Maybe I should call up Haylee's grandpa. The man loved drama, so he'd probably be interested in mine, and he'd be pleased to hear that I was starting to have something vaguely resembling a love life.

That decided, I got my phone and dialed him up.

Wednesday dawned.

The fact that Francisco would be there at lunch was a warm, roiling weight in my stomach, and I was as eager as I was terrified. Would he talk to me

again? Would he maybe, I don't know, wave at me, or something? What would happen if someone from my program saw me interacting with him? What if some of *his* friends saw him interacting with me?

Turned out that I didn't have to worry about any of that, because Francisco didn't turn my way once.

I spent the entire time angled away from his table, looking intently at my Game Boy screen where a wild Pikachu had attacked me, simply running my thumbs over the A and Up buttons without pressing them and advancing to a battle. I was wasting the batteries, and at this rate I'd need new ones by the time I was done with my classes today. I felt way too conspicuous, probably because the neon orange and red that I'd chosen this week for my hair looked as bright as a Vegas billboard next to Haylee's jet-black ponytail with its blue highlights.

"I know you're trying to be cool about this," Haylee said, calmly sipping her soda, "but it's not working. Cut it out. He isn't looking anywhere near here. No one is looking anywhere near here."

"Maybe it's because you're glaring at them," I offered, finally pressing the A button and starting the fight.

"I'm not glaring at anyone. And besides, I will glare at who I want, when I want." She shrugged. "It's my right, or something."

"No, I really don't think it is. And besides"—I bent forward a little, in imitation of a slight stoop, and raised my index finger—"violence is not the answer, young one." My imitation of Haylee's grandfather was perfect, since I had been the boy whom he liked to randomly waylay and lecture on a daily basis.

For an eighty-year-old, the guy was very agile. Then again, karate does that to you.

"Yeah, yeah," she grumped. "Put that thing aside and eat your lunch. It's disrespectful."

"Mm, okay." I saved my game and carefully tucked my Game Boy into my bag, before digging into my plate of noodles. "Do you think I'm crazy for getting so worked up about this?"

She gave me a sideways glance. "Of course."

"I know, right? But I can't stop myself from thinking it either. It's all just so bizarre. Why did he flirt with me back then?"

“Probably because he likes you? Jeez Ben, if you’re trying to get me to tell you something sparkly like ‘there’s nothing wrong with you, why wouldn’t he like you’ or something, it’s not going to work. And just stop doubting yourself already.”

“I’m not doubting myself,” I said, defensive. “I’m just wondering about—” My line of sight flicked to the left for some unknown reason, and my breath caught.

Francisco turned toward me at the same moment, and our eyes met. He gave me the same little sideways smirk that he’d given me at the café.

Oh. Oh God. My heart.

My phone chose that moment to blare the opening of Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda*.

Judging by the pleased snickering that I heard over the man singing about having buns, Haylee had something to do with this immature prank.

It was a tense, embarrassing little eternity while I struggled to get my phone out of the front pocket of my skinnies. And then the touch screen simply refused to work, so I had to resort to ripping the battery out to get it to shut down.

Head, meet table.

“Why do you do this to me. Why.”

“Payback for spilling grape juice on my brand new shirt.” She smiled, calm as ever.

I remembered doing that probably three months ago. Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have laughed at her and told her the stain made the shirt look better, but this was so much worse. “I’ll get you back, Kurosawa.”

“Your challenged is accepted, Malcolm.”

I waited awhile with my head on the table, waiting for my face to feel a little less warm. When it stopped feeling like it was on fire, I let out a long breath and sat back up. A few people were giving me amused stares, which I ignored like a pro.

Francisco had turned away, but I could tell he was laughing. His shoulders trembled, as if he were working hard to keep them from shaking with his laughter.

I wanted to be annoyed, but I could only find it funny. I shook my head and got up, ready to leave.

We were placing our trays in the dump when I heard from behind me: “Anaconda? More like a snail, I bet. Fucking emo trash...” from behind me.

Haylee whirled around faster than I could grab her. “What the hell did you say?”

“Forget it,” I hissed, yanking on her arm. She didn’t budge.

“You have a problem, princess?” The guy who started it stood up, towering over the both of us. I’d seen him in our college basketball jersey, but beyond that I knew nothing about him.

“How kind of you to ask. Yes, I do have a problem, and it’s with ho—”

“Haylee, enough!” I slapped a hand over her mouth. “Let’s leave.”

She looked at me with fire blazing in her eyes, and I looked back, steady. There were only two of us, but there was a tableful of guys just like him to back him up. Everyone just froze, staring between Haylee and the guy who looked like he could be related to a yeti.

Another guy stood up behind him, placing a placating hand on his shoulder.

This time when I pulled, Haylee yielded, though not before giving the dude a murderous glare.

Francisco was just sitting there, looking at his phone as though a showdown of Karate Kid versus King Kong hadn’t just been averted. I decided to ignore that for now and worked on dragging my angry friend away from the scene.

We were both stiff with tension till the moment we got out of the cafeteria.

“Fucking asshole!” Haylee yelled in Japanese, clenching her fists and making like she was wringing someone’s neck.

“Now, now,” I said, throwing an arm over her shoulder and rubbing her arms. “No use getting upset over that dumbass. Let’s go get some candy from the vending machines. Wipe the name-calling asshat from our memories with chocolate.”

“Now who’s being a name-calling asshat?” She snorted.

I chuckled, happy that she wasn’t seething anymore.

“You should have let me teach him a lesson. He was saying emo, but he meant faggot. I could practically hear it. Like he was broadcasting it using mindwaves.”

“I know you’re the captain of the karate team, and karate runs in your blood, blah blah blah, but I really didn’t want you getting suspended over something as minor as that. Like Gramps says—” I raised my hand as if I were making a point and cleared my throat “—If you sling mud, you will be soiled as well.”

“*Hai hai, ojiisan.*” She smirked at me.

“Don’t call me grandfather. *Baka.*”

She hip checked me playfully. I didn’t retaliate, my mind too focused on something else now that the main problem had been resolved.

Francisco had been *right there*, like he hadn’t heard the comments his teammate had made, like he hadn’t been giving me flirty smiles just a few minutes ago. And his deliberate disinterest in what had happened was shocking.

I hadn’t realized I was digging my nails into my palms until Haylee pried my fists open.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and I knew what she meant. “Who would have thought he’d just completely ignore it like that?”

“Not me, that’s for sure.” I smiled ruefully.

The bad mood hung around me the whole day. I stuffed my bag with my laptop, graphic tablet, and phone, and took off to the café half an hour before my shift began. Rain took one look at my face and immediately guided me to my cushy armchair, handing me the most perfect vanilla hazelnut latte and two humongous chocolate chunk cookies. It improved my mood by seventy percent.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and bit into the cookie. It melted in my mouth like a dream, and I hummed. These people were right. Chocolate *was* happiness. “It’s nothing.”

“You’re a liar.” She smiled. Her hair was all purple now, and she had it pulled into a neat French braid. “I’ll be here if you want to talk to me. Enjoy your snack.” She took a step away, paused, and turned back. “You up to working tonight? Because I could get someone else to fill in for you, if you want.”

“What? Nooo.” I shook my head vehemently. “I’m perfectly fine. I promise I won’t mope and depress the customers. Okay?”

Rain smiled widely. “Great! Your shift starts in ten minutes, then.”

I finished the cookies and started on the heavenly smelling coffee, sorting stuff out in my head.

It was a little stupid to feel this sense of betrayal with someone I barely knew. Francisco wasn’t even a friend; he was an acquaintance who liked to flirt with me when no one was looking. Though, more than the anger, it was disappointment that upset me.

My shift started, and I put away the mug and plate in the back room and donned my apron.

I was so occupied with taking orders and collecting used mugs and plates that I didn’t get the chance to take a break till almost nine.

That was when Francisco stepped inside, standing at the entrance and looking around. The minute his eyes landed on me, he looked relieved, and then nervous.

I stuffed my laptop, which I had just taken out, back into my bag, and strode over to where he was waiting by the corner table.

Before I could open my mouth, he stopped my words.

“I’m sorry.”

I blinked. “What?”

He stepped a little closer, looking earnest and solemn. “Today, at lunch. That was awful, and I know I should have said something to stop it. But I just completely froze up.” He shook his head. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to start something with my teammate. I’m still new on the team and, selfish as it sounds, I didn’t want any trouble.”

“So you decided to ignore it *completely*,” I said, my voice flat and hard. I could understand where he was coming from, but I felt like he should have at least made an effort.

“Or I would have punched him in the face and gotten kicked off the team.” He had the nerve to smile at me. “Or suspended.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m really angry with you,” I said. “Please stop making it difficult for me.”

He kept smiling at me.

I gave him my most Not Impressed look. “Stop looking at me like that!”

“Looking at you like what?” he asked, smile widening and the beginnings of a dimple showing on his cheeks.

I kept giving him a flat look.

“Ben, I’m *sorry*,” he said, sobering a little, his smile smaller and more sincere now.

I tried not to smile back, I really did. It was a doomed effort. “Dammit! It’s not fair that you can just smile and look all adorable like that and just get away with things.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He batted his eyelashes at me, all innocent-like.

Good God. I’m hopeless.

“I can see what you’re trying to do. And it’s working. Ugh.” I shook my head. “How can you be with them, though? They’re such jerks.”

“They’re not *all* jerks.” He shrugged. “And they don’t know I’m gay.”

I gave him a surprised glance. “Did the topic just never come up, or did you tell them outright that you’re straight?”

“It never came up, and if they asked me if I was seeing anyone, I’d just shrug and say I was too busy,” he said, slipping his hands in his pockets and looking at me intently. “Apart from the people I date, no one knows I’m gay.”

“Oh.” I nodded. He looked at me expectantly. Why was he—“Oh. *Ohhh*. Okay. Wait, so is this your way of asking me out? By telling me you’re in the closet and then indirectly hinting that we’re going to date?”

“Pretty much?” He smiled sheepishly and scratched his forehead. I had a tough time concentrating when he was looking at me all coyly. “I haven’t dated much, because of what I said just now. So I’m just going with the flow of things here. I really like you, Ben. Have liked you since the first time I saw you at lunch, crowing victory over some dude you beat and asking to be called The Supreme Overlord of Pokémon.”

I gaped at him, amazed and embarrassed at his words. That match had been at least two or three months ago. He’d liked me the whole while? “So... You’re *seriously* asking me out on a date?”

He laughed. “Yes, I am. Need it in writing?”

My God, was he kidding? Was this really happening? Was this too sudden after what happened today? I didn’t know. All I could focus on was the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled at me like that.

It wasn't a big surprise what my answer was. "Want to meet this Sunday evening, then?"

He grinned widely. "Is five all right?"

I nodded. "We'll meet here and then decide what we want to do."

"Sure." He gave me another grin, eyes half-lidded, and held out his hand. "I'll look forward to it, Ben."

I placed my hand in his. It was bigger than mine, rough and callused. A jolt shot down my spine when he squeezed gently, and when he let me go, my hand tingled.

I was going on a date with Francisco. I was going on a date with Francisco, this very Sunday. It wasn't a dream.

Oh boy.

Oh boy.

Haylee was going to be *pissed*.

Chapter 5

I entered the apartment to find Haylee and Abel lounging on the sofa, watching *Godzilla*.

“How many times will you guys watch this?” I squirmed in next to Abel and grabbed some popcorn, affecting calm.

“Oh quiet, I know you love this dumb movie.” Haylee tossed a kernel at me.

“Don’t call *Godzilla* dumb.” I grinned, tossing another kernel back. Maybe I should just slip it in along with this banter. *Wow, this animation is flawless. I’m going on a date this Sunday. Only, with Francisco. No biggie. And oh, did you know Godzilla is a hundred and eight feet tall in this movie?* Yup. Sounded good.

“How was work?” Abel asked, picking up the edible missile I’d just launched into Haylee’s lap and tossing it in his mouth, not realizing he’d just poured my plan down the drain.

Why, Abel. Why. “It was... interesting? Ha-ha. Ha. Um.” Shit. I better leave now.

But Haylee grabbed my hand before I could, of course. Because that is my life. “Spill it, Malcolm.”

I scratched my forehead. “So you know that thing that happened at lunch today?”

Haylee’s brow furrowed, and Abel nodded, looking sympathetic. “Haylee told me about it.”

“Well... Francisco came to the café. And apologized for today. Something about teams and closets.”

Haylee looked expectant. “And?”

“And... he asked me on a date?”

Abel and Haylee both frowned at that. Abel spoke. “Some nerve. You told him where he could stick it, right?”

“Uh.” I looked at the ceiling. The little spider making its web offered me no answers. “I told him we could meet on Sunday?”

“Are you *serious*?” Haylee shot up and nearly yanked my arm off as she did. Good thing we didn’t have a table in front of us, or it would have been flipped. “No, really, I want to know. Are. You. Serious?”

“Haylee, calm down.” Abel pulled her back down to sit on the sofa. “Ben. Tell us the whole story. This is confusing.”

So I told them. About his apology, about the fact that Francisco thought I was cute, and about how I agreed to go on a date with him.

Haylee was fuming. “So he’ll have his fun with you when he wants it and completely ignore you when it suits him, and you’re okay with that?”

“Hey, it’s not like I agreed to marry him or something! It’s just a date. A date with a guy who I’ve been crushing on since the year started. Why should I refuse? He explained today to me, and I accepted his apology. If it doesn’t work out, then I’ll tell him that and break it off. I should at least give it a try, right? Isn’t that what you always tell me? ‘At least give it a shot, don’t be a coward?’ Why aren’t you telling me that now?”

She huffed. “Forget it.” She got up and stormed to her room, closing the door with a bang.

Abel looked at me, considering, before he sighed. “Do what feels right for you, Ben. Go on your date and have fun. I’ll talk to Haylee about it.”

I nodded, grateful for his support.

Abel went to Haylee’s room, and I lost all interest in the movie. Haylee was right, and I did feel like I was probably not giving this enough thought, but ultimately, I really wanted a date with Francisco.

I really, *really* wanted it, enough to not seriously consider anything else.

Sunday evening found me at Café Café, in my best pair of jeans and my hair freshly dyed deep blue, half an hour before my date was supposed to arrive. I’d used a little eyeliner and chucked the glasses, so my eyes looked a little bigger and bluer, nearly the same color as my hair.

Rain took a lot of pictures like a proud mom, and I obediently posed and preened while she modeled me like my own mother never had.

“So, handsome,” she said, smiling. “Want me to get you something to drink while you wait?”

I laughed, and the sound came out more like a nervous bleat. “No, please. I might throw up if I eat anything now.”

“Just relax, everything will be fine.” Octavian handed me a dark chocolate cookie. “Eat.”

As I nibbled on the bittersweet cookie, I wondered when Francisco would get here and if he'd like my look. What if he didn't like the blue hair? What if he thought I looked way too emo? Would he mind the makeup?

"Do you want another one?" Rain asked, just when the door opened and Francisco appeared. He was wearing a black leather jacket and dark gray jeans with a white V-neck. His hair was tousled and he was clean-shaven. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a fashion catalog.

If I looked *half* as good as he did, I'd be happy.

He smiled when he saw me, the lethal smile that slayed me every time.

I heard someone behind me curse about spilled coffee, and I suppressed a laugh. With a wave to Rain and Octavian, we stepped out of the café.

"Good evening." I felt his gaze move from my hair to my eyes. "You look gorgeous."

All my doubts went fizzing away like a leaky balloon. I think I may have glowed for a moment. "Thanks! You look pretty great yourself."

He winked. "Good to know. So where are we heading?"

"Maybe we could get ice cream at the place near the park and just sit and talk?"

"Okay, but I have a request." He pulled out a folded envelope and gave it to me. "Can we go here first and then go to the park?"

I opened it to find a flyer and two tickets for an exhibition on the evolution of Japanese comics and animation. My jaw dropped.

He looked at me hopefully. "I thought you might like it, but it's okay if you don't want to go either."

"Are you *kidding*? *Of course* I'd love to go!" I scanned the brochure quickly, put it back in the envelope, and safely tucked it in my pocket. It was going in the shoebox where I stored all my game cartridges and the one valentine I got in high school from a secret admirer. "Though you'll have to listen to my constant rambling when we're there."

"I like your rambling." He chuckled. "You become super excited. It's entertaining to watch."

"You sure know how to compliment a guy." I snorted.

He shrugged. "What can I say, I'm just gifted like that."

We walked the whole way there because it was only a couple blocks away. The evening breeze was refreshing and carried with it a faint hint of petrichor.

“So, why did you get into the game art program?”

I pushed my hands into my pockets and curled my shoulders forward. “It’s actually a little childish...”

He chuckled lightly. “I promise I won’t tease or anything.”

I looked at him out of the corner of my eyes, and he looked sincere enough. “I want to work with Nintendo... on the team that’s behind Pokémon. It’s been my dream ever since I got my hands on a Game Boy in middle school. I’ve always liked drawing, and I’m crazy about all things anime, but Pokémon was the thing that made me want to make it a career.”

“You’re following your dream. That’s impressive.”

I looked away to hide my blush. “Not *that* impressive...” I mumbled. “What about you, then? Why are you in the auto engineering program?”

He hummed. “My reason is pretty mundane, really. I’d been working at my uncle’s garage for most of high school, and after that, I decided to just keep at it. I worked there for almost five years till I realized I wanted to do more, so I decided to go to college. I got into a good program out of state, but some issues came up with my family, so I had to transfer back home. And here I am.”

“I hope your family stuff is sorted,” I ventured. “How are you liking it here?”

“Things are fine, thanks for asking.” He smiled. “Honestly, I liked the other one better. The program here is pretty good, and though the basketball team is strong, the guys are... difficult to get along with. But it lets me be close to my folks, and right now that’s pretty important.” He smiled, and the teasing light returned to his eyes. “Plus, I got to meet you, so yeah, I really like it a lot here.”

ARGH. MY HEART. “You did *not* just say that.”

He laughed, and I was acutely aware of the stares that were being cast our way. A few people actually paused to stare. I could understand exactly how they felt.

We arrived at the exhibition center and handed in our tickets to gain entry.

“Wow,” I whispered, taking in the books and posters and all the people milling about.

“This is pretty big,” Francisco said, looking at all the exhibits. “You don’t mind, right?”

“Minding is the last thing I’d do.” I grinned and grabbed his wrist. “Let’s start from there!”

By the time we were done at the exhibition, Francisco had probably learned a lot more about manga than he might have wanted. I did end up rambling a lot, mostly about my favorite artists and how they influenced my art. I think I spent a solid half hour on Osamu Tezuka and Hayao Miyazaki alone. Francisco listened to all of it with an expression of mild amusement and what looked like genuine interest. He even asked questions, wanting me to elaborate on some things. If he got bored at all, I couldn’t tell. He was blown away when I translated some of the Japanese posters for him.

“I taught myself the basics when I was in middle school, because I wanted to watch the original anime and a lot of the English dubs are bad,” I explained, embarrassed. “And then I met Haylee and her family, and they taught me the rest. It’s really not that impressive.”

He kept giving me awed looks, though. I secretly drank it all in.

We got out of there only because we were both hungry.

“Wow, it’s nine already,” Francisco said, looking at his watch. “I’m so sorry, but I don’t think we can go to the park now.”

“Nah, that’s all right. Next time?” I asked, perhaps a little too eagerly, because I wanted to get rid of that sad puppy look on his face.

“Yeah, definitely.” He nodded, a smile brightening his face. “What about dinner, though? I know a good place nearby.”

“Sure, lead the way.”

We walked a block to where the restaurant was, only to find it closed.

“But... They’re always open on Sundays... And I wanted you to try their tiramisu for dessert—Why are they closed?”

“Maybe an emergency?” I offered, patting his shoulder. “Come on, we can find somewhere else to eat.”

“I made you walk the whole way, and for nothing.” Francisco raked a hand through his hair, mussing it up. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, there’s no need to apologize. I like walking. It’s really no problem.”

He looked so upset over this tiny thing. It was super adorable.

We walked along, searching for a diner or restaurant, and ended up at a small, brightly lit place that advertised huge hamburgers. The burgers weren’t that great, but the fries were fantastic. We sat right next to the windows, and I ate fries drenched in ketchup while he sipped on his coke, watching the rain pour outside.

We stepped out when the rain let up, walking around the small puddles on the sidewalk.

“So do we split up here?” I asked, shoving my hands into my pants. “My house is that way.” I pointed.

“My place is the same way too,” he said, smiling. “Would it be okay if I walked you home?”

Wow. Okay. “Um, sure? You aren’t a creeper or anything like that, right? I don’t have to be worried about you misusing my address, right?”

He shook his head and chuckled. “Nope, not a creeper.”

I gave him a once over and tapped my chin, pretending to consider the honesty of his answer. He turned 360 degrees presenting himself good-naturedly for my inspection.

“Hmm, okay. I’ve decided that you are not a creeper”—and that you also have a really nice ass—“so I’m going to let you walk me home.”

He laughed at that. “Wow, I’m so honored. Come on, then.”

We started back the way we came. He put himself between me and the road, but I usually preferred it the other way.

“Why don’t I walk on that side?” I asked him, and tugged lightly on his arm to get him to move.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he said, looking a little uncomfortable.

“Eh?” I walked in front of him and stopped, standing toe-to-toe. “Don’t treat me like a girl just because I wear eyeliner and look tiny.”

He raised his hands, placating. “Hey, I never said that.”

“No, but—”

One minute I was perfectly dry, and the next minute I was dripping disgusting puddle water.

I was stunned into silence. Francisco cursed at the car driver (who didn't even slow down, naturally) and then ran a hand down his face, sluicing off the water dripping from his hair. "Just great. Now we get to walk home wet and sticky."

I snorted. "And also smelling like gasoline and exhaust."

"I *always* smell like gasoline and exhaust. I don't even notice it anymore. You, though," he said, shaking his head, "your shirt's ruined."

"At least it's night, and we're just going home, right?"

Francisco gave me a small smile, and I smiled back, but I could tell he was disappointed at the failed dinner and getting drenched in yucky water. I didn't mind really, but he obviously did.

We started walking again, and when I tugged on his sleeve, he moved to my other side so I could walk next to the road.

"I wasn't trying to treat you like a girl," he said, picking up the conversation that had been so rudely interrupted and looking a little embarrassed. "I just thought it'd be a nice thing to do."

God. This man. "Noted." I grinned at him.

After that, we didn't talk much. I looked at him every now and then, admiring his profile. He looked straight ahead, hands tucked in his pockets and shoulders slightly hunched. We were both wet and rumped, and a few passersby gave us curious looks.

Finally, we reached my apartment.

"Do you want to come upstairs? Dry your clothes, maybe?"

He shook his head. "Thanks, but no. I'm sorry we didn't get to go to the park."

"Noo! That's completely okay. I mean, that exhibition was much better than the park! I had a lot of fun with you today. I loved every minute."

"Even the ones where you had to walk all the way home soaked in dirty water?" He smiled.

"Even those." I grinned.

He shook his head and chuckled. "That's real kind of you to say that. Next time will be much better, I promise."

I stepped closer and had to tip my head back a little to maintain eye contact. “So there’ll be a next time? You weren’t scared off by my ranting and my unholy love affair with ketchup?”

“It’ll take more than that to scare me, you know.” One of his large hands clasped around mine and squeezed gently.

I stepped closer still, till our chests were touching. His eyes were dark, and his hand was warm. My hair was falling in my eyes, making my right eyelid twitch. We were both wet, and smelled like rainwater and gasoline.

I raised myself on my tippy-toes and kissed him.

He responded by sweetly pressing back, raising his hand to hold my jaw, inadvertently keeping me from floating right off the earth.

I had a death grip on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of it through the leather and his shirt, feeling the solid strength of it under my palm. He kissed gently, and I savored each moment of it—the taste of his lips, the rasp of his just-growing stubble, the smell of cologne and leather that rose over the gasoline now that I was so close to his neck.

He squeezed my hand again before breaking the kiss, and I stood back, dazed and red faced. He pulled me closer and laid a chaste peck on the corner of my mouth before he let me go completely.

“I... Wow,” I said, hiding a giddy smile behind my palm. “That was...” Amazing, beautiful, fantastic, out of this world, I’m going to squeal and blast off any minute now. “That was nice.”

He gave me a smirk, like he knew exactly what I meant by “nice.”

“I’ll see you soon, Ben.” He waved, and started to walk away.

I stood there until he turned the corner and vanished from my sight. And then I ran straight to my room, threw myself on the bed, and screamed into the pillows in sheer disbelief and euphoria.

I couldn’t wait to see Francisco again.

Chapter 6

I woke up to a sound that was like a cat being strangled while a seagull screeched in the background.

It took me a few minutes to identify the terrifying sounds as Haylee and Abel singing in the shower, but I was too happy to even bitch at them. When they hit a particularly high note as they sang about swinging from chandeliers, I just covered my ears and grinned into the pillow.

I'd kissed Francisco yesterday. We'd been on our first date yesterday. There were going to be more.

I was so happy!

The day flew by, and Octavian and Rain gave me knowing looks when they saw me.

"Yesterday was a success, then?" Rain asked as I settled the apron around my neck.

"Yup, it was." My lips stretched themselves into a smile of their own volition.

"I told you so." Octavian smirked with a roll of his eyes. "And you're going to scare the customers if you keep smiling like that." He tapped me on the head with a notebook. "Snap out of it."

"Oh hush," Rain, ever my supporter, piped up. "Let him smile like a sappy idiot. God knows you were the same when you were in love."

It was mind-bending to imagine Octavian smiling like a sap and being in love, so I didn't.

Things were more or less the same, though. On Wednesday, Francisco wasn't in the cafeteria, and Haylee sighed in exasperation each time my gaze darted to the basketball table.

Friday, Francisco was back, looking absolutely gorgeous in a skintight graphic tee. I couldn't admire him openly like I wanted to, couldn't go there and tell him that green was really his color. I just sat there and sipped on soda and played Tetris on my phone.

I looked at Francisco out of the corner off my eye. He was talking to his teammate, both of them pointing at a book that Francisco was holding. The

friend turned away, and Francisco quickly glanced around before shooting a wink my way.

I smiled around my straw and didn't care at all when I ended up losing the game.

"You're crazy," Haylee muttered, her first words to me since her spectacular storm-off a few days ago. "Absolutely crazy."

"I thought we established that already." I took a nice, long sip and set my glass down. "Why don't you just ask me what you want to ask?"

Haylee glared at me and then looked away, stabbing at her salad. I waited. Any moment now. Aaany—

"How was your date?" she blurted, face pink with the indignity of having to give in to her curiosity. I chuckled and handed her my chocolate pudding as a token of goodwill.

"It was super, super awesome. We went to a manga exhibition, and then had awesome fries, and then he walked me home and kissed me good night. We even got splashed with puddle water. It was annoying but kinda funny. A great first date."

She grumbled something at her salad before she turned to me. "So you really don't mind this whole secret thing?"

I shrugged. "It's not such a big deal. And besides, it's not like we even meet much in college. We only get to see each other on Wednesdays and Fridays."

"It is a big deal, though," she insisted, gripping my hand. "It's a big deal because you're being forced to behave like you don't know him. Tell me you don't wish you could eat lunch with him right now."

"Okay, I can't say that." I shrugged and then smirked. "But forget lunch. At least I have a boyfriend who I can eat dinner with, right?"

"Pfft. Yeah, yeah. So you have a boyfriend now. Don't gloat."

I snickered. "You're just jealous."

"You wish I was jealous."

We looked at each other out of the corner of our eyes and dissolved into snickers.

In the middle of that, I made sure no one was looking at us and winked back at Francisco.

It was so much fun to watch his expression of surprise turn into a suppressed grin that he hid behind his book.

After four weeks and twice as many kisses, we had a routine established. We saw each other during lunch on Wednesdays and Fridays, when we mostly snuck smiles at each other or texted each other from across the room. He came to the café every Tuesday and Friday night, and Sunday evenings or mornings we went exploring the town.

Mostly that meant we walked around till we found some random, small shop, and pattered about in there for a while before we got dinner and made our way home. On our forays, we discovered a great bookshop, an antiques store, and an art supply store that made their own paint. I didn't use traditional media a lot, but I bought a few bottles anyway.

My phone vibrated on my desk, snapping me out of my reverie. I grabbed it and prayed for a split second before I saw who it was.

Yup, prayers answered. Frankie had sent me a message.

We still on for ice cream tomorrow?

I grinned widely.

Yeah! Meeting at the café like usual, right?

Yup, that's fine. What are you up to?

Ehh. Nothing much. Just playing around with an old set of glitter ink pens I found :P

Show me?

I clicked a picture of the doodle I was making and sent it to him.

That's the prettiest unicorn I've ever seen. Who're the stick men sitting on top of it?

The one with the pink hair is me, and the one with the green hair is you.

It's green cuz I don't have any brown/black pens. Well I do, but they don't glitter. And everything on this page needs to glitter.

It took a little longer for him to reply. I imagined he was laughing or typing a longer reply.

I would have preferred red :-) Why is your hair pink though?

I dyed it yesterday. It's the exact pink as this ink. (wow I rhymed :D)

LOL, awesome. Look forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Me too. Good night :3

Night.

I put my phone aside and drew in sparkly red hearts and a rainbow over our heads.

Because I was a dork in love.

Standing in the ice cream parlor, I was having a really tough time making a choice. There were ten different combos for chocolate alone, and with so many options altogether, I didn't know what to pick.

Options were good. But too many options were just unnecessarily stressful. What even was the difference between a chocolate delight and a chocolate special? An extra drizzle of chocolate sauce? Why did they have to make ice cream so confusing?

“Have you decided?”

I blinked, the words jarring me out of my internal rant. “What?”

Francisco chuckled and snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Ben. Wake up. What flavor of ice cream do you want?”

I looked at the menu in my hand and started to feel dizzy again. I couldn't do this. “I'll just take strawberry so it'll match with my hair.” I moved his hand away from my face, and I didn't let it go after.

He extracted his hand from my grip and linked our pinky fingers together. “Of course. Chocolate sauce?”

I shrugged. “Why not.”

“Rainbow sprinkles?”

“Sure.”

“Assorted nuts?”

“If you want?”

“Waffle cone or plastic cup?”

“Why are you *doing* this to me?” I whined. “I’m hungry and just want something to put in my mouth.”

“Is that so?” He grinned. I thought about what I just said.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” I protested. “Though I guess I wouldn’t be opposed to it either.”

He whipped around to look at me, wide-eyed. I smiled sweetly.

“I’ll hold you to that, you know.” He smirked.

“I sure hope so.” I grinned back.

So I finally got a strawberry waffle cone with the works, and Francisco got a chocolate and vanilla waffle cone with chocolate chips. The ice cream was thick, creamy, and goddamn tasty, and we decided that all the fuss was worth it when the results were so sweet.

We looked around for seats and found a nice two-seater table near the back.

“So how’s that Nissan project of yours coming along?” I asked, but I got no response.

Francisco was looking at someone who’d just entered, an expression of pure “Oh Fucking Hell” on his face. For a moment, I wondered if it was someone from school. The two men who’d just entered looked well over their forties though, and I’d never seen them around campus before. Maybe they were professors?

With a terse “stay here,” Francisco strode across the room. “Hey, Uncle!” he said, smiling widely. The two men looked surprised to see him at first, but they smiled warmly, and one of them stepped forward to hug him. “Uncle,” the older of the two, said something loudly in Spanish, and all three of them laughed.

I sat down at the table and waited for Francisco to come back. I fiddled with my spoon while the two men picked something to order and Francisco ate his ice cream standing in the line. I played “hide the sprinkle in the molten ice cream” while they got their ice cream and looked for a place to sit. I perked up when they looked at me, but “Uncle” made a sort of disgusted expression when he saw me, instantly putting me on edge. Francisco looked right through me, without the tiniest glint of recognition or apology in his eye.

Apparently having decided that they did not want to eat inside the shop, they turned to leave.

Francisco went with them. And I was sitting there just staring after him.

I sat and sat, till my ice cream was a melted, soggy mess, and the staff kept giving me anxious looks, probably wanting to ask me to leave, but having too much tact to do so after what they'd just seen.

In the end, I threw the whole thing in the trash and started walking home. Then it started to rain, because that's how my life works. I kept walking, taking a longer route so I wouldn't have to pass by the café and risk being seen by someone I knew.

I was sure I looked like a pathetic mess, with my bright purple shirt sticking to my skin and my eyeliner-smudged eyes. The temporary, pink hair rub-on was supposed to last for two shampoos, but I had a feeling it was leaching out already. If Rain or Haylee saw me now, they'd probably have an aneurysm.

Halfway home, I had to stop since my eyes were itchy and nearly swollen shut because I kept rubbing at them and got eyeliner everywhere. And for some reason there was a big lump in my throat, not letting me breathe properly.

I wasn't crying. I swear I wasn't.

I was just... hollow. And tired. And pissed.

So, *so* goddamn pissed, even if I knew I probably should not have been.

Chapter 7

I was hoping Haylee wouldn't be home when I got back.

So naturally she was sitting right in the living room—and Abel was there too, how nice—when I walked in, looking like I'd fallen into a gutter somewhere.

Haylee swore in Japanese and ran to the bathroom to get towels. Abel hurried over to help me out of my wet clothes.

“Why didn't you get a cab?” he asked, *tsking* when my shirt tag got tangled up with my chain and got stuck around my neck.

“Didn't want to,” I mumbled, wriggling out of my shirt and toeing my boots off.

Haylee returned with an armload of towels and tossed one on my head. “You dumbass, you wanna come down with pneumonia?”

“Sorry.” I shrugged and started toweling my hair dry.

“Wait.” Abel pointed to the bathroom. “Go take a warm shower, and I'll bring you clothes. You'll feel better once you're clean.”

Standing in the shower, I scrubbed my scalp till all of the pink went down the drain.

Abel had been right. By the time I finished my shower, I was much calmer, though the hurt feeling still simmered inside my stomach.

Okay, Francisco *had* made it clear that he wasn't out to his family, but there was no reason to just completely ignore me like the way he had. He could have introduced me as a friend, or could have just told me that he'd talk to me later, or something. Instead, he chose to act like he didn't know me at all, which was a vastly hurtful thing to do.

And what was with that look the old guy gave me? Like I was gum on his shoes, or something just as yucky. And I was just sitting there and not even doing anything that could have made him react like that.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I was a little short, and my eyes were kinda bigger than most guys. My hair, completely devoid of any artificial product, hung to my neck in a pale blond tangle. My body was wiry,

though it was a soft wiry. I waxed my body hair, so my skin was soft and smooth. I *was* quite good-looking. Not as handsome as Francisco, sure, but I was pretty okay. I didn't deserve to be looked at like that. *Nobody* deserved to be looked at like that.

I dressed in the clothes Haylee had laid out for me on the counter and stepped out of the bathroom with a towel over my head.

“Hey, have you been crying?”

I couldn't look Haylee in the eyes and lie. Well, I could, but she'd figure it out immediately, so there was no point in it anyway.

“Maybe I have, but I'm not anymore, so can we just not talk about it?”

“How about no?” She stood with her hands on her hips, and though she was an inch shorter, I felt like I was looking up at her. “What happened, Ben? You were so happy when you were getting ready for your date, and now you look like someone trashed your Nintendo 3DS.” She blinked as it clicked into place. “Wait. Francisco has something to do with this, doesn't he?”

I picked at the corner of my towel. “He ditched me at the ice cream shop when some people he knew popped up out of nowhere.”

“What do you mean ‘ditched’?” Haylee squawked, and Abel squinted at me. “Someone from school?”

I shook my head. “His uncle and someone else. He basically acted like I didn't exist, and then he left with them.”

Abel, zen and reasonable as always, patted me on my shoulder. “He must've panicked when he saw them. You told us he wasn't out to his family, right? He must be feeling just as bad as you are right now. You should talk to him.”

Haylee balled her fists at her side. “Forget that. He could have passed Ben off as a friend, or even an acquaintance he'd run into by accident. How could he just abandon him like that *in the middle of a date*?”

“Let's just forget this ever happened, okay? Just. Leave me alone now. I'm tired and irritated, and I just want to sleep it all off.”

I stalked into my bedroom and closed the door before I collapsed onto the bed, face-first.

My phone, which I'd forgotten on the bed before I left for my date, poked at my side. I was about to toss it on my nightstand when it vibrated.

I had about five messages and three missed calls, all from Francisco.

Ben, I'm so sorry. I can explain. Please pick up the phone.

Ben? Did you reach home safe? Call me.

Pick up the phone, for God's sake.

It's freaking storming out and I don't know where you are. I know you're mad but just let me know you're safe.

Goddammit, Ben! I'm heading to your place. Please be okay.

I considered the messages. He seemed panicked. Maybe I should send him a reply before he had a stroke.

I'm home safe. Thanks for ur concern.

Yup. That should be enough. I wasn't really in the mood to speak to him now. Maybe tomorrow morning, when I wasn't feeling irrationally angry and hurt.

I put my phone on the bedside table, and it started vibrating even before I let go. I ignored it and closed my eyes.

The vibration stopped, and started again.

I tugged my pillow over my head, but I could feel the damn phone vibrating right in my chest.

I waited for the calls to slow down, but no such luck. My phone just kept ringing.

I picked up on the sixth call.

"Hello."

"Ben! Christ, I was so worried. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Did you get home before the storm hit?"

"No."

He was silent for some time, and I could hear his breathing, slightly elevated.

"Ben, I'm sorry about earlier. I want to—"

"There's nothing to apologize for." I was upset, but my voice came out mechanical and flat. "I'm going to sleep. Good night."

“Wait, Ben, just listen to me—”

“Really, Francisco. I mean it. I get why you did what you did, okay? But I just can’t talk to you right now. Thanks for checking up on me. Good night.” I disconnected the call and switched off the phone.

I was actually more pissed at myself than I was at him. He’d explained to me earlier on that he wasn’t out. And I agreed to go out with him despite that. I shouldn’t be bitching about what happened today in theory, but try telling that to my bruised feelings. I was being unreasonable, but I really couldn’t help it.

I stared at the blank screen of my phone, contemplating switching it on again.

Someone knocked on my door.

“Ben?” Haylee poked her head into my room. “Francisco called, asking for you. I told him you were sleeping.”

I nodded. “Kay, thanks.”

She padded into my room and sat on the bed. “What are you going to do?”

I grumbled into my pillow before I turned around to see her. “About what?”

She waved her hand. “About your boyfriend.”

“What’s there to do? I’ll talk to him in the morning, get things sorted out. Don’t wanna think about it right now.” I buried my face in my pillow again.

“He seemed pretty freaked when he called.”

“I know.” I turned a little so I could look at her with one eye. “You’re my best friend. You should be sympathizing with me.”

“Tsk. *I am* sympathizing with you. I’m just saying maybe you should talk to him before you get yourself all depressed and stuff.”

I set my foot on her butt and pushed, but she just sat there. “Okay. Tomorrow.”

“You better, or I’ll have to tell Gramps that your love story bombed before it could take off, and then he’s going to call you up and start lecturing you about dating.”

“I wouldn’t mind. Sensei is nice to talk to.”

She pulled a face. “You’re so weird. And masochistic.”

“Yeah. Well. I think everything in my life until now proves that I’m a glutton for punishment.” I switched off the night lamp, plunging the room into darkness. “Will you leave now?”

“Sheesh, you’re so melodramatic. See if I’m ever concerned for you again.”

“G’night, Lee.” I pulled the covers over my head and kicked her off my bed, mulling over demanding an apology or apologizing myself.

Octavian kept glancing at the clock, though I couldn’t tell if he was looking forward to something or dreading it. Rain yawned as she wiped the tables. Except for one middle-aged man nursing a coffee and typing away on his laptop, the café was empty, a welcome change from the rush of customers that had lasted all evening.

I was putting the books back in their shelves, wondering if either of my bosses were in a mood to talk. While we usually made conversation as we worked, we had been kept busy this evening and all three of us were tired.

The door opened, and I turned to see a tall, gorgeous man with a carefree grin and carrying a leather satchel step inside. I felt like I’d seen him somewhere before, but for the life of me couldn’t remember where. “I’m back!” he sang, and bowed with a flourish. “And I come bearing treasures!” He made a beeline straight to Octavian, high-fiving Rain as he walked by her. He gave Octavian a charming grin. “Hello, oh sweet one. Are you happy to see me?”

I resisted the urge to snort. *Sweet one*? I watched with a mixture of surprise and amusement as Octavian rolled his eyes heavenward before he pulled out two books from the shelf under the counter and slammed them down. “You told me these would be *entertaining*. They only made me want to gouge my eyes out.”

The man laughed good-naturedly. “They *are* entertaining, in that train-wreck-you-can’t-take-your-eyes-off-of kind of way. I mostly read them for all the dumbassery that was taking place.” He sniggered and put the two books in his bag and retrieved two more, placing them on the counter. “These though, are honestly good.”

Octavian looked skeptical, but he took the books anyway. “Good. Now leave.”

“Hey, not so fast! I believe there’s someone we need to introduce,” Rain piped up then, pulling me forward. “Emilio, meet our newest employee, Ben

Malcolm. Ben, meet Emilio Fernandez, our number one fan and emergency waiter!" She beamed. Octavian let out a resigned sigh in the background.

"Hi," Emilio said, and we shook hands. His smile was open and friendly. His hair was jet black, thick and lustrous, swept to the side with a few tendrils falling in his eyes, sort of enhancing how pretty they were. And he had great bone structure. "So nice to meet you. I've seen you at the library once or twice. You came with a girl and you borrowed about half a dozen books about dinosaurs, and I had to keep telling you to be quiet."

A light bulb went off in my head. "You're a librarian at the Central Library!" I smiled. "I thought I'd seen you somewhere before."

Octavian coughed, and Emilio's smile strained a little. "Yeah, I get that a lot. Are you in college?"

"Yeah. I'm in the state university, in the game art program. I'm a senior."

"That's great. It must be hard work, huh? But it seems like you enjoy it, so that's nice." He smiled and turned to Rain. "Can I have a drink to go, please? A cappuccino would be nice."

Rain nodded, but it was Octavian who spoke. "Yes, if you keep quiet."

As Emilio waited patiently and quietly, just as instructed, Rain pulled me down to sit with her at one of the tables. "I didn't get the time to ask earlier, but why do you look upset?"

I blinked, wondering if I was that easy to read. "I'm not upset."

"You do look like it," Rain said, looking solemn. "You look tired, dull, and a little stressed."

"Artist's block?" Octavian asked, getting mugs of coffee ready for us as well. He prepared three mugs and a travelling container. He didn't say anything when Emilio took the cup and sat back down, despite his eagerness to chuck him out earlier. Emilio had noticed it as well, and looked at Octavian with such fondness in his eyes, it was obvious he had it bad for my boss.

"No, though I think I'd have preferred that." I sighed and scrubbed a hand through my hair. I felt strange with my hair in its natural color, sort of like I was naked.

"Problem at school, then?" Rain plated a few cookies and slices of chocolate cake, and I carried two plates to a table.

“Or is it boyfriend or girlfriend trouble?” Emilio asked, looking curious.

“Boyfriend trouble.” I sighed and sat down, burying my face in my hands.

Rain gasped. “No! What happened? Did Francisco say anything?”

Emilio perked up. “I know a Francisco Ibarra who goes to the state university too.”

“You shouldn’t stick your nose in others’ business,” Octavian chided, settling our mugs in front of us and sitting down next to me. And then he asked, “How do you know him?”

Emilio smiled widely, apparently pleased at being asked to speak. “He’s my next door neighbor, and we play basketball once in a while. His mother keeps trying to set me up with him—though I keep declining, of course—and... Ben, are you okay?”

No, I was not okay. I was not okay *at all*. In fact, I felt downright violated right then. “Are we talking about the Francisco Ibarra who’s in the auto engineering program and works at his uncle’s auto repair shop?”

Emilio frowned. “Yeah, the same guy. Is there a problem?”

I gripped the edge of the table hard enough to hurt. “His family knows he’s gay?”

Emilio nodded hesitantly. “His mom does, for sure. His uncle too, and his cousin. Don’t know about the rest.”

My breath left my lungs in a whoosh. Rain’s fingers closed over mine, and she gently pried them away from the table. “Ben, sweetie, calm down.”

“He lied to me.” He lied to me. He lied to me. Why would he lie? Why would *anyone* lie about something like this? “He told me he was still in the closet.”

Emilio looked chagrined. “Shit.”

“*Shit* is right.” Octavian sounded pissed.

“Look, maybe he had his reasons,” Emilio said, both hands raised as if trying to ward off an attack.

Octavian’s tone was deadpan. “Or maybe he’s just a lying scumbag.”

“Don’t *look* at me like that, Ian—”

“Will you stop calling me that, for God’s sake—”

“Guys!” Rain yelled. “Guys. Quit it. Save that for later. You’re not helping.”

At that moment, the door opened, and who should come in but Francisco himself.

He looked at Emilio sitting with us, at my wide-eyed, betrayed expression, and put the pieces together, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Ben,” he sighed. “I can explain.”

“Of course you can,” Octavian scoffed, his hand coming to rest over Rain’s hand and mine.

“In private.” Francisco looked at me as he said it, even though it was meant for the others.

Octavian started to protest, but Rain stopped him. The middle-aged guy was looking at us, bewildered. Rain sighed. “You can talk in the back room.”

I got up numbly and let my legs carry me to the stockroom without a conscious effort. I turned around only when I heard the door close behind me. “You lied to me.”

“I did. I’m sorry.”

How could he look so calm and put together when he told me that? “Why?”

“First, I’m sorry about yesterday.”

I just stared at him. Because what was I even supposed to say, anyway?

He looked away and frowned, and his dimples made an appearance when he pursed his lips. When he looked back at me, he looked miserable, not an expression that I’d want to associate with what he said next: “You know I really do like you, right?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

His face was tight as he spoke. “I haven’t lied to you about anything except the fact that my family knows about me.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Ben, please.”

I crossed my arms in front of me, hugging myself. “You still haven’t told me why.”

He swallowed. “You’re... very different from all the other guys they’ve seen me with. And you’re not the guy they’d want to see me with either.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Well, because...” He hunched his shoulders a little and pushed his hands into his pockets. “They’ve only seen me with guys like myself. The athletic type.”

I waited, but he didn’t say any more. I was super confused, and the anxiety rising off him was making me edgy. “I really don’t see what that has to do with this.”

“My coming out wasn’t very easy.” I blinked at the sudden change of topic. “My mom came around quickly enough. She said she was fine with it, but she still had to read as many PFLAG pamphlets as she could get her hands on to get her head around things. My uncle though...” He shook his head and grimaced. “My uncle, though, stopped talking to me. And it tore me up because I looked up to him after my dad died. He said something about Ibarra men not being fucking pansies... It took me a while to get it across that being gay didn’t equate to being a weakling. He’s talking to me again, but I don’t think he’s ever really accepted me completely. He’s rigidly conservative.”

His uncle was a douche, that’s what he was. I didn’t say it out loud though. “Okay.”

“I dated ‘manly’ guys, mostly. That’s why my mom keeps trying to get me to go on a date with Emilio. She thinks he’s the perfect match for me, but he’s really not.” He sighed. “I’ve never let myself date guys like you. And I—”

I held up a hand. “What do you mean, ‘guys like me’?”

“Uh, you know. Pretty? And kinda feminine? Shit, this is not coming out well.” He scrubbed his hands over his face and tried again. “You know what I mean. You look delicate.”

“Whoa, stop right there. I’ve heard enough.” Damn right, I’d heard enough. “Do you know how offensive that is? Good God! I am so, *so* pissed right now. You mean to say that just because I’m short, and skinny, and I like wearing makeup and glitter, that I’m a weakling?”

“That’s not what—”

I let out an incredulous laugh, stopping him short. “That’s exactly what you’re saying. You’re afraid that if they see you with me, they’ll think you’re a weakling too. Isn’t that it?”

“It’s not what they’ll think about me—”

“Enough!” I snapped, stepping away from him. Nothing was really clear to me except for the fact that Francisco had lied to me just to avoid the possibility of me meeting his folks. Because he was ashamed of me being a girly boy. “You should leave.”

His face crumpled. “Ben, please. Just listen. Let me explain.”

I strode past him and held the door open. “Please leave. Right now.”

He tried to touch my shoulder, but I flinched away from him. He sighed and left without another word.

I gently closed the door after him and leaned my forehead on the cool wood. How could he? *How could he?* “Stupid fucking bastard asswipe!” I screamed, barely resisting the urge to punch a hole through the door.

Chapter 8

“Did he actually say that?” Haylee snapped her cookie in half as if she were snapping Francisco’s neck. Or maybe that was me projecting my feelings onto her.

“He did. Can you believe it?” I tore a hunk off my toast and chewed it viciously, remembering how last night had turned out. After Francisco left, Emilio left too, promising that he was going to give his neighbor a good talking to. But I didn’t care. We closed up a little earlier than we usually did, and Rain and Octavian gave me a ride home. They even told me to take the day off today, but I thought I’d go in anyway. I skipped classes though, and Haylee had skipped with me, so I was taking the time to rant to her.

“I really don’t get why there’s so much drama though? It’s not like you were going to say ‘Take me to your familyyyy. I sooo wanna meet ’em. Take me take me take me,’ or anything like that in the first place.”

I let out a gusty sigh. “I *know*, right? Like really, I don’t understand why he made such a big deal out of it either? I mean, he could have told me he was out to his family. Obviously I wouldn’t have asked to meet them, or even said anything about it unless he said something about it. But noooo, he fibbed, and he said the shittiest thing—Like, his uncle thinks gay people are pansy and girly, so he didn’t want to be seen with me, and he didn’t want to tell them about me? Fine, dude, don’t tell *them*, but why lie to *me*? Jeez!”

Haylee snapped another cookie. “His uncle is a douche. Francisco is a douche.”

I snorted and raised my toast to her. “You got that right, sistah.”

She snorted. “You’re toasting me with toast.”

Right after that, we dissolved into helpless giggles. Did I mention we’d already finished a bottle of Absolut between us? No? Well, finished a bottle of vodka, and on empty stomachs at that.

We were sooooo drunk.

“Fuck, Ben, make it stop,” Haylee gasped, clutching her stomach and falling on me. I pushed her away and tried to catch my breath.

“You started it, you make it stop!”

We laughed some more for no reason at all, and then we got really silent, half-lying on each other.

“Haylee?”

She *hmm*ed.

“I’m not a pansy, am I? Because I look girly?”

“Course you’re not, Ben. I think you’re tougher than most of those *manly* men out there.” She hummed. “Gramps would vouch for you. In fact, I think we need to let Gramps loose on your boyfriend’s uncle. That’ll teach him.”

“Not my boyfriend anymore.” I sighed and ate another piece of toast.

She hummed again. After listening for a few minutes, I figured out it was Phoebe’s “Smelly Cat” song from *Friends*.

“Is that supposed to be some kind of message? Are you saying I’m smelly?”

“No, dummy,” she said. “I was just humming it ’cuz it came to mind.” She hummed the chorus again. “But seriously, you think this is it? You’re not even going to give him a chance, listen to him explain properly?”

“You think I should?” I thought I should. I also thought that maybe I shouldn’t. I was just confused.

“Maybe you should,” she ventured. “I mean, he *likes* you, we know that for sure... I don’t think anyone can fake that dopey look that’s common to all idiots who’re smitten.” She ticked it off on her fingers. “Then there’s the fact that you like him, too. And you get along well. That’s three reasons.”

“He’s a good listener,” I added, hesitant. Why was I listing out his good qualities now? “Sometimes he snorts when he laughs, and he kind of sounds like a piglet. And oh, the guy doesn’t like the taste of citrus! I mean, who doesn’t like oranges? And lemonade? So weird.” I shook my head. “But he’s nice, I guess. And he’s interested in me and my art. And he doesn’t mind when I ramble.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And he’s hot. And sexy. And so damn adorable.”

“Uh-huh.”

I elbowed her where I could reach, and ended up getting her head. “Are you even listening?”

“Yes I am! Shit, stop shoving at me with your bony elbows!”

I shoved the last piece of toast in my mouth and slumped into the couch. Maybe I should go back, give him a proper chance to explain. I’d known him personally for only a short time, but I was quite confident that we would last. And despite everything, thinking of him and his smile and his laugh still made me want to sigh and melt, even if it hurt at the same time.

I fell asleep hugging my plate to my chest, Haylee’s head heavy on my stomach.

Francisco sent me apology texts every day, all of which I ignored. He was missing at lunch on Friday, and he didn’t come to the café either. I didn’t know if I felt relieved or disappointed. He wasn’t there at lunch on Wednesday, either, and now I was confident that it was disappointment.

I stared morosely at my latte. It had always been my beverage of choice, and now it was completely linked with memories of our dates and the time we’d spent together. I couldn’t drink it, and ended up giving it to Haylee who grumbled because it was cold. But she took it anyway, because she didn’t believe in wasting food.

My phone vibrated.

Hey.

I looked around, wondering if he’d come in today, but I didn’t see him anywhere. I typed back quickly.

Hello.

There. That was casual, and not disappointed or eager at all. Just a bland hello.

I told my mom to stop trying to set me up with Emilio because I found a boyfriend. My question is if I still have a boyfriend, or do I tell her to resume her matchmaking?

Haylee peeked at my phone to see what was going on. “No way.”

“You think he’s fibbing?”

“He might be,” she said, sipping on my latte.

“Thank you, that was very insightful,” I deadpanned. She gulped more coffee and shrugged.

What do you think?

I'd like to think that I still do, but I want to talk in person and make sure. Over lunch?

Lunch whe—

I never finished the message, because there he was, a bag of takeout in hand, striding right to my table.

Haylee and I just stared as he came toward us—*good God this is really happening*—and smiled at me. It wasn't the shiny-teeth, Dimples of Doom smile that he usually flaunted. This one was a bit hesitant, a little unsure, but so very hopeful; it still took my breath away. "Is this seat taken?"

"Are you serious?" I stage-whispered, looking between him and the jock table where his friends were looking at him as if he were out of his mind. I thought they were right.

"As I'll ever be," he said, placing the bag on the table and coming around to sit beside me.

"I didn't exactly say this seat was free," I griped, just to cover up the giddy rush I got when his shoulder brushed mine.

"Should I leave?" he asked, making to stand again, the picture of gracious good manners and charm, though I could see the kicked-puppy look in his eyes that he was trying to hide.

"Gah! Just sit and start eating already!" Everyone was looking at us. Everyone was looking at the popular new basketball player who was sitting right next to and talking with the faggot geek. My glasses kept sliding down my nose, and I kept having to push them up.

"Thanks," he said, sounding genuinely relieved and much happier. He unwrapped his burger and took one ketchup packet for himself and gave the rest to me. Haylee snorted, and I elbowed her as I took a packet with a smile.

"You know that I'm still super mad at you for everything, right?" I asked, ripping the packet with my teeth and sucking out the contents.

"I know, and I will give you a proper explanation and a thousand more apologies. I've already been planning all the different ways I'm going to make it up to you." His voice dropped, became huskier as he leaned closer. "Some of it even involves a bed."

I nearly swallowed the little packet, I swear. Haylee's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "You still owe me an explanation!"

He pulled back and grinned. "And I will explain, but on the way to dinner and a Japanese horror movie festival."

Haylee clamped a hand over my mouth. "Forget him. I'll come with you to the festival. Are they showing *Ringu*?"

"Beat it, Kurosawa," I hissed, shoving back. "Get your own boyfriend to take you. Francisco's mine."

"Well, I'm glad we have that settled, then." Francisco smiled, and made a show of pulling out his phone and calling someone up. "Hey, Mom? Yeah, I just got it confirmed. You can stop pestering Emilio now."

I stared wide-eyed as he talked for a short while longer, and then promised his mother to bring me over for dinner sometime, if I agreed to come.

Haylee finished the last of the latte and stood up. "Well, if I sit here any longer I might start feeling dizzy from your dopey smiles. So I'm off." She leaned over me so she was looming over Francisco, eyes hard and slightly terrifying. "Don't do something dumb like that *ever* again."

Francisco nodded, expression wary, and she backed off, shooting him one last glare before she turned and left.

"Whew. I don't want to be on *her* bad side." He shuddered slightly and smiled at me. "Think you'd be able to get the evening off tomorrow? I'll pick you up at six." Francisco polished off the last of his burger, and I picked at one of the five tiny ketchup packs that I'd eaten.

"I can ask. I'm sure Rain will let me, though."

"Great!" He grinned, flashing his dimples.

I was about to say something about how distracting that was when the big lunk of a basketball player who'd called me an emo came over to our table.

"Frankie. What're you doing with this trash here?" He frowned as if we were confusing him.

Francisco stared back calmly. "I'm eating lunch with my boyfriend," he said, and it gave me a jolt of pleasure that he was publicly making our relationship status known after hiding for so long.

The lunk reeled back, and his frown became more thunderous. "What do you mean, *boyfriend*?"

“It means he’s the guy Frankie makes out with, Sid,” someone drawled from another table. I recognized the guy who’d stopped “Sid” the last time.

Sid sneered at Francisco and me. “So this fag is your squeeze? If you wanted a girl, you should have gotten a girl, Frankie.”

Francisco stood and gave Sid an icy glare, but I interrupted him before he could say anything. “The next time you say something offensive about me, I will hand you your teeth.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared,” Sid sneered. “The tiny pussy boy is going to—”

“Shaddap, Sid,” their teammate drawled again, and the lunk immediately quieted, though he was still glaring. “Stop being an asshole and get back over here. You’re making all of us look bad.”

Sid went back with one last dirty look at us. Francisco smiled at the guy, and the guy nodded, raising his soda cup in a small salute. The rest of the team followed (except the lunk), all of them smiling.

Francisco turned to me. “Well, now I’m officially out to all the people I know.”

I grabbed him and kissed him to a chorus of wolf whistles.

As promised, Francisco picked me up at six the next day, carrying a small backpack. Octavian gave him a rather frigid look from behind the counter when we came in to buy lattes, but Rain made up for the temperature difference by being her sunny, smiling self.

We walked hand in hand to the park, and we sat at a bench facing the sunset. Francisco opened his bag and came up with two food containers and plastic spoons. He waited till I got comfortable on the bench before handing a set to me.

We sat close enough that our sides were touching. I was sitting cross-legged, so my knee rested on his lap. We opened our boxes and inhaled appreciatively as fragrant steam rose and curled around us.

“Mm, biryani,” I mumbled, lifting the carton to my face so I could get a better whiff of the cardamom-clove aroma.

“I figured you’d like it better here instead of a restaurant,” Francisco said, poking at his biryani rice and weeding out pods of cardamom.

I nodded. “I do.” The bench was out of the way of the walking trail and the kids’ play area, so it was relatively peaceful and surrounded by lush green bushes. “It’s really great here.”

We sat in silence and took a few bites of the food, chewing slowly, peaceful and together.

Francisco set his carton on his lap. “I’m going to give you the explanation I owe you, but I need to ask you to be calm and not run off or hit me or anything. Some of it is going to be dumb and some of it might be offensive, but just hear me out,” he said, turning sideways a little so he could look at me.

“All right.” I nodded.

He took a deep breath and started. “Well, I already told you the basics on Monday, and this is sort of continuing that. I did lie to you that I wasn’t out to my family, and for that I am sorry. I know it’ll be difficult for you to trust me completely again, but I promise I’ll work hard to gain your trust back. And I’ll never lie to you again.

“As for *why* I lied... My uncle is a phobe. He thinks gay men are weak pansies. He is especially intolerant of flamboyant guys, and he hates domineering women. He’s got that outlook that men must wear the pants and women must wear the skirts. He thinks flamboyant or femme guys should just become women, because calling them ‘men’ is insulting to his macho sensibilities. Or whatever.” He shrugged, frowning. “I thought he’d turn around eventually, you know. But he didn’t. Still makes an offhand comment about how I ‘looked like a real man,’ and was doing a ‘man’s job,’ how I couldn’t possibly be a fairy. Things like that. It’s awful, I know. My uncle is a jerk.” He sighed wearily and reached for my hand. “But I still like him so much, you know. After my dad died, he looked out for me like I was his own kid. He was my hero. I used to date all these macho types like I was telling him, hey, look guys can be macho and still be gay. *I* am studying so I can make the shop better, and being athletic just like you want me to, but I can’t be straight. It’s the one thing I can’t be for you, no matter how hard I try. I like guys, and that’s not gonna change no matter how many girls you try to set me up with.

“I kept having to prove that I was masculine enough for him to not be disappointed in me. When I saw you, I knew you were special right at the beginning. But all I could think of sometimes was how my uncle would react to you, and to me. You’re gorgeous, kind, and funny, but my uncle would only see your makeup and your pretty shirts and judge you, and judge me based on you.

When you yelled at me on Friday, I realized what a big dick I was being. I was so desperate for his approval that I ended up hurting you. I'm sorry." He squeezed my hand slightly and looked into my eyes, really looked. "I finally told him all about it anyway, on Wednesday. Showed Mom and him a picture of you. Mom was excited, but he was pissed, just like I thought. Said some dumb things about you and me," he murmured, running his thumb over my knuckles. "I told him to take his ridiculous opinions and go to hell. We're not talking now."

"Wow, okay," I said. I felt sorry for this poor guy who only wanted his uncle's approval, and saw a younger version of myself reflected in him. "You know, if things aren't working out, it's okay to stop trying after a while. You've tried so hard for him, but if he can't even begin to support you, after all this time..." I shrugged. "I don't know what to say, Francisco. Maybe it's for the best?"

Francisco looked at me wide-eyed. "But he's family."

I laughed sadly. "Sometimes our family can be wrong for us. I used to be a straight A student in middle school and high school, all for my mom and dad. But they never noticed me, and it didn't seem like they were going to anytime soon either. They liked their jobs better than they liked me. I stopped telling them anything. I stopped coming home, even. If it weren't for Haylee's family, I think I would have some type of psychological problem based on emotional neglect, or something." I chuckled. "Sometimes there's only so much you can do before you're too tired to do anymore."

Francisco made a sort of hurt noise and yanked me into him. It was awkward, but it was one of the best hugs I'd ever received. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

I smiled, untangling my hand from where it was caught between our bodies so I could muss his hair. "I should be the one apologizing that you have an assbutt for an uncle then."

He laughed at that. "Oy, shut up. He's still my uncle. An assbutt, but my uncle nonetheless. Let's just forget about him, okay? The movie should be starting soon."

I nodded, but I didn't get up, and neither did he. We sat there for a while holding onto each other, watching as dark blue began to slowly bleed into the west.

“Francisco?”

“Mm?”

“I want us to be okay. Will we be okay?”

“I think we will, Ben. I think we will.”

I turned my face toward his, and he tipped my chin up with his knuckles so he could kiss me slowly and sweetly. I kissed back, licking lightly at his lips, clutching his shoulder with the hand that wasn't holding onto my food carton. He took it out of my hand and twined his fingers in mine, and I felt him smiling against my lips. I smiled back.

“Let's go see ghost movies now,” I said, and he grinned, his teeth bright in the dim light.

“Only if you let me hold your hand.”

The movie was something neither of us had ever seen before, and we were practically in each other's shirts by the time it ended. Oh, it wasn't anything naughty, sadly. Just two boys scared out of their wits using each other as their safety blankie.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Francisco shuddered, holding onto my hand tightly. Many others were doing the same thing. “I don't think I can ever go camping again.”

“I'm going to think twice every time I go to the bathroom, that's for sure.” I shook my head. “God. My heart's still pounding. Feels good, though.”

A leering smile came over his face. “I can think of a few ways we can get your heart pounding without having the piss scared out of us,” he murmured into my ear.

I grinned back. “I can't wait to find out.”

It was still only nine o'clock or so, so we decided to take the scenic route and wander around a little more before we headed home. His arm was thrown around my shoulder, and mine was curled around his waist, and we kept bumping into each other as we walked.

As we reached the mouth of an alley, I heard shouts and curses coming from inside. We immediately stopped.

“We should just go,” Francisco murmured, gently pushing me forward, but he froze when a male voice cursed loudly in Spanish and let out a yelp.

“Should we call the police?” I asked, worried.

Francisco stepped into the alley, and I followed behind him, cell phone in hand.

Three guys surrounded another man on the ground. One of them had a baseball bat, and I felt faintly ill.

Before I could think, Francisco had yelled out, grabbing their attention. “What the hell are you doing?”

One of the men came toward us, his hands empty. I hoped to God he didn’t have a gun or a knife hidden somewhere. “What was that, punk?”

“I’ve called the police,” I said. I was just fibbing, but I had my hand poised over the dial button, the numbers typed in already. “You should leave now.”

“Ooh, the little fag thinks he’s threatening me,” the man said, grinning.

Before I could give him a scathing response, the man lunged at me. I ducked out of the way and socked him in the gut. He doubled over, and I used his movement to knee him in the face. I felt his nose crunch, and I grimaced and let go. He staggered a few steps, clutching his bloody nose, before he fell.

“Wow,” Francisco breathed, admiring and impressed. I blushed and averted my gaze, but movement from the other two guys brought it back to the front. Francisco straightened, but he seemed mostly unfazed.

The guy with the baseball bat went for Francisco, but the other guy came at me, face twisted in rage. I took him out with a few precisely placed punches, and looked back to see Francisco had wrestled the bat away from the other guy. When he made to swing the bat at his head, the man ducked and swept out with his feet. Francisco wobbled for a minute, but I caught him and helped him straighten. The man turned to punch me and got in a glancing blow to my temple when I couldn’t block it in time. In retaliation, I kicked at his kneecap, and he collapsed with a pained scream, clutching his leg.

“God, Ben, you okay?” Francisco hugged me tightly before he held me at arm’s length and looked me up and down, equal parts worried and pleased.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said, feeling my face go a little pink. “Now you go see if that guy’s okay, and I’ll call the police.” I pushed him in the direction of the fallen man.

The guy looked really young, almost younger than I was, and I felt angry that those douche bags were trying to pick trouble with a *kid*. Francisco, though, did a double take when he recognized the kid. “Timmy?”

“Frankie!” The kid pushed himself up to stand, and Francisco crushed him to his chest just like he’d done with me a few minutes ago.

“God, Timmy, what the hell are you doing out here?” he said, catching a hold of the kid’s chin and turning his face this way and that, checking for bruises. “Are you okay?”

Timmy managed to nod weakly, mumbling something about losing his way, his eyes pinned on my face as I called emergency services and told them the address. “This is your boyfriend?”

Francisco grinned. “Yeah, this is Ben.”

I ended the call and reached to take Timmy’s hand. “Hi. Can’t say I like *how* we met, but nice to meet you.”

“Timmy is my cousin,” Francisco said, nudging us so we were walking back to the mouth of the alley where it was brighter and had more traffic. It would be better to wait for the cops there.

“You were so badass,” Timmy chimed in, everything sinking in only now as the shock wore off. “Do you know karate? Or was it something else?”

I flushed red to the tips of my ears. No one had ever called me badass before. “It was karate. I’m a second dan black belt.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.” Francisco and his cousin both looked at me with this expression of awe. It was funny.

“It’s not a big deal really. I’ve still got quite a few dans—”

“Just take the compliment, Ben. Seriously.” Francisco grinned at me. “Timmy doesn’t usually say such nice things about people.”

Timmy shoved Francisco. “Hey, don’t bad-mouth me!” Francisco laughed. Timmy rolled his eyes at that, but he looked at me and smiled before turning back to his cousin. “I can’t wait to tell everyone how cool your boyfriend is. Won’t dad be so pleased to find out,” he said, grinning conspiratorially.

“I can’t wait to see his face.” Francisco grinned back.

Chapter 9

After we gave our statements to the police, we got a cab back to Timmy's house. He wanted us to come in with him, but it was late already, and Francisco didn't want any drama right then, so we just decided to drop him off and head home.

We walked with him to his front porch. The minute Timmy had disappeared into his house, Francisco grabbed me by the hips and slammed me against a wall, kissing me to within an inch of my life.

"Holy *hell*, Ben, do you know how sexy you were back there?" he murmured, littering kisses all along my neck. I stood on tiptoes and seized his lips again, starting a small kissing war.

"Really?" I asked, just to hear him say it again. My breaths came in pants, and I gasped when he bit down on my collarbone.

"Yes, really. Want me to say it again?"

"If you don't mind."

He chuckled. "You. Were. *Awesome*." He caught my bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled on it. "There's a story behind the karate, isn't there?"

"I *may* have learned it because I was obsessed with martial arts manga and anime when I was a teenager. And since it was the Kurosawa family dojo, going there meant I could stay for as long as I liked. And Sensei let me work instead of paying a fee."

"A man who knows his goals and how to get them. Nice."

"Shut up." I laughed, muffling it in his shoulder.

"Hey, you know what I said about some of my apologies involving a bed?"

My breath hitched. "Yeah."

He pulled back and looked me in the eye. "I'd like to take you to mine, then."

This was really happening. I grinned. "I'd like to be taken to yours, too."

We practically ran to Francisco's apartment—which was only three blocks away, thank God—and stopped only when we were at his door and he was pinning me to the wood as he dug in his pockets for his keys.

He broke off our kiss to exclaim, “Found it!” and triumphantly brandished his prize. It took a while to get inside, because apparently it is not the most effective method to blindly poke at the door until you find the keyhole.

We finally managed to get inside, and I toed off my shoes and climbed him like a tree. Because *yes, FINALLY!* We were gonna have sex!

Francisco got rid of my shirt, and I popped a few buttons off of his and giggled at his peeved expression as he mumbled something about it being special. He cupped me through my jeans, and I abruptly stopped laughing when I found my breath was missing and everything felt like it was being fried, my brain and dick especially.

“Ho-oly Mewtwo, fuck!”

“Not sure if that’s good or bad, but okay?” He laughed into my neck, and I felt lightheaded and high. No, brain. You can’t fail me now. Be good, please.

Francisco slid his hands into the back of my pants and pulled me closer, grinding his groin against mine. I gasped. “It’s good. It’s sooo good. I think I might faint.”

He laughed as we stumbled to his bedroom and crash-landed on the bed. He reached out to flip the switch, filling his room with a dull white light.

He was on all fours, his knees on either side of my hips, one hand bracing his body above mine and the other splayed on my neck. He had a soft smile on his face as he carefully removed my glasses and set them on the bedside table.

I felt a sense of wonder, looking at his face and his dimples and his gorgeous, sculpted chest. He was beautiful on the outside, and a wonderful person on the inside, and I felt incredibly lucky to know this guy, even if he had caused me quite a bit of heartache.

He murmured an apology for lying and bent to kiss my forehead, and all of a sudden I felt choked up and emotional.

“It’s in the past now,” I said, smiling, my voice a little wobbly. “Let’s not keep talking about it.”

He hummed and gave me a kiss on both of my cheeks, then my nose, and finally, my lips. I ran my hands through his short mop of hair, scratching lightly, loving the soft texture of it. The beginnings of stubble prickled my face, and I rubbed my chin against it.

“I’ve been waiting for this,” he said, low and throaty, looking in my eyes like a man in the Sahara seeing an oasis.

“Me too.” I rocked my hips upward, but didn’t make contact, not having the leverage to roll them properly. Francisco solved that problem by lowering his body, rubbing deliciously against mine.

Reaching between our bodies to undo our pants, I lowered his first, and saw his shaft standing at attention, reddened and veiny. It occurred to me that I was getting up close and personal with Francisco’s dick, for real. My own was paler and more pinkish, and it made a sweet contrast. One of these days, I was going to draw them together. Of course, I would ask beforehand. Because otherwise it would be very creepy. How would I ask though? I mean, do I just say “Francisco, can I draw your—”

His broad, callused hand came up to wrap around the both of us.

“Don’t be so nervous,” he chided. “I can hear your internal rambling all the way here.”

Words... I need words... “Not—Not nervous.”

“If you say so,” he said casually, as if he weren’t currently stroking and squeezing us together.

I shuddered and bit my lips to hold in a moan, but it turned into a pathetic little gurgle.

“Be as loud as you want,” he said, rescuing my lip by sucking it into his own mouth. “I want to hear you come undone.”

“Your wish—ahh, yes—my command.” I grinned and ran my hands across his shoulders, down his back, over his butt. When he squeezed us together, I cursed.

“I want to see your face when I enter you, but I also want you on all fours so I can see how perfectly you take my dick. What do you think?”

My brain popped and fizzed. “Yes. Anything.”

“Give me a proper answer, babe.” I could hear the laughter in his voice almost as prominently as the heat.

“On my back,” I gasped, squirming when he reached down to toy with my sac.

“Great.” I heard the crinkle of foil, and I made my eyes stay focused as Francisco prepared himself and lubed up.

Tossing my legs over his shoulders, he made an appreciative noise as he spread me open. “Do you put anything in your ass when you jack off?”

I nodded. “Dildo. I imagine it’s your dick. Looks kinda similar too.” Was that TMI? I couldn’t care less at that point.

He licked his lips and rubbed me with a thumb, pressing lightly into it and massaging. “How often?”

I almost didn’t hear his low question over the roaring of blood in my ears. “Two times a week.”

“When did you do it last?”

I closed my eyes to get away from his teasing gaze. “This evening, before I came to see you.”

He laughed. “You’re awfully short with your replies today, aren’t you?”

I groaned. “My brain is so fried, you should be happy I’m answering in the first place! Fucking hell, get with the program!”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.” He smirked, positioning himself and sinking home in one thrust.

My toes curled and my back arched at the sensation, like fire was spreading through my body. Francisco kept up a steady rhythm, looking down at me and muttering dirty words of encouragement. “Yeah, that’s just perfect. You fit me like a glove.”

“Give it to me harder,” I gasped, my hands running all over his front and back, clawing and scratching and rubbing.

“Harder, babe?” he said, doing as I asked. Every time he touched my prostate, I felt an explosion behind my eyes, until it was just a string of explosions, and I was coming so hard I stopped breathing for a few seconds.

Francisco still pounded away, his grip on my hips brutal as he chased completion. I clenched and unclenched to help him along, and he froze, looking at me with my legs held apart, and I felt his cock pulse with orgasm.

He collapsed beside me after carefully lowering my legs, gently massaging to ease the slight ache.

“Your teeth are so white,” I blurted, feeling floaty and special and sparkling. “You have a beautiful O-face.”

“Yours is prettier, though.” He tucked my hair behind my ears and pulled me closer. I snuggled in as closely as I could without wearing his skin, and we looked at each other. “Was it okay?”

I snorted. “Okay? It was brilliant. We should totally do that again.”

“We will.” He curled a few strands of my hair around his fingers. “Your hair is so gorgeous. *You* are gorgeous. I can’t believe we actually had sex.”

I smiled. “Hey, that’s my line.”

“I’m stealing it, then.” He smiled back at me. “Ben?”

“Hmm?”

His brown eyes were focused on mine. “I think I might be in love with you.”

I stared at his solemn expression, my heart beating overtime. “Well isn’t that a coincidence, ’cause I’m already almost there.” Sensei and Rain would have been proud of me.

Francisco’s serious stare turned into something naughty and happy, and I swooped closer to kiss him. “We’re proper boyfriends now. And you’re going to be stuck with me. If you want to change anything, do so now because you won’t be able to later.”

He huffed. “Just get back here and kiss me, boyfriend.”

So I did.

The End

Author's Note

“Caffe Latte” is the first book in the Love Like Coffee series. “Kaapi,” the second book, is based on Eleftheria’s prompt for the LOR 2015 event, and will be available sometime in early 2016.

For anyone who is interested, you can find “Coffee is always the answer” and “Chocolate is happiness” merchandise here:

[Coffee is always the answer mug](#)

[Chocolate is happiness mug](#)

Author Bio

Dee Aditya is an Aquarius, and like other Aquarians, she's a little strange and a little random. When she's not getting her hands and words to cooperate with all the different stories in her head, she often contemplates the mysteries of the universe (Why is Yellow Yellow? Why are all professors so cruel? Why is saving money so hard?), and sings along to mushy songs while cleaning her room. Dee is currently in uni, and like most students, she is broke all the time, and will never turn down free food or free books.

Dee likes M/M, and loves romance, so that's what she writes. Her stories tend to be funny, sweet, angsty, cheesy, fluffy, or some combination of those. She has plans to write in different genres, though she is partial to contemporary and dystopian/sci-fi.

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