

LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES 2013



*Six*  
TARA SPEARS

## SIX

After what seemed six happy years together, Todd abruptly leaves Angelo the day their daughter is born. Suddenly Angelo finds himself alone with a newborn to raise, and no explanation as to why Todd left him, or the child he so desperately wanted.

Between work and home, Angelo doesn't have time for anything else, let alone a relationship. Besides, where would he meet someone at his age, with a baby in tow no less?

## Contents

Love Has No Boundaries .....	4
Six.....	7
Dedication.....	8
Acknowledgements.....	9
CHAPTER ONE .....	10
CHAPTER TWO.....	17
CHAPTER THREE.....	26
CHAPTER FOUR.....	33
CHAPTER FIVE.....	39
CHAPTER SIX.....	50
CHAPTER SEVEN.....	61
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	68
CHAPTER NINE .....	72
CHAPTER TEN.....	79
CHAPTER ELEVEN .....	84
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	91
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	102
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	107
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	112
CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....	120
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.....	125
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN .....	132
EPILOGUE.....	140
Author Bio .....	161

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## SIX

**By Tara Spears**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

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

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

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# SIX

By Tara Spears

## Photo Description

A smiling, dark-haired man is lying on a bed opposite a grinning baby. The baby has a grip on his finger, and a tattoo on his biceps reads, *Lover of my soul*.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I've been a very happy man for the past six years, but my partner left me right after our baby was born. That's us in the picture.*

*While I love my son/daughter, I feel like I lost a part of me, like I could never open myself again to someone who isn't a kid. Even if I did, how many men want to have a kid with a twenty-four-year-old kindergarten teacher?*

*Please, dear author, show me how true love is supposed to be!*

*Sincerely,*

*Anna*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** phone sex, sweet, men with children, teacher, accountant, hurt/comfort, illness, slow burn

**Word Count:** 50,463

*Dedication*

This story is dedicated to “Anna” whose prompt stretched my boundaries of creativity, and brought me out of my dark self.



### *Acknowledgements*

A special thank you to my beta readers; Anke, Vicki and Seiran. Without your encouraging words I'm not sure I would have ever been happy with this. I would also like to thank Jen and her faithful helpers. Without them there would be no event to write for.

# SIX

By Tara Spears

## CHAPTER ONE

“Chey, sweetie, give me a break, okay?”

Her poor bottom. I was never giving her apple juice again. She had a legitimate reason to cry this time, but my head couldn't handle any more in the confines of the Volvo. That such a high, earsplitting sound could come from something so small always amazed me.

My little girl had been opinionated and loud from the moment she was born. She didn't get it from me. I had been a quiet, easily amused baby according to my mother. Chey had to have inherited her lungs and voice from Erica, her birth mom.

Suddenly and without warning, in the silent but deadly manner she had, the car filled with a gag worthy odor.

“Oh, God. You are really testing me today, aren't you?”

She started bawling anew as I cracked open my window, and then hit the control for the ones in the far back of the wagon. It didn't help any and I coughed, trying hard not to gag. If I threw up it would serve me right for only having coffee this morning. First day of school, first time dropping Chey off with strangers, I couldn't eat. The three messy diapers through the wee hours of the morning hadn't helped. *Definitely no more apple juice, ever.*

I was going to be late. Not a good way to start the school year. Not to mention my lack of sleep and the migraine worming its way behind my eyes. My class was going to ravage me and leave nothing but a pile of picked clean bones.

“Chey, we're here!” I said cheerfully then muttered. “Finally.”

I parked in the driveway of the private daycare. I had interviewed twelve, and Nancy's Toddler Train had been, by far, the hands down best. A rambler,

meaning no stairs, set off the road with a large chain-link yard. Her and her assistant, Molly, only accepted six kids, all under five years of age. We had been very lucky they had an opening. They were both sweet middle-aged women who had fawned all over Chey during the interview. They may not think her such a sweetheart by the end of the day.

I unbuckled my daughter and wrestled her, and the diaper bag, out of the car. She stopped wailing for a second and gazed at me with her huge hazel eyes. She had my eyes and dark hair, but she was so much prettier than me. Even with the snot running down her upper lip. I set the diaper bag down and dug a tissue out of my pocket.

“Blow.” She sniffed instead. “Good girl.” We were still working on it. I wiped her lip and nose, then dabbed her eyes and round cheeks.

I went to pick up the bag and she grabbed my cheeks in her little hands and pinched. This had been her thing since she could control her arms. She always touched my face when she was unsure, not feeling well, wanted affection. And I couldn’t deny her even now, late and surrounded by the toxic smell of her diaper. She leaned her forehead in and bonked against mine.

“Kee,” she said, wanting a kiss. I lifted my head enough to smooch her wet lips. My eyes stung and I blinked hard. I refused to get emotional over this. It was just daycare. Lots of kids went to daycare. *But she’s only thirteen months old!* My mind screamed. I shoved the thought away.

“And if daddy doesn’t get his tush to work we won’t have to worry about it, because we’ll be on the streets.” I nuzzled her, and she laughed, her diaper and sore bottom forgotten for the moment.

I swung the diaper bag onto my shoulder and headed through the gate. The door opened before I reached it, and Nancy smiled warmly at us.

“Is Cheyanne ready to have some fun?” Nancy asked in her soft, sweet voice. Chey hid in my neck. “Has she had any breakfast?”

I shook my head and grimaced. “We tried apple juice for the first time last night and it didn’t agree with her. There’s pumpkin juice in her bag and some Cheerios. I need to change her before I leave her.”

“Oh, I can do that—” She glanced over her shoulder—“Didn’t you say 6:30?”

“Yeah, I’m late, sorry.” We stepped into the house, and I saw Molly watching over a boy, a few months older than Chey, as he ate scrambled eggs off the tray of a highchair. The house was as immaculate as it had been on our first visit.

Nancy reached for Chey and I hugged her before handing her over. The crying I had known would come, began. She pushed against Nancy’s chest, giving me the most imploring look as she sobbed, her lower lip pooched out.

I put my hand on the doorknob. “Thanks for taking her.” It was all I could manage as Chey began to scream. It was my fault of course. I had had her to myself all summer, and had been much too overprotective of who I allowed to hold her.

“We’ll see you around 3:00.” With that, Nancy backed away, rubbing Chey’s back, and my heart squeezed painfully. I nodded and left.

Once in the car, I took a few deep breaths. I knew better than to make a big deal of leaving but, wow, that had been harder than I imagined. I wiped off my eyes as I turned the key.

\*\*\*\*

Half an hour of bliss before the kids returned from lunch. The morning hadn’t been so bad. Eric had punched Josh, and Amy had thrown up all over the activity table, but all in all... I threw back two aspirin with some orange juice.

“I hope those are prescription,” Mrs. Lily Dupree, the principal, said as she stepped into the room from the central area entrance.

“Just aspirin.” I showed her the bottle and she chuckled as she waved her hand dismissively.

This was my second year at The Heights, and I had learned my first year that Lily had a very dry sense of humor when it came to the teachers here. Not as amused if the kids misbehaved, however.

“Day’s been that good so far, eh?” She quirked her eyebrows up as she perched on the edge of my grey metal desk. Her dark hands went to smoothing invisible wrinkles from her sage-green skirt. She was always impeccably dressed.

“No, not bad,” I said and we both laughed.

Eric had ended up in her office and Amy had gone to the nurse, who sent her right back with a note saying it was nerves. She was a meek girl and I had figured as much, yet I felt it was better to be safe and have the pro decide whether she stayed or went home.

“Don’t forget you have a late arrival—” Lily glanced at her gold-tone watch—“that should be here any minute.”

“I didn’t forget.” Oops, I *had* forgotten. Good thing I packed my lunch and was eating in my classroom.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “Only a few more hours, Angel, then you can go rescue that little girl of yours. Oh, don’t look so surprised. I know these things... single dad, worried about his precious daughter in the incapable hands of a daycare.” She smirked.

“Well, they are not incapable, but, yeah, end of the day can’t come soon enough.”

She nodded. “First day is always the worst.”

The outer door squeaked, drawing my attention, and Lily disappeared before my head even swung back to her. I rose and went to welcome my late arrival. I think her name was Ryan? No, Riana, that was it. I smiled a welcome to the red haired girl that was trying to disappear behind her dad’s grey trousers.

I squatted down.

“Who are you?” the man asked brusquely.

“The kindergarten teacher, Mr. Tucco, and you must be Riana?” I offered her a smile.

She held her ground, clinging to her father's leg, and managed a nod. The hardest day, I think, of a child's life is the first day of kindergarten. Add to that the fact Riana had just moved here, and she had a right to be shy.

"Angel Tucco?" the deep, solid voice asked. I could tell from his tone that he had assumed I was a woman. I got that a lot.

"Angelo Tucco, actually." I stood. "Everyone took to calling me Angel—" I paused as my eyes wandered up the crisp suit and silver tie to the face frowning down at me. *Oh, Jesus, he was tall... and broad.* And attractive despite the disdain plastered across his face.

His eyes inspected me like a viper, and I couldn't see even a hint of his lips. Maybe God had forgotten to give him any? The man didn't look like he smiled much, so he probably didn't need them. There wasn't one laugh line marring the corners of his green eyes, yet his forehead held two big creases above his flaring nose. He was either an angry type or he worried a lot.

I cleared my throat. "Everyone started calling me Angel when I was a kid and it just stuck. Angelo Tucco, kindergarten teacher extraordinaire." I extended my hand and he stared at it for a moment, probably contemplating whether I was worth shaking hands with.

"Marcus O'Keefe." He clasped my hand and I tried really hard not to squeak as I felt the bones shift. I was taking a stab at guessing he was Irish, just as folks usually assumed I was Italian. Well, half anyway, from my dad. The pale skin threw them at times. Polish-Dutch-Swedish mother would throw anyone. He let go, and I resisted the urge to shake my hand to reset the bones.

"I'll come pick her up at 2:30. No one else is authorized to pick her up, understand?" He was practically glaring at me, and I had yet to see his lips.

"Not a problem. Which lot?"

He shook his head and that was when I noticed his hair. It was the most unusual shade of bronze with bright copper highlights. I was fairly certain it was his natural color, although it looked like something a whacky stylist would charge a small fortune for.

“I’ll pick her up right here.” He pointed to his feet.

Well, I guess I better make sure she was right there when he came then. Actually, I had been through this with a student last year. Poor boy was smack dab in the middle of a custody battle.

I gave him an empathetic smile. “Nasty divorce?” It wasn’t my business, really, and I shouldn’t have pried, yet I always felt akin to recent divorcees. Having been dumped I knew what it felt like.

“Something like that.” He scratched his neck then blew out a low breath.

I nodded in sympathy. A year later, I could still feel Todd’s abrupt betrayal. Six years together and he hadn’t even had the decency to tell me why. Four words texted to me right as our daughter entered the world; *I can’t do this*. Not even a sorry, not even a goodbye.

Mr. O’Keefe cleared his throat and my head snapped up and out of the damaging thoughts. He was looking at me with the oddest expression on his face. It took me a moment to realize why it looked strange. I could see his lips, and they were plush, and delectable, and he was biting the outer edge in an indecisive way.

Indecision did not belong on this man’s strong face. He was chewing on that plump lip aggressively and I wanted to reach up and pull it from his abusive teeth.

*Oh!* Where had *that* come from? Not a suitable thought to have right now. Not at all.

I smiled, hoping it looked reassuring, but I was pretty sure I was beginning to blush. I hadn’t so much as looked at another man since Todd left, let alone admire even a part of one. I was pretty sure my cock no longer worked. My libido had either vacated the premises when Chey arrived, or had left with Todd. I wasn’t sure which, and honestly it didn’t really matter. I had a daughter to raise now.

I was saved from further embarrassment by my class tumbling in noisily as they returned from lunch. Mr. O’Keefe let his poor lip go.

“Right.” He bent down and hugged his daughter, whispering something she nodded at. He gave her a reassuring smile and helped her out of her red wool coat. I gestured to the coat area, and she headed right over to hang it up.

“I’ll take care of her,” I told him when he hesitated at the door.

“Thank you,” he said quietly as he glanced at his daughter then took one last look at me. He was probably deciding whether or not I was capable of the task of keeping his beloved daughter safe. With a small lift of his lips, he nodded curtly and left. Well, I guess I passed muster.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Chey giggled when she saw me, and handed up a red block from the pile in front of her. The movement caused her to sway, and I was about to steady her when she planted her other hand on the carpet. She still had the red block extended up to me, and I took it from her, grinning madly over her little triumph. It really was amazing to watch a child figure out all the small things, we, as adults, take for granted.

“Thank you!” I showed her the block then hugged it to my chest. Her hand made a grabbing motion, and I squatted down and handed it back to her. She snatched it away and put it in her mouth. *Everything in the mouth.*

“They’ve been disinfected,” Molly said, setting a boy close to Chey’s age down on the other side of the blocks.

“I’m not worried. I grew up with dogs, cats, and a pet chicken in our house, and somehow managed to survive.”

The little blond boy picked up a green rectangle and threw it at Chey, hitting her in the chest.

“Ronald!” Molly grabbed his hand. “No, we do not throw things.”

Chey didn’t cry, or even seem to care. So I turned to watch the exchange between Molly and Ronald, curious on how discipline was handled. Suddenly a purple triangle smacked him right in the face. I turned to my daughter, and found her pouting, and about to throw another block. I seized her hand and slapped it lightly. The block fell from her surprised grasp as her eyes pooled with tears.

“Absolutely not, young lady. No throwing.” I shook her hand gently for emphasis.

Molly sputtered, then snorted as her laughter broke free. Just then Ronald began to cry, and not to be outdone, Chey let loose a mighty wail drowning him out.

I groaned and hid behind my hands for a second. “Fabulous, my daughter’s a prima donna.” That made Molly laugh so hard she fell over, rolling around on the caramel carpet with her hands over her face. I looked at Chey with her mouth open and eyes closed, screaming for all she was worth, and began to laugh myself.

I shouldn’t find this funny, yet I couldn’t help myself. My thirteen-month old little girl had put a boy in his place. All right maybe not the best way to do it, but still, it was freaking hilarious.

\*\*\*\*

*TGIF.* I tipped the beer to my lips and savored the golden liquid as it slithered down my throat. I rarely indulged, but I felt I deserved one tonight in celebration. I had survived my first week with a new class *and* I could leave Chey at daycare now without blubbering. It was progress.

I glanced down at her asleep on my chest, a fist rammed into her mouth. Her bath had finished her, and she had dozed off while I was putting on her pajamas. I really should put her to bed, but she looked so comfortable, and these moments wouldn’t last forever. I bent my head down and nuzzled her dark hair. She smelled wonderful, a mix of baby shampoo and her own sweet scent.

Todd had no idea what he was missing. Chey had been his desire. From almost the day we met, he had wanted to be a father. What nineteen-year-old wants to be a father? Yet he had. I laid my lips on Chey’s head. He had wanted her so desperately. I was the one that had been hard to convince, and in the end, my dad was the one who persuaded me.

She was supposed to have been Todd’s biological daughter, but after several tries, we were told he wasn’t viable. He had a low count that wouldn’t have been a problem normally, however with insemination it was a big problem. We did the next best thing, and one ejaculation later, we were going to be parents. Even the doctor took to calling me a one shot wonder. I remembered being extremely embarrassed over that.

Then, when I thought I had given him everything he wanted, everything he needed, he left us without even a backwards glance. He left me for someone else. I knew that now, but I had been so blinded and in love, I hadn't seen the signs until it was too late.

We'd had our ups and downs just like everyone else. He always bitched about our sex life, but I had never denied him. Not once. He was always trying to lure me into kinky stuff, and he had a thing for ferries. My refusal to have sex on a damn ferry had been the cause of more than one row. Maybe if I had given in just once...

I sighed as I looked at the perfection huddled on my chest, her tiny hand fisting my T-shirt. It didn't matter now. He was gone and I was a father. Thanks to Todd, my life was forever wrapped up in *his* deepest desire and I didn't have room for anyone else anymore.

Was that a cop out? I sipped my beer while I thought about that. I was a twenty-six-year-old gay man with a daughter. It's not like I could go to the bars. I shuddered over *that* idea. Me and bars—not a good combination. Most of the guys there wanted a fling, and I wasn't the one-night stand type. I needed to feel a connection with my partners. That left work, grocery stores, and the parks Chey and I frequented. Not a lot of options for romance there.

I could do without sex, but I missed the companionship. I loved Chey and couldn't imagine life without her, but sometimes... I grimaced, remembering I almost gave her up. That seemed so long ago now and better forgotten.

I took another swallow of beer and made a face. Warm. I slid it onto the coffee table and struggled off the couch, hoisting Chey into my arms. She let out a little whimper then went to sucking on her tongue. The girl could sleep through anything.

Before I laid her down in her crib, I kissed her head one last time and lingered, laying my cheek against her soft hair. *You're the best and the worst thing to ever happen to me.* I settled her in her crib then went to my big empty bed.

\*\*\*\*

Chey giggled, and screeched, and giggled some more at the dogs racing around inside the chain-link play area. She loved watching them. Dogs and ducks could occupy her for hours. I had my foot on her stroller and was reading a Ted Dekker novel. It was a perfect Indian summer day, warm and sunny, and it seemed everyone was out enjoying it. One last hurrah before the rain began to fall.

When I discovered Chey's dog and duck fetish I took full advantage. It had become a Saturday tradition. I was no dummy. Something she would sit and watch happily for a few hours that wasn't a purple dinosaur, or weird people in terrycloth costumes? I felt I had won the lottery. She watched enraptured as I read something not written by Dr. Seuss or Mother Goose.

I was at the good part, where the detective finds out his own daughter had been taken by the same madman he was after, when my name rang out.

"Mr. Tucco, Mr. Tucco," the little voice sang. When you're a teacher, your students seem to pop-up at the most inopportune times. And they *always* recognized you, even from a mile away it seemed. I turned just as Riana slammed into the back of the bench.

"Hi!" she said grinning as if she had found a prize.

I smiled back, closing my book. "Hello, you enjoying the sunshine?"

She nodded enthusiastically, strands of red hair dancing around happily, having escaped her braid.

"Sorry, she had to come and say hi."

I glanced up into the smiling face of Mr. O'Keefe. The man was actually quite handsome when he let his lips out to play.

"Not a problem. We're just enjoying other people's dogs." I gestured to the fenced area with my book. Riana gasped and ran to the fence, locking her fingers in the chain-link.

"I didn't know you had kids." Mr. O'Keefe gestured to the stroller I still had my foot on.

“Just one. My daughter, Cheyanne.” At the sound of her name, Chey gurgled, and I spun her around so she could see us.

Mr. O’Keefe leaned over the back of the bench and grinned at her. “Aren’t you just the cutest thing?” He cooed at her.

I couldn’t stop the smile from breaking out at seeing this man ogling my daughter like only women usually did. Chey grinned back and held up her hands, making grabby motions.

He looked at me, his green eyes dancing. “Can I hold her?”

I opened my mouth, but rather than refusing, I found myself saying, “Sure.” The man was obviously smitten and Chey seemed to think he was okay. He smiled enthusiastically and hustled around the bench while I unbuckled her and lifted her out of the stroller.

The second he sat down he reached for her, getting his fingers tangled with mine. His were soft, and warm, and I swear he stroked them across my knuckles. It was ridiculous of course. Yet, ridiculous or not, I felt my face warm. Crap, I was blushing. His vibrant green eyes watched me for a second before they turned to Chey.

“Hi, sweetie. Oh, you are just too precious.” He settled her feet into his crotch and let her lean against his broad chest.

*Lucky girl.* Oh, where had *that* come from? That was the second time I had thought something inappropriate around this man, and I wasn’t even sure he was gay. I bit back a groan. Chey grabbed his face, and he laughed, then turned his head and pretended to gobble her hand. She squealed in delight.

“She looks like you.”

I nodded knowing it was true. “Thankfully she’s prettier than me though. She has her mother’s cheeks and mouth.”

He looked over at me. “I don’t know. I think she has your mouth too.”

I licked my lips without meaning to and his eyes followed the movement for a second before turning back to Chey. I felt my whole body warm. I was sure under my clothes I was pinker than Chey’s corduroy pants.

*What was wrong with me?* I was blushing like a school kid over a straight guy, who wasn't being sexual in any way, shape, or form... well, maybe his gorgeous form. *Jesus! Stop it!* I turned away, concentrating on the bridge in the distance. It *had* been over a year. Not even a morning hard-on in that time. Maybe my libido had just been sleeping. I cleared my throat to stop from snorting. A coma more like it. He *was* an attractive man, not that I needed to be thinking about him that way. Definitely not in *that* way.

"Is she your daughter?" Riana wedged herself into the tiny space between her father and me.

I cleared my throat and brought myself out of my musings. "Yeah, she's mine." I turned back and watched Chey grasp the finger Riana offered her.

"Where's her mom?"

"We're not together," I told her. It was a good honest answer for a child her age.

She nodded. "Like my mom and dad." There wasn't any sadness there, just fact.

I noticed the hardness return to Mr. O'Keefe's face and wondered what had happened. A daughter detached from her mother and a husband who obviously didn't like his ex-wife much at all. There must have been some tragedy there to cause their reactions.

Chey must have felt the tension in him because she began to squirm and pout.

"Shhh, it's okay." He cuddled her in his arms and bounced her gently. He turned his face away and Chey butted her head into his cheek.

"Kee."

I gawked at her. She had never asked for a kiss from anyone but me. It was my fault she was shy around people, yet obviously she wasn't shy with Mr. O'Keefe.

"*Kee,*" she said more insistently.

“She wants a kiss,” I said quietly. I wasn’t sure he had heard me as he didn’t move.

“Dad, she wants a kiss.” Riana climbed up until she was standing on the bench, and leaned over her father’s shoulder. “Dad? Are you thinking about Toby?” Riana laid over her father in an awkward hug. I heard his breathing, harsh and broken, and felt like an interloper despite my daughter being crushed between them.

“Ah, ah, *KEEEE!*” Chey demanded. It was enough to break them apart, and they chuckled at her.

Riana gave her father a smooch on his temple. “She’s so cute.” She ruffled Chey’s hair and received an indignant squeal in return. She bounced down and went back to watching the dogs.

Chey pinched Mr. O’Keefe’s cheeks hard. He glanced at me with the silliest, most adoring look on his face.

“Go ahead. She’s obviously in love.” I waved a hand dismissively, while I mock sniffled.

He smirked at me for a long few seconds as the skin in Chey’s fingers turned pink then red. She was really pinching him. Chey bounced on her feet causing him to wince.

“I think you better give her what she wants before she really hurts you.” I twirled my finger at my daughter and laughed.

He bent down and kissed her forehead.

“Nao,” she said with a pout.

“Gotta be on the lips,” I told him, tapping mine when he looked to me with a cocked eyebrow.

He bent down and she smacked her gooey lips to his then giggled without lifting her head. He chuckled back as he stared into her wide eyes. It was one of the most adorable things I had ever seen.

Chey goo-gooed as she twisted around, trying to see the dogs again. She was done with us. I reached for her and Mr. O’Keefe handed her over a bit reluctantly. I smooched her cheek while she tried to push me away. *Well, isn’t that a fine how do you do!*

“Who’s Toby?” I asked as I settled Chey in her stroller and tugged her shirt down. He didn’t answer. I clicked her harness on. “Sorry, I was being nosey.”

He sighed heavily, settling his elbows on the back of the bench. His navy Henley stretched tight across his wide, and I couldn’t help but notice, shapely chest. *Mmm, I wonder if he has a six-pack.* I sighed with a hint of dejection in there. I wasn’t stupid. Even if he *were* gay, he would be completely out of my league. Regardless, my mouth filled with saliva and I turned back to fuss with the strollers harness, swallowing before I began drooling. My libido drug a foot out of bed.

“He’s my son; a few months younger than your daughter actually. My wife’s—*ex-wife*’s parents took him. He’s special needs and I worry they’re not taking care of him properly.” He wrinkled his nose and I could see he barely had his emotions under control. “I haven’t seen him since... they just took him and I can’t find him.” He looked away, his shoulders lifting and falling with each breath.

Jeez, that was rough. I glanced at Riana giggling as a beagle licked her fingers through the fence. I couldn’t imagine having two kids. I could barely take care of one, but even so, not knowing must be unbearable.

“You didn’t have to tell me. It’s really none of my business.” I repositioned Chey so she could watch the dogs. Riana began talking animatedly to a girl a few years older than her while the beagle pawed at a tennis ball trying to get their attention.

“You’re right. I didn’t mean to impose on you.” He scratched his head then tried to smooth his hair out. Between the two girls, it had become a lost cause some time ago. In jeans, Henley, and messy hair, he looked vulnerable. A soft contrast to the stiff suit I knew him as. I liked this side of him much better.



“You didn’t,” I answered. “Sometimes we need to talk to a stranger.” I smiled at him reassuringly as I settled against the back of the bench and crossed my legs.

He chuckled. “Are we strangers? I mean, aren’t I supposed to be able to trust my kid’s teacher? That makes you more than a stranger I would say.” He twirled a hunk of his hair between his fingers, tattering it even further. It was an odd thing for a man to do.

“Well, I appreciate the ear, and the baby fix—”

“Anyone ever tell you, you sound like a woman.” *Jesus, did I just say that?* I did, I did just say that. He laughed and, thankfully, there was actual amusement there.

“Yeah, my ex-wife, actually. All the time. We didn’t get along very well.” He didn’t elaborate and I didn’t ask, afraid I might say something I’d regret even more than the last tumbled words.

Talking to kids all day seemed to have rendered my adult communication skills practically obsolete. Not that I had a chance to practice with many adults these days. Most of my friends, which had been Todd’s friends too, had disappeared once Chey entered my life, or rather when Todd exited it.

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## CHAPTER THREE

I didn't see Mr. O'Keefe again until Wednesday afternoon. He had arranged with the office for his sister to drop off and pick up Riana for a few days. I barely saw the woman, let alone spoke to her. She was in and out in seconds, but there was no denying the resemblance to her brother. Same wildly marked hair, same bright green eyes, and based on the huge grin Riana gave her, a well-loved relative.

I was re-organizing my classroom while Riana colored at the activity table, when her father finally arrived, late, to pick her up. The door had already auto-locked, and at his knock, I went to let him in. He was peering through the small window, and even though he looked tired, he was smiling.

"Your dad's here," I told Riana. She glanced up then started putting the crayons quickly away.

He entered carrying two bags and apologizing.

I waved off his rapid-fire words. "Don't worry about it. It takes me half an hour to put the chaos back in order." I indicated the room, which was actually almost clean.

Flu season had arrived, so I needed to wipe off the tables with disinfectant then put the chairs up for the janitor, and I would be done.

Riana put the crayons away then ran over and crashed into her father's legs. He set the bags down and scooped her up, gobbling at her neck. She squealed and giggled before remembering she was too old for that. She pushed on him trying to stop giggling and failing. He hugged her tight, closing his eyes for a moment before setting her down.

"Sorry I'm late. Were you good for Mr. Tucco?" He gave her a serious look.

She nodded and he glanced at me. I confirmed with a nod of my own. Once Riana settled in, she had become an exemplary student. Well, as kindergarteners go anyway.

“I guess you earned this then.” He handed her one of the bags. She peeked over the edge, then dove in and wrestled the object out. She hugged the pink and turquoise Dora the Explorer backpack against her chest and hopped up and down.

“Thank you, Daddy. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, go get your things. Daddy’s tired, and wants McDonald’s and a nap.”

She grinned, her eyes going round over the McDonald’s part, as she scooted to the coat area.

“You’re welcome to join us. You and Chey, I mean.” He rocked back on his heels, waiting for my answer.

“I, um, thank you for the offer.” I shook my head. “I have to pick up Chey from daycare.”

He chuckled. “I figured she wasn’t stashed here somewhere. Pick her up and meet us there. We just go to the one on Sunset with all the tubes.”

Dating a student was grounds for immediate dismissal. I had laughed when I read that part of the district’s policy structure knowing it applied to upper grades. Even so, I found it amusing being a kindergarten teacher. There hadn’t been anything in there about dating parents however. And although I knew this wasn’t a date, per se, I felt if I went I was overstepping an invisible line.

“Thank you for the invitation but I—”

“Oh, come on. You deserve dinner out after six hours of cranky kids. Besides, I’d love to see Chey’s face when she gets this.” He lifted up the other bag.

He’d bought her a gift? Crap. I’d never been good at accepting gifts, and for some reason Chey getting a gift from Mr. O’Keefe was terrifying me.

He wrapped his hand around my arm and I jumped, knocking the bag out of his hand. He let it fall to the floor at our feet. At least now I knew it wasn’t fragile.

“Relax. It’s not a date, it’s just McDonald’s. Here.” He pulled out one of the tiny plastic chairs. “Sit down. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I sat down and heard the chair creak. They weren’t exactly made for adults and I hoped I didn’t break it. *Wait, did he say date?* Or rather not a date, but still, he used the word.

I looked at him crouched next to me, and he looked back, concern etching his face and drawing the lines between his eyes deep. Gosh, he smelled good. There was a slight sweaty tang that just made him more enticing. I found myself leaning towards him then saw him reaching out. I moved my head and fended off his hand as he tried to feel my forehead. If my face was flushed, it wasn’t from fever.

“I’m fine. I must be tired or something,” I murmured. I needed to get a grip. It was a gift for Chey from a man that smelled like, well, a man. It wasn’t *that* unusual.

He lowered his hand and laid it on a much less appropriate part of me. My thigh. I pretended not to notice because every part of me was screaming *YES*, and I didn’t want him to know *that*. No one over the age of six had touched me in a long time, and every drop of blood and nerve ending jostled inside me, trying to be beneath his strong, warm hand.

“You don’t look okay. You’re all flushed. The flu’s going around...” He glanced at Riana investigating her new backpack near the door. “All right, maybe another time.” He slid the bag next to me.

I didn’t even want to look at it.

“And maybe you’ll let me know if she likes this.” He fingered the bag reverently, and for some reason that touched me. “Riana had one when she was a baby and loved it.”

His hand left my thigh as he stood and I saw myself doing it, but couldn’t stop, as my fingers traveled over where his hand had just been. I heard the door open and snapped my head up.

“Mr. O’Keefe, thank you. I’m sure she will love whatever you got her.”

He looked at me over his shoulder. “Marcus, call me Marcus.” The door closed behind him.

I sat in that tiny chair for several minutes as I wished so many things, but most of all, I wished I wasn’t a coward.

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“I don’t feel good.”

I glanced down just as Jeffery’s partially digested lunch splattered all over my beige trousers and leather dress shoes. I had no idea what possessed me to wear nice clothes today. That was the second time my shoes had been hit, a first for my pants though. What was it about six-year-olds? They only realized they were sick when their stomachs were already beginning to rebel, and I swear they had projectile vomiting down to a science.

Thankfully, Jeffery didn’t start crying like Calvin and Amy had. I retrieved the baby wipes off my desk, and cleaned off his narrow face. I already knew the nurse’s office was full. Amy was on a mat near the coat closet, her parents unable to pick her up for another hour. I felt Jeffery’s forehead. He was pretty warm. I had lost nine in four days to the flu, and for some reason every one of them had come to school then had to be sent back home. What were their parents thinking? School was not a babysitting service for God’s sake.

I steered Jeffery towards the back wall where a few of the lights had been turned off so Amy could sleep. I settled him on another nap mat, and covered him with a blanket before calling the front office.

“All right, who’s sick now?” Lily Dupree, the principal asked.

“It must be a madhouse there if you’re answering the phone.”

“You have no idea. It seems several parental sets can’t get off work to pick up their sick kids. What’s with people these days?”

“I was just thinking the same thing. I still have one here whose parents were called two hours ago. Anyway, Jeffery Lyons just decorated my pants with his lunch. Spaghetti on linen.” I glanced down at my more than likely

ruined slacks. “And it looks like Jujy Fruits, no, wait, gummy bears, there’s a green head stuck to my shoe. Any chance—”

She laughed. “I can come watch your class while you clean up. Anything to get me out of here for a few minutes.”

Now I laughed. “And you think twenty-three kindergarteners are a break?”

This flu outbreak was a nasty one, and I was glad I had taken the free flu shot Chey’s pediatrician had offered when she got hers. As I knelt down to clean the carpet, I decided it might be smart to bring a change of clothes tomorrow, and leave them here until this worked its way through.

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I was instantly worried when Nancy informed me Chey had been crabby all day, refusing to eat anything but Cheerios and mashed pears.

I felt her head again when we got home. She wasn’t warm, but she was definitely being a brat. The instant she knew I was going to set her down, she screamed loud enough I thought the windows might shatter. I kept her in my arms.

“Okay, okay. I suppose a bath isn’t going to go over well either?”

She whimpered around her pouted lower lip as she cuddled against my chest. I really needed to change but I could give her a few minutes. I swung my shoulders back and forth as I rubbed her back. She took several sharp, snotty, breaths then wiped her nose on my ivory shirt.

“Gee, thanks.” I glanced down and below the yellow snot streak was a pale pink wet spot. *Oh, thank God.* Not that a new tooth was better than the flu, but at least I could make her feel a little better. Baby Orajel was a *wonderful* product, and Chey actually didn’t mind the taste.

I kissed her head. “Let’s both get changed, and then Daddy will make everything better.”

Even with the Orajel Chey didn’t want me to put her down, only eating half a jar of chicken noodle, which was one of her favorites. She sat in my lap as I ate leftover Chicken Fettuccine, doing her best to grab my fork, the

noodles, the plate. It was like trying to eat around a starving monkey, only this monkey spit out the piece of noodle I gave her.

After dinner I went to put her down for the night, and the second I stepped into her room she went off again.

“Cry all you want, you’re not sleeping with me.” I kissed her cheeks, which brought the decibel level up a few notches. I had read not to coddle your baby when they were like this. I did it anyway, rubbing her back until she relaxed before laying her in her crib.

I grabbed the baby monitor before shutting her door. I could feel a headache coming on and it was only going to get worse once I balanced my checkbook, and read and signed the new safety regulations the school district adopted. Oh, crap, I left them in the car.

I put my slippers on, opened the door, and groaned at the fat drops of water falling from the sky. Of course, the umbrella was in the car. I raced out, unlocked the trunk and grabbed my messenger bag. Just as I was about to slam the trunk, I saw the plum colored bag Mr. O’Keefe had given Chey shoved behind the toolbox. I’d forgotten about it, maybe conveniently. I yanked it out and darted back inside, managing to only get wet, not soaked.

I set everything on the table then stripped off my T-shirt. Water dripped off my hair and down my back. *Brrr*. Maybe a little soaked—and now cold.

After depositing my wet shirt in the laundry room, I went back to the table and stared at Chey’s gift for several minutes. Or rather the bag. I knew I was being a coward. But what if it was something special, something he had put some thought into?

I pulled the bag over and leaned my head down to peek inside. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a stuffed animal. I drew the purple dog out of the bag and suddenly the room was full of stars.

*Dang*. Not just a stuffed animal. I’d seen these advertised, and every time I saw the commercial I thought; *Chey would love that*, but then I would forget until the next time I saw the commercial. I squeezed until I found the switch and it shut off. I set it on the table and stared at it. Now I would have to thank

him personally. I let my head fall onto the stuffed dog, and stars lit the air again.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

I passed Amy off to her mom for the second time this week. I was more than a little disappointed she had sent her daughter to school still sick. Poor girl hadn't even made it two hours before she was feverish and complaining she didn't feel well.

“Hopefully she'll be better by Monday,” I told her with a forced smile.

The starchy woman appeared rather put out, and didn't say one word as she wrestled her daughter against her shoulder and left. I shook my head at her back. I couldn't understand why some people had kids when they obviously didn't have time for them.

I was growing tired of sick kids, and irresponsible parents, and was thankful I had a whole weekend before I had to deal with them again. I loved all the kids in my class, even the naughty ones like Eric, but every now and then, I needed a break. This was one of those rare times.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Eric throwing a box of crayons at Aleese, and of course she screamed. Why couldn't Eric get the flu? That would probably upset the whole dynamics of the universe. I swear there was a cosmic law that stated every class had to have a bully. Last year it had been a girl named Keeva, who had been six going on seven, instead of five going on six. And everything had been beneath her, including her classmates. This year it was Eric, who loved to make girls cry, and seemed perfectly content in time out.

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Riana was being a big help while we waited for her father to pick her up. She had put all the art supplies away and even picked up the little pieces of paper off the floor. Now she was helping me put the chairs up on the tables.

Lily walked in and smiled when she saw my little helper. “Did you get a chance to sign the new safety protocol?”

“Sorry, I forgot to drop them at the office this morning. I’ve got them right here.” I pulled the manila envelope from my bag and handed it to her.

“You’re not the only one. I figured I’d just come around and collect them before the weekend.”

The door handle rattled and I ran over to let Mr. O’Keefe in. He had his sister with him, and the second Riana saw her she squealed and tackled her with a hug.

“Aunt Kim wants to know if you want to spend the night with her?”

Riana nodded enthusiastically.

“All right, go get your coat and backpack.” Mr. O’Keefe gestured to the coat area and Riana hustled over so fast she tripped and fell into the cubbies.

“I’m okay.” She waved a hand out and we all laughed.

“Mr. Tucco, this is my sister, Kim, Riana’s aunt obviously.” Mr. O’Keefe stepped aside and Kim stuck out her hand.

I shook it. “We didn’t get a chance to meet last week; you were in and out so fast. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

She smiled and fanned her face. “Sorry about that. It’s been a crazy few weeks. Riana seems to love your class. She’s always talking about you and your *cool* art projects.”

“Well, I don’t know how *cool* they are, but thank you. I try to keep them entertained while educating at the same time.” I clasped my hands behind my back and realized I was rocking on my feet and stopped.

“They are cool. Today we made a zoo out of paper. The animals stand up and everything. See?” Riana ran over to the table where our 3-D zoo resided. They followed her then her dad picked up a green giraffe with gold stars for spots.

“This *is* cool. Which one is yours?” He turned the giraffe around in his hands then set it back down as Riana grabbed her pink and purple zebra.

“Wow, that’s great. You got the stripes perfect, honey. Don’t you wish zebras actually came in these colors? How neat would that be?” He smiled and held the zebra out in his hand for her to put back.

“Oh, that would be sooo cool. I wish I could see a real one.” She sighed as she set her creation back in the Popsicle stick pen.

“I promise as soon as the weather’s nice again we’ll go to the zoo. Maybe we can convince Mr. Tucco and Chey to come with us?”

She grinned and nodded while I gaped stupidly. I had a feeling I would be doing a lot of that around him. He seemed to have a way of surprising me. Riana looked at me expectantly.

“Um, yeah, maybe.” I glanced quickly at Lily, who was sitting at my desk thumbing through some books there, and either not paying attention or feigning disinterest. Riana was clapping her approval.

“Ready, sweetie? I’m sure Andy is wondering if we got lost.” Kim held out her hand and Riana ran over and took it. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

Mr. O’Keefe nodded and waved at his daughter as they left. As soon as the door closed he turned to me with a mischievous look on his face.

“I forgot to thank you for the nightlight. Thank you.” I glanced nervously at Lily but she was now reading *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. I had the feeling she wasn’t actually reading though. He was still looking at me like he had a secret and I was beginning to get a little uncomfortable.

“Since I’m alone, and really not sure I want to be, I wondered if I could talk you and Chey into dinner tonight.” He tipped his head and his expression changed, becoming soft and maybe a little pensive. I didn’t even have to think about my answer. There was only one right one, even if it wasn’t the one I wanted to give.

“I’m sorry, Mr. O’Keefe—”

“Marcus.”

“Mr. O’Keefe, I just can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” He said it so quietly I almost didn’t hear him.

“Can’t.”

“Mr. O’Keefe, can I borrow Mr. Tucco for a minute so I can get out of here? We’ll only be a moment.” Lily smiled as he nodded then ticked her head towards the central area. I followed her out. She grabbed my shirt and dragged me into Mrs. Scott’s second grade classroom causing me to stumble into the wall.

“Do you have the flu?” She laid the back of her hand on my cheek. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

I ducked away from her touch and shook my head at her. “What? I feel fine.”

“Mm, I thought maybe you were feverish since you turned down that nice and fairly handsome man’s invitation.” Her voice ended in an accusatory tone that made even me squirm. She laid her hand on my arm. “Angel, it’s been over a year, time to get out and live again.”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying to me. She knew about Todd, heck the whole school knew about my being dumped since I had taken time off, and then spent a few weeks in mopey mode. I ate a lot of cupcakes, cookies, and salads that appeared mysteriously on my desk during that time. I guess everyone thought since I was a man I could very possibly starve of a broken heart. But Lily had never stepped into my personal life before.

I didn’t realize I was concentrating on my loafers, shaking my head, until Lily spoke again.

“Angelo Tucco, I have a fair idea how your mind works. Let me see if I have this right.”

She took a breath and straightened her dark blue dress as if she was about to speak in front of an audience. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited, actually wanting to hear what she came up with. The woman was incredibly intuitive and had guessed I was gay before I even told her. When I wouldn’t stop fidgeting at my interview, she touted the district’s policy on sexual

discrimination letting me know it was not tolerated. Her way of telling me she knew and was fine with who I was.

She tapped her dark finger to her lips then spoke. “The district does not police what teachers do off campus, provided said activities are legal. That includes befriending parents. However, we will step in if you’re caught necking in the parking lot or kissing in the cubbies. So don’t do that.” She pointed a finger at me trying to look firm but her face was triumphant if not amused.

“But he’s a parent.” It was a straw grab and one I needed a solid resolution to.

“And you’re both adults. So go forth and fornicate, Angel—just not on school grounds,” she said slyly.

I gasped. “I’m not...”

She laughed as she turned and walked towards the library, waving the manila envelope over her shoulder. “I made you think about it though, didn’t I?”

I couldn’t believe she had just given me permission to go *fornicate* with a parent. I chuckled in spite of the fact I knew I was blushing madly. I was pretty sure she had just overstepped the boundaries of principal-teacher relations. And dangit, now I *was* thinking. Thinking of all the possibilities an evening with Mr. O’Keefe, Marcus, could hold. Heck, I didn’t even know if he was gay.

I supposed by the end of the evening I might have my answer. At least I hoped so. That thought had my heart racing a little. I went back into my classroom feeling awfully giddy for a twenty-six-year-old.

He turned from the construction paper zoo, his hands shooting behind his back as if he had been caught touching precious art. He smiled tentatively at me and seeing him nervous, was my undoing.

“Yes,” I blurted out, and sighed at how good it felt to let that word free.

His brow furrowed. “Yes?”

“To dinner.” It was a whiplash style turnaround from *I can't* to *hell yeah* and I watched to see what his response would be.

His palmed the back of his neck as a huge smile broke out across his face.

“One condition.” I straightened the chairs on a table to stop from staring at him. It wasn't easy because now my mind was thinking about him in *that* way and my eyes kept roving to places they shouldn't. I was going to kill Lily.

He nodded and walked towards me, apparently not worried about my condition in the slightest. His smile morphed into this sexy smirk. When he let those lips out to play... *okay, breathe, Tucco.*

I cleared my throat. “Where was I? Oh, condition. I'd rather order in and eat at the house, you know, since Chey goes to sleep early.”

He had stopped a foot away from me and his scent was raising havoc throughout my body. I'd forgotten how seductive a man could smell and he smelled divine. Musky and male in all the best ways. *God, let him be gay.*

“That sounds like a fine condition.” He put his hands in the pockets of his long coat and began playing with his keys. “Are you ready then? I'll just follow you.”

“Um.” I glanced around the room. “Yeah, I'm ready.”

If my body was any indication, I was more than ready. I managed to get my lungs working efficiently again as I collected my things. My pulse was another matter entirely. It wouldn't stop racing through my body, all of my body. This could end up being the most embarrassing evening of my life if he proved to be straight.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

He stayed in his black Accord while I picked up Chey. I was thankful she was in a very good mood, and *talked* all the way home managing to keep me grounded. It had been over seven years since I had been on a date. No, this wasn't a date. Just two guys having dinner. Okay, that sounded like a date, but I refused to look at it that way. Still...

I was so nervous by the time we reached the house I was afraid I was going to drop Chey as I unbuckled her. Suddenly she squealed right in my ear at the same time a hand landed on my back. I rose up and cracked my head on the doorframe of my old Volvo.

"Ow." I hissed and clutched the back of my head.

"Are you okay?" Marcus rubbed my arm like I was a kid needing reassurance. Despite the pain, I didn't miss how nice his fingers felt fondling through my jacket.

"Yeah, just stupid." I grimaced, embarrassed, and he chuckled.

"I'll get her. You work on getting in the house without killing yourself."

"I think I can do that."

I continued to rub my head as I collected our bags while he picked up Chey. She immediately smacked her hands to his face and giggled. Obviously, she remembered him. And judging by his enamored look he was pretty darn infatuated with her too.

"This is quaint," Marcus commented as we stepped through the door.

"Yeah, if tiny is the new quaint. It's what we could afford and at least it's solid."

"Like a bunker. You're definitely safe if we get bombed."

I laughed and shrugged over my cinderblock house. If it hadn't been a Fannie Mae home, I never would have been able to keep it after Todd left. I thanked my lucky stars for that one every time I paid the mortgage.

With my head somewhere in the clouds, I managed to make it all the way to the kitchen without harming myself. I set my bag down and turned.

“Mind if I change?”

He didn’t take his eyes off Chey. “Nope, what’s your address? I’ll call for pizza, if that’s okay with you?”

I pulled a piece of yesterday’s mail off the counter and plopped it on the table. “Mmm, pizza works, I’m starving. Just nothing with pineapple—or anchovies.”

“No anchovies? Your dad doesn’t know what he’s missing.” He rubbed his nose against Chey’s making her giggle and squirm.

I made a face. “Yuck. Pizza should taste like pizza, not fish and salt.”

“Yeah, I don’t like anchovies either.” He glanced at me, his green eyes sparkling.

“Brat.” I shook my head and went to change out of my slacks and dress shirt.

As I changed into jeans and a T-shirt, I couldn’t keep the grin off my face. I wasn’t sure where the easy banter was coming from, it wasn’t like me, but I loved it. I washed my face and hands then put on fresh deodorant and headed back out.

The second I hit the hall I could hear Chey squealing with laughter. I found them on the couch with Marcus’s lips on my daughter’s belly as he zrbitted her. He looked up when I walked in.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.” He rearranged her shirt as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn’t have. I couldn’t help finding that sweet. Maybe if his daughter wasn’t so well adjusted I wouldn’t have had the same reaction, yet I felt completely comfortable leaving Chey with him. That, right there, said a lot.

“She loves belly zrbits, and neck zrbits, and cheek zrbits. Pretty much any zrbit.” I grinned and sat down next to them.



Chey leaned towards me. “Da, kee.” I stared at my daughter. I could feel the lump forming in my throat over that one syllable. Marcus must have noticed my shock, as he handed her over.

“It’s the first time she’s said it?”

I nodded, knowing I should be elated, but the softer emotions pouring over me were overwhelming. Chey had no idea what she had just done, and demanded her kiss by pinching my cheeks.

I bent my head and kissed her wet lips trying really hard not to become a blubbering idiot. Marcus laid his arm over the back of the couch then his fingers trailed through my short hair. It was a barely there touch, yet it sent a tremor through me.

“I cried for an hour the first time Riana said it,” he said softly.

I hugged Chey to my shoulder and hid behind her while I reined in my scattered emotions.

“I’m trying really hard not to, and you go and say that.” I took a few shallow breaths.

Chey began to squirm so I loosened my grip.

“Sorry. Who ever thought Da would have so much power?”

His fingers feathered through my hair again and suddenly all I wanted was to lean against him. To share this with someone who understood.

I smiled as I looked at Chey drooling all over her hand. “Yeah. What am I going to do when she’s a teenager?”

He groaned and flopped his head back. “Don’t even go there. I’m dreading it already.”

I glanced at him and grinned. “They certainly have us around their little fingers don’t they?”

He leaned over and ran a finger down Chey’s cheek. “Little monsters, that’s what girls are. You know what you’re doing don’t you?”

Chey looked at him with her big expressive eyes as if she had been caught doing something naughty, and we both started laughing. She kept looking at us like we had just figured out her deepest secrets and that made us laugh harder.

Finally, her eyes squinted and she laughed too. The doorbell rang and Marcus straightened up, wiping off his eyes.

“I’ve got it.” He went to the door, pulling his wallet out.

Somewhere in the middle of our hysterics he had laid his forehead on my shoulder and wrapped his fingers around my neck. I had been laughing so hard I missed it. Now that he wasn’t there, my shoulder, my neck, my arm felt surprisingly cold and lonely.

I leaned over and smooched Chey’s neck. “Thank you, baby girl. You’ve already made this night special,” I whispered then swung her and I off the couch.

I was on my third piece of chicken carbonara pizza while Chey thoroughly enjoyed her first spaghetti escapade, managing to get sauce even in her ears. Marcus was making it hard to keep my eyes on my daughter however. He looked so relaxed, so happy, and so sexy sitting at my table. Every time he licked his lips or sucked on his fingers, I wanted to do it for him. I think he knew it too, as his movements slowed considerably the longer we ate.

I had become pretty confident in the last hour that he was gay, or at least bi, but I needed to know for sure. I didn’t think I could hang with him only to find out he was straight. I liked him too much.

“How long were you married?” I picked up a piece of chicken off my plate and popped it in my mouth trying to come off casual. It was a normal dinner type question, wasn’t it?

“Six years. We were married our senior year of high school.”

My head snapped up and I found him watching me with a raw intensity that might have made me blush, had his admission not shocked me to my core.

“You don’t have to tell me, but I’m curious—”

“Do you always give everyone an out? If you want to ask a question just ask.” He wiped his fingers off on his paper towel.

“Yeah, I guess I always do. So what happened?” I leaned back and pushed my plate off to the side.

“Claudia was a dare. A drunken one at that. Never a good combination. Throw in a fair chunk of the football team, one gay boy trying to convince everyone he was bi, and you have a disaster in the making. I used a condom that was too small and it tore. Marrying her was the right thing to do in a backwoods Montana town. Riana was born five months after the wedding, and two weeks after we graduated.” He wrinkled his nose. “We never loved each other but we tried to make it work, in the beginning anyway. Then Claudia pushed the boundaries of infidelity, got caught up with the wrong crowd, and involved in drugs. We had a really nasty fight and I got drunk for the first time in years.” He shook his head then laid a hand on his forehead as if it all gave him a headache. Maybe it did.

“I don’t remember any of it. We were already divorced when Toby arrived nine weeks premature and addicted to meth. I didn’t believe he was mine, I couldn’t even remember having sex with her, but a paternity test proved he was.” Marcus sighed and scrubbed his face hard. He leaned his arms on the table and fingered his pizza crusts.

“After the divorce I was kinda lost, newly single dad, two kids. Claudia disappeared, didn’t even show for the custody hearing. I had left the kids with Claudia’s folks and when I arrived home, Riana was at the neighbors in hysterics, and my in-laws’ RV was gone along with my son. She was such a smart girl. She knew what they were doing was wrong and broke away, running right into the neighbor’s house. Anyway, we moved here four days later, and I’ve had a private investigator searching for them for the past month.” He glanced at Chey and smiled, drawing my eyes to her. “It looks like someone is ready for bed.”

She was sound asleep in her high chair, covered in sticky orange sauce and tiny bits of noodles. She was a contented mess.

“Dang, I wanted to give her a bath.” Her highchair was in need of a bath itself. I glanced down, so was the floor.

“Between the two of us, I think we can get her cleaned up and to bed.” Marcus began removing her bib. I was still thinking about everything he had said. He had lost six years of his life because of a stupid bet. But in those six years he had gained a son and a daughter. Suddenly our lives seemed somehow similar.

They weren’t of course, since I had been happy with Todd and he had been stuck in a lie. I couldn’t even imagine what he had gone through living with someone he didn’t love.

“Marcus, if—”

“Say that again, my name, say it again.” He set his hands on the table and stared at me esuriently.

It was my turn to smirk as I leaned over the table. “Marcus,” I drawled out.

His eyes closed as his mouth moved, like I had just given him a tasty morsel. He opened his eyes and my libido made a valiant attempt at resurrecting itself. God, he looked like he wanted to eat me.

“You have the sweetest, sexiest voice. It’s like a caress when you say my name.”

I opened my mouth and all that came out was a squeak. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I could feel the heat rising up my cheeks. Why did I always have to blush?

“Sorry. That was probably too much. I’m a bit out of practice. I do love my name on your lips though.” He gave me a sexy half-smile then stood and lifted Chey into his arms.

“No, um, its, I—thank you,” I finally managed. So much for being articulate. *And you’re his daughter’s teacher for God’s sake.*

I reached out to take Chey and he turned away.

“I’ve got her, just lead the way.” His smile was soft and teasing.

“You just want to look at my ass.” I couldn’t believe I had just said that. *Good for me.*

“Oh, sass!” He chuckled as I headed down the hall. “I can’t lie though. I do like looking at your ass. It’s... very nice, and you tend to swing your hips when you walk.”

I didn’t dare look back at him, knowing I would blush furiously. “I do not swing my hips.” I said indignantly, trying very hard to walk straight. *Did I really swing my hips?*

“Mmm, yeah, you do.”

I bit my cheek to keep from groaning. *Talk about a sexy voice, dang.* I tried hard not to imagine what it would sound like when he was really turned on. I couldn’t help it though. Would it go deeper, be more breathy, or would it just get huskier? Jesus, he had my daughter in his arms for God’s sake. I flipped the light on as we entered Chey’s room.

“Wow, did you paint the walls?”

I looked over my shoulder at him while I pulled out a diaper and the tub of baby wipes. He was turning slowly, his mouth open. I felt a flush of pride over the pastel forest on her walls.

“Yeah. It was kinda like therapy after she came home.”

He brought her over and laid her carefully on the changing table. She didn’t stir, not even a *num*.

“Sounds like there’s some heartache in your past too. You know, I listen better than I talk.”

I glanced at him as I removed Chey’s overalls. “You told me yours, now I tell you mine?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

I sighed. “I know. Sorry, it still hurts and it’s hard to talk about.”

He ran a hand down my arm before reaching for a baby wipe. As we cleaned most of the orange from one dead to the world girl, I realized I wanted

to talk to Marcus. He had opened himself up to me and suddenly I wanted to give him a part of my past too. Maybe opening up would alleviate some of the deep ache I still held on to.

I picked up Chey and Marcus slipped her arms into her sleeper then zipped her up. She opened her eyes for a second as I cuddled and kissed her goodnight. They closed again with a few smacks of her tongue. The spaghetti had obviously won this time but she'd had a blast during the battle. I laid her down and pressed the plush dog, lighting the room with diffused stars. I turned around and caught Marcus watching me.

“You’re a great dad.”

“Thank you. So are you,” I replied.

Something in his expression had me looking closer. I didn’t like what I saw. I knew what self-loathing looked like. I’d seen it on myself in the mirror more than once.

“Yeah—that’s why I *let* my son be kidnapped.” His lips disappeared before he shook his head and walked out.

I gaped at the empty doorway. I couldn’t help it, what he just said was ludicrous. I chased after him. “I can’t believe you blame yourself.”

“Believe it. It was *my* fault.”

I grabbed his arm and pulled. He could have kept walking, I wouldn’t have been able to stop him, but he didn’t.

“You can’t blame yourself for something you had no control over.”

He sneered, his eyes hardening then he collapsed back against the wall. “I’m a horrible person.” He dropped his head into his hands. “I wanted the judge to give full custody to Claudia. I didn’t want the kids. When she didn’t show up, and they were automatically remitted to me, I got in my car and drove off. I was fifty miles away when I turned back. I couldn’t leave them to become wards of the state, or worse, end up with her parents. They barely take care of themselves for God’s sake.” He lifted his head and hugged his arms around himself. “It’s just so hard some days. Between worrying about Riana

and worrying about whether Toby is getting the care he needs. I don't want him with them but I'm not sure I can take care of him either."

I guess I wasn't the only one who needed someone to talk to. I knew he was a good man and even good men doubted themselves at times.

"You went back. That makes you a good person, and of course, you'll be able to do right by him. I don't see you as the type of person who gives up easily." I glanced down, somewhat remiss. "I, um, almost put Chey up for adoption. I filled the paperwork out and everything. I thought I didn't want her. Then I suddenly didn't want anyone else to have her. What if she ended up with someone who couldn't take care of her, or treated her badly? I threw the paperwork away and went and picked up my daughter. I've never regretted that decision." I looked up at him. "Do you regret turning around?"

He met my eyes and understanding dawned slowly across his face. "No." He shook his head. "But what kind of father doesn't want his kids?"

I leaned against the wall next to him. "I bet more than we can imagine. Some run and never come back." My point hit its mark and he sighed as a sad smile touched his lips.

"Thank you for that. I don't feel I deserve it, but thank you anyway." He glanced at the door a few feet away. "I should probably go."

"You still owe me an ear." I didn't want him to leave yet. He needed someone and I was beginning to believe I just might too.

He looked at me and nodded as he uncoiled himself from the wall.

"Wine?" I asked, and he wrinkled his nose. I chuckled and tried again. "Beer?" That made him smile. Not a wine man. Good to know. I headed to the kitchen.

"You're wiggling your hips."

I threw my hands over my butt and tossed a snitty look over my shoulder. He snickered, and my heart swelled over the fact I could make him laugh and forget himself, if only for a moment.

I retrieved two bottles from the fridge and turned around to find Marcus undoing his belt. I must have looked surprised, and, well, honestly I was wondering what he was doing. He gave me a rakish half-grin as he slowly pulled his belt through the loops on his charcoal slacks.

“You don’t mind do you?” He paused to lick his lips. “Getting comfortable, I mean.”

With the heated look he was giving me, I wasn’t sure how comfortable he was planning to get.

I managed to shake my head. “N-no.” *I can’t believe I just stuttered.*

His tie had disappeared while I was changing and now he undid a few buttons of his shirt, drawing my eyes right to his chest. Or rather, the bevy of tight auburn curls amassed on the slip of skin he’d exposed. I’d never been with anyone who had a hairy chest, and I’d never really thought whether it was sexy or not. However, I seemed to be swiftly developing this odd hankering... I wanted to run my fingers, my cheek, my tongue through that kinky profusion. I bet he tasted like he smelled. I sucked up the escaping saliva and swallowed.

He pushed up his sleeves and exposed well-covered arms and my skin tingled. Before I ended up with an embarrassing hard-on, over his body hair of all things, I turned and headed to the couch. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of his belly as he tugged his shirt loose. *Oh, happy day...*

*Jesus, who are you and what did you do with Angel?* This wasn’t me. I wasn’t an instigator. I was more comfortable letting guys lead and quietly got off on my partner’s pleasure. I liked it that way. *I wanted it that way.*

I set one of the beers down, opened the other, then chugged down half the bottle. I sat down on the couch and pulled my knees up. Marcus opened his beer and settled next to me, turning sideways and pulling a leg under him.

Boy, he was a handsome man, and he was sitting on my couch looking at me as if I were someone special, someone he wanted to know. What if he ended up bored with me? He would eventually leave me just like Todd had, like everyone in my life had.



“Tell me your story. How is it you have a daughter?”

I looked at him dumbly for a moment, hugging my knees tight.

“Okay, start with something small. Tell me about your parents.”

I looked away and cleared my throat. That was definitely not something small. It had been over three years now, and I could talk about them. At least I thought I could. I turned my head and laid it on my knees as I thought of where to start.

“Jesus, Angel, do you have anyone?”

I felt the familiar ache in my chest that I knew as loss. But I wasn't alone, not really.

“I have Chey,” I told him.

He rubbed his lips and looked away.

“My parents, they were killed by a drunk driver three years ago. I miss them, but I'm luckier than some. I only have fond memories of them. A day never went by that I didn't know they loved me. My father...” I smiled and shook my head. “He's a big reason I have Chey and the real reason I chose to be a teacher. He was always lending me out to watch everyone's kids. I hated him for that. But, one day I went home upset that Todd was pushing so hard to have a child. I wasn't ready and I thought my parents would be on my side.” I chuckled. “They weren't. My dad told me it would make him sad to know I hadn't shared my life with a child. That he didn't know anyone who would make a better father. I don't know about that, but he was so adamant he succeeded in swaying me. I do have one regret. I wish they could have met their granddaughter, at least once.” I swallowed and took a few deep breaths, proud of myself for not crying.

“I lost both my parents too, but I'm thankful I still have my sister and brother. They make things easier.”

“What happened?” I asked, jumping at the chance to learn more about him and give my haggard emotions a chance to settle.

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## CHAPTER SIX

He picked at the label on his beer. “Mom died of breast cancer when I was twelve and Dad—he died when I was twenty-one of a brain aneurysm in his sleep.” He shrugged and took a swallow from the bottle. “It was one of those fluke things that can’t be explained.”

I curled my legs underneath me and leaned into the cushions. “I’d say I’m sorry but I know how much I hate that myself,” I said, tipping my beer to my lips.

He lifted his in salute then took a huge swallow. I was beginning to really like Marcus. He wasn’t perfect and didn’t pretend to be. Yet, even with his trials, he had an ease about him that made me comfortable.

“Do you want to hear Chey’s story?” I asked.

“Only if you want to tell it.” He adjusted which brought his knee against my foot. Such a simple touch, yet I could feel it all the way up my leg.

I nodded. “I do. First, I’ll answer the most common question. Chey’s mom was a surrogate.”

“I’ve always wondered where people find surrogates.”

“Surrogates-are-us,” I told him with a perfectly straight face.

“Seriously?” he asked, his face thoughtful.

I chuckled. “No. But there are websites and personal ads everywhere. We found Erica through a personal ad. She’d already been a surrogate so we felt pretty comfortable with her.”

“How long were you and Todd together?” he broke in.

I rolled my eyes over to Marcus. “Are you going to let me tell the story?” However, I was rather impressed he had remembered his name, since I had mentioned it only once and in passing.

He gave me a sheepish look. “Sorry, bad habit.” He held his hand out. “Please, I promise I won’t interrupt again.”

“I seriously doubt that, but I’ll try to forgive you when you do.”

He stuck his tongue out at me. I chuckled and went on, telling him about Todd wanting to be a father, my not wanting to be a father, and how it took three years and my own father’s comment to convince me otherwise. He laughed over how I ended up Chey’s biological father by default. Then I grew quiet for several moments as I approached her birth and Todd’s betrayal. I didn’t know how to voice it without my own emotions muddling it up.

Marcus noticed my apprehension and squeezed my foot. He then went and got us each another beer while I grappled with my thoughts. When he returned I took a healthy sip and went on, hoping I could keep things on a light note.

“I was about to leave the school when Erica called to let me know she was in labor. She’d already left a message on Todd’s phone, but I left another one. I couldn’t believe how excited I was. I drove straight to the hospital with a grin cemented on my face. *Our* child was entering the world, how amazing was that? An hour flew by and still no Todd. I called him again and it went right to voicemail. I didn’t think anything of it at the time. He worked construction and he left his phone in his truck most days. Another hour later, I began to worry, and called his foreman. He told me he had left some time ago, something about his kid being born.” I felt a mild ache developing above my eyes and realized I was frowning. I rubbed the creases from my forehead and went on.

“Not long after that Chey was born and I couldn’t believe he had missed it. I waited and waited and he never showed. I blew up his phone, our friend’s phones, but no one had seen him. I panicked, thinking he’d been in an accident. I was unlocking the door of my car when he texted me.” I glanced at my hands wrapped tightly around the bottle. Marcus carefully moved his leg against my feet and I took the offer, wiggling my toes under his thigh. It was just a small comfort but it felt immense right then.

“Four little words, that when strung together sent me to my knees; *I can’t do this*. That was it. That was all I was worth. When I got home his stuff was gone and I never heard from him again. He disappeared, left his job, even our friends *said* they didn’t know where he was.”

I took another long draw from my bottle remembering the sting of *our* friends lying to me. That they would do that in order to maintain Todd's favor had hurt deeply.

"Man, that's messed up." Marcus blew out a noisy breath as he scratched his head.

"Tell me about it. The most fucked up thing was me. For two days, I hated that little girl. I blamed it all on her. That's when I almost put her up for adoption. Of course it wasn't her fault, none of it." I set my empty bottle on the table and went to stretch my legs out. Marcus pulled them onto his lap and began rubbing my calves as he looked tensely off into the corner. I wasn't sure what he was staring at until he jutted his chin.

"I take it that's Todd?"

I glanced at the pictures on the bookshelf. "Yeah, that's him."

"How long were you two together?" His hands stilled as he turned to me.

"As long as you were married. Six years."

He blinked. "That's a bit of a coincidence."

I slid down, getting more comfortable. "I thought so too." I closed my eyes as he went back to massaging my legs. The man had talented hands.

"Tired?"

I shook my head. "No." I wedged my arm behind my head and opened my eyes. "It's been a long time since anyone over the age of six has touched me. I didn't realize how much I missed it." I couldn't believe how easy that was to admit to him.

He leaned over, supporting himself against the back of the couch. "I'd be more than happy to touch you anywhere that feels lonely."

I snorted a laugh. "Talk about your all-time cheesy lines. Was that supposed to be sexy?"

He leaned on his hand and smiled. "It sounded better in my head. I told you, I'm out of practice."

“And am I just someone to practice on?” *Jesus, why’d I say that?* Actually, I knew why I had said it. He was way out of my league, and honestly, I was afraid of getting hurt again.

His eyes narrowed. “What made you say that?” he asks quietly.

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “Are you kidding? You’re masculine, and gorgeous, and sexy, and—”

“You think I’m gorgeous and sexy?” he asked dubiously.

*He had to be kidding.* “Well, *yeah*, and guys like you don’t go for guys like me.”

“Guys like me?” He curled around my legs and groaned. “Jesus, Angel, do you have any idea what you do to me? I’ve been having wet dreams about you for two weeks, and I haven’t had a wet dream in ten years. I’ve taken to wearing *really* tight underwear so I don’t get arrested for walking around with a hard-on at a grade school. Do you know how uncomfortable that is?”

I slapped my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing, but it didn’t help. The vision was spectacular, and he definitely would get arrested for being a pervert. He turned his head and grinned coyly. My whole body flushed as my libido stood up and shook the dust off. *Hello, shy boy.*

“So, where do we go next?”

He bit his lip as his fingers dug into my calves. “Bed?”

Okay, he’s not *that* shy. His suggestion was tempting but I wasn’t ready yet. Well, mentally anyway.

“I was thinking more along the lines of movie, popcorn, cuddling.”

He leaned against the back of the couch again and looked at me. “I could cuddle.”

Never in the history of the world had a man uttered a less likely phrase. Cuddle didn’t belong on those lips.

I chuckled. “All right, stud. Movies are behind the bookcase. Pick one, I’ll make popcorn.”

“Oh, now I’m a stud.” He leered at me and I scrambled off the couch making him laugh.

I straightened my clothes ceremoniously. “Yeah, you’re a stud.”

He glanced to the black bookcase. “How do I get to your movies? Is there a secret passage or something?” He turned back to me. “Now I’m curious what might be in your collection to warrant such measures.”

“That was here when we bought the house. There are a few other hidden spots like that. Just push on the bookcase and it clicks open.” I headed to the kitchen then threw over my shoulder. “And no, there are no pornos there.”

“Bedroom?”

“What kind of a kindergarten teacher do you think I am?” I reached for the microwave kettle corn on the top shelf.

“Normal. *Whoa*, cool.”

I looked over and saw him swinging the bookcase in awe. It was kinda cool. I unwrapped the popcorn and tossed it in the microwave.

“I don’t watch porn. That was Todd’s thing and thankfully he took them all with him.” I cleared our plates off the table and set Chey’s tray in the sink while the popcorn popped. I stared at the crusted tray. I’d deal with it in the morning. I was sure it would require scraping with a spatula in order to get it clean.

I poured the popcorn in a bowl and turned to find Marcus holding a DVD case against his chest.

I rolled my eyes. “Really? Patrick Swayze in drag?”

“What? Is it truly awful? I’ve never seen it. Actually, you have a lot of movies I didn’t dare watch while I was married.”

“It’s entertaining. At least you didn’t pick *Rocky Horror*. Todd liked to go to the midnight showing and I can recite every-damn-word.”

I snatched *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* out of his hands. He grabbed me and yanked me against his chest, brushing his lips over

mine. *Uhhnhh*. I had to pinch my fingers around the rim of the popcorn bowl to stop myself from dropping it. He had done it playfully, not realizing, but I knew, and wanted to toss everything and make this a proper first kiss. His lips left me much too quickly.

“Thank you. I feel like I’ve been shackled in a closet for six years and I’m finally back in the daylight again.” He nuzzled my neck, lingering for a moment. Someone should bottle his scent. They’d make a fortune. His lips touched down on my neck sending a shiver down my back. Okay, he could watch anything he darn well wanted.

He leaned back and looked lazily at me. “Bed?”

“I have one.” I was ready to give him anything.

He laughed. “Maybe after the movie.” He laid a kiss on my nose and let me go. He adjusted himself, none too discreetly, and snatched the movie back. I sighed and tried not to crumple to the floor. Bastard. He had known exactly what he was doing.

Halfway through the movie, the popcorn gone, he pulled me down next to him and adjusted me until I was laying partially on his chest with a leg over his. He didn’t say a word, just let out a long hum.

He went back to watching the movie and I closed my eyes reveling in the feel of him, his warmth, his musky scent, *mmmm*, his hard body. God, how did he find the time to work out? I was exhausted the second I walked through the door. I let my hand wander down and bit my lip when I felt the ridges along his stomach. I so wanted to slip my hand under his shirt, but I wasn’t bold enough. I settled for snuggling against him and drowning in his masculine scent.

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“Todd, it’s too early.” I squirmed away from his hand rubbing my ass.

“I’ll forgive you that—once.”

My eyes bolted open and I looked into Marcus's stern face. Oh, crap. We'd fallen asleep on the couch and I seemed to be sprawled across him. Not seemed, I *was* sprawled across him.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I scrambled to get up and his arms cinched around me.

"Oh, no. You're not getting away that easily. Obviously I have yet to make a withstanding impression on you, and I aim to rectify that." His face turned fierce and I froze. *Oh, help me.* He was fricken hot with his face flushed from sleep and edged in anger. Unfortunately, I wasn't into punishment and even verbal abuse left me shaking at times.

"How?" I asked hesitantly.

He gripped my ass and hoisted me up his chest until we were face to face. His hand wormed up then grasped the nape of my neck.

I pushed on his shoulders half-heartedly, not really wanting to get away. Wow, his shoulders were so well muscled I couldn't even feel any bones beneath his warm skin. I was going to faint when I finally saw him without his shirt. He tugged on the back of my neck.

"But I have morning breath. Just let me—"

"I. Don't. Care," he said, his tone coarse.

I opened my mouth to retort and his tongue slid in just before his lips crushed against mine. In an instant I didn't care anymore either. His kiss was harsh, possessive, and so exciting. However, after only a moment his hold loosened and I felt him withdraw.

"Angel, is this okay?"

It was until he stopped. "Yeah, why?"

"Because you're not responding—at all." He closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair then dropped his arm across his face. "I understand if I don't excite you, just tell me and I'll leave—"

I pressed my fingers to his mouth causing his arm to lift and his eyes to open. He had caught me off-guard but I didn't think I was being



nonresponsive. I could feel every inch of him beneath me, even his heart, which was beating rather fast... and every inch of me screamed to feel his skin. Even my cock was squirreling in my jeans trying to get out. And that rarely happened with just a kiss.

“No, don’t leave. I’m sorry, I was just surprised. Kiss me again—please.”

I saw the doubt creep into his eyes. If I didn’t do something I knew he was going to leave. Todd had always said I was horrid at seduction, but he wasn’t here. Marcus was, and he didn’t know about my shortcomings. I could be sexy, I knew I could.

I bent my head, laying my lips below the hollow of his throat and traveled up, dipping my tongue into the concave. He tasted salty-sweet with a hint of soap, and he smelled heavenly. When I sniffed his neck, making a sound of appreciation, he swallowed.

As my tongue laved up the side to his ear, he sighed deeply. I ran my hand down to his chest and caressed his nipple, then as my teeth raked his earlobe I squeezed the pert nub.

His hands landed on my ass as he pushed his hips up, his body arching underneath me.

A shot of sensation zinged through my groin and landed in my gut. My fingers clenched, digging into the hard flesh of his pec. He grunted then twisted his head around, capturing my lips roughly.

I wasn’t nonresponsive now. I gripped his side while my other hand grabbed his hair. I felt everything at once. His soft hair, the firmness of his body, his warm wet mouth, and his hard length pressed against mine. All the sensation made me dizzy. He sucked my tongue as he ground against me. *Mmm*. Yep, libido just sleeping, thank God.

My hips answered and began rocking. *Damn couch*. I reached down and yanked on his pant leg. He responded and threw his leg over the back of the couch. The closer contact made him groan and me gasp.

Tongues parried, hands groped, and body slid against body. I levered against the back of the couch changing the angle of my thrust, bringing my cock hard against his. His fingers bit into my ass as he threw his head back.

“Oh, fuck, six years. Ah, Angel, I’m going to come.”

I watched his face tense in concentration, as he reached for a release denied too long.

God, it was one of the most erotic things I had ever seen. I felt my own release building as I ground against his length. *Right there... oh, yeah...* I pressed my lips down and wrapped my tongue around his as my throat vibrated in appreciation.

A loud wail cut through the sensuous fog building in my head. Just another minute, Chey, *please*. Her demanding screams continued and my orgasm disappeared, poof.

Marcus groaned then started chuckling. “Damn, so close,” he panted out. “That girl’s got impeccable timing.”

“5:45 every morning.” Chey was more reliable than my alarm clock.

I buried my face in his neck and grumbled, my hard-on shrinking as Chey continued to vocalize her discontent. I lifted my head and glanced towards her room with a sigh. Marcus wrapped me in a tight embrace, kissing my temple then let me go.

“Better get her before she breaks our eardrums. She already sent my cock into hiding.” He shook his head. “I swear it’s never been so small.”

I chuckled and reached down, finding him still semi-hard. “Doesn’t feel small to me.” I traced his length with my fingers and he sucked in a breath.

“God, that is *so* not fair.” He seized my wrist.

I bit my lip feeling suddenly very bold. “Chey takes her nap around noon.”

“Is that an invitation into your bed? Because if it is, I’m definitely staying.”

I climbed off him and stood up, pulling my jeans out of my crack. He was looking up at me expectantly, desire still lacing his features.

“Definitely stay.”

Marcus glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall and clapped his hands over his face, groaning. “Six hours.”

I grinned. “You waited six years, what’s six more hours?”

God, they were the longest six hours of my life. Marcus was ruthless. Pressing against me every chance he had, teasing my lips, running his hands down my chest, my ass, and even over my hips. I swear the man was hard the whole time. I wasn’t that far off myself and was downright ruthless to poor Chey.

Of course she didn’t know our motives and had a wonderful time being tickled until she was breathless, and squealing with glee when Marcus swung her around or I bounced her on my knee. She’d never had a better time.

Chey yawned and I glanced at the clock. 11:30, right on cue. I scooped her up and set her in her highchair then heated her turkey noodle and peas. It was a good thing she didn’t judge her food on appearance yet. I couldn’t even taste this one. It looked like it had already been regurgitated once. It was the most awful color of olive green with this yellow sludge on top.

Marcus paced the living room, calling his sister, while I fed Chey. She devoured the glop and finished with a few animal crackers she softened with copious amounts of drool. I heard his cell hit the glass coffee table and glanced up from wiping Chey’s hands.

His tongue was caught between his teeth as he stalked towards me. My breath hitched. I’d never wanted anyone more.

“How’s Riana?” I wiped the slime off Chey’s chin while she tried to bite the washcloth.

“Excited. Kim and Andy are taking her to a movie then dinner at Chuck E. Cheese.” He stopped behind Chey’s highchair and fingered her fine hair. She looked up at him and giggled. I couldn’t get over how much she liked him.

“Lucky girl.” I tossed the washcloth in the sink then lifted Chey out of her chair.

“Lucky Dad.” He stepped forward, bending down to kiss me.

“Down boy. She still has to fall asleep.”

He changed trajectory and gobbled her neck. She giggled softly then yawned.

I kissed the top of her head and she let herself fall against my chest. “All right, off to bed with you.” I headed to her room.

“Mmmm,” Marcus hummed loudly from the kitchen.

I wiggled my hips and grinned. “Uncle Marcus likes your dad’s butt.” I rubbed my lips in her hair, smelling her strawberry baby shampoo. “And I kinda like all of him,” I whispered.

Chey was asleep before I even finished with her diaper. I laid her down, and for a second I felt guilty for making her tired so I could have sex. Then I thought about all the parents out there, and seriously doubted I was the first one to do such a thing.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

I found Marcus touching a picture of me as a boy wedged between my parents on our old porch swing. When he saw me his hands shot behind his back as they had in my classroom.

“Sorry. I was snooping.”

God, he was adorable when he looked contrite. I rubbed the grin off my face and shook my head.

“I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Cute kid.” He gestured towards the picture.

I shrugged. I had been a gangly, gawky thing. All knees and elbows. “I know better, but thanks.” We had exactly an hour and a half before Chey woke up and I really didn’t want to spend it talking about me as a geeky kid. Marcus perused the pictures for a few more seconds then turned and gave me a rakish grin as he came towards me.

“Let’s try this one more time. Bed?”

“You kinda have a one track mind don’t you? Um...”

I teased him with a confused look as I thought about it a second, tapping a finger to my lips. His grin widened.

I gestured over my shoulder. “I think I have one in the bedroom. Would you like to see it?”

“I’d rather see you on it, naked with your ass in the air.”

*Oh.* Well, the man had waited six years and who was I to deny him *that*?

“Can you give me a few minutes? Bedroom—first door on the right.” I grinned. “Make yourself comfortable.”

He covered the last few feet and snatched me around the waist, pulling me against him. His lips covered mine in a searing kiss as he ran his fingers firmly up my crack giving me a bit of a wedgy. He bit my bottom lip as he let me go.

“Don’t make me wait too long. I have a feeling time is of the essence here and I’d like to take my time.” He turned me and gave me a gentle shove.

I hurried down the hall and into the bathroom, shutting and locking the hall door then the access from the bedroom. I wondered what kind of a lover he was going to be. I’d seen his soft side as well as a rather demanding side too. Not that I cared, I just really wanted to make him happy.

As I stripped out of my clothes, a thought slammed into me. “Crap.” I wasn’t sure I had any lube or condoms that were any good. For some odd reason Todd had taken most of the sex paraphernalia when he left. All the toys and DVDs were his anyway, but he had taken practically everything.

I fumbled with the child lock on the bottom drawer and finally got it open. I riffling around and found four condoms that were still squishy in their wrapping then I spotted a tube of lube in the melee and grabbed it.

“Ew.” That one wouldn’t work. Something had punctured the tube and it had leaked all over the corner of the drawer. I chucked it in the trash and shoved the drawer closed with my foot while I checked the medicine cabinet. Bingo. Behind the Tums was a brand new tube of Eros.

I went through my little ritual as fast as I dared then grabbed the lube and condoms before entering the bedroom.

“Ah, umm, nuymmm.” I wasn’t sure I actually managed words. They were overrated anyway.

Marcus was lying on his side reading my Ted Dekker novel, and absolutely gorgeous, and male, and so hard I could see all the glorious veins pumping to keep him that way. My fingers twitched and I almost dropped the lube.

His chest was carpeted with dark red curls so thick you could barely see his nipples peeking out. Oh, man, his stomach was ripped. A luscious four-pack hunkered into a deep V of muscle. I wiped the drool off my chin and swallowed. *Not out of my league, not out of my league...* If I kept repeating that maybe I could get through this.

He set the book onto the nightstand. “I think there’s more to Angelo Tucco than meets the eye. Pretty deep book.”

“I read everything. From romance to horror. Gives me something to do.” I set everything next to the book and kneeled on the bed.

“Yeah, in your hours of spare time.” His hand went to caressing my thigh. I almost gurgled. He had no idea that was one of my favorite things a man could do.

“Look who’s talking, Mr. Gym.” My voice was fleeing quickly as I raked my eyes over him, appreciating every edge, curve, and ripple.

“Pfft. I don’t have the time or money to work out. Stupid cash hounds think they own me, and pay slave wages to prove it.”

“You’re an accountant?”

“Mm-hm.” He stroked along my belly with the back of his fingers, just grazing my hardening cock. It pulled up tight against my body before bouncing down again. Marcus groaned in his throat. “Enough talking...”

He stroked my length and my cock leapt in his hand. I fought the urge to thrust. A few more strokes and I’d explode. I squeezed my knees closed not wanting to come before he did.

“What—”

I scrambled onto my hands and knees, gathering the pillows up and hugging them.

“*Okay*, I guess we’re done with foreplay.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I reached back and pulled my cheeks apart. I wasn’t used to a lot of talking, or being touched much before sex. Just enough to get me ready... and I was ready.

“Oh, God, that’s—fuck.” He snapped up the lube and a second later I felt his slick finger massaging me. I worked on staying relaxed and breathing deeply. His finger slid in and he groaned.

“Jesus, you’re so tight.”

I widened my stance and glanced back. His eyes were closed and his mouth open.

“I’m ready though.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me dubiously. “You don’t feel ready.”

“I am. I’m always tight, that was one of the things Todd liked about me.”

A small frown flitted across his face at the mention of Todd. Shoot, I was going to have to watch that. I’d spent most of my adult life with him and it was a hard habit to break.

His hands left me and I took a few deep breathes, steadying myself for his entry.

He moved up behind me and caressed my back. His hands were so warm and solid, and I arched into his touch. His hands traveled down my thighs and back up then he palmed my balls and I sat back in surprise, ramming into his cock.

“Someone’s a little sensitive.” He fondled my testicles again, sending a rather uncomfortable shock through my groin and straight up my back. I yelped and arched up like a cat. He let out a husky chuckle. “Definitely need to play with those again when we have more time.”

His hand closed over my cock and my hips jerked erratically.

“Ah... ahh.” I slapped a hand on the headboard and gripped tightly. I wasn’t used to all this... *ah, shit*. He pumped me then ran his hand over my cockhead making my hips misbehave again.

“Someone’s very sensitive.” His hand slid back between my legs and I felt his cock against me. *Oh, thank God*. I couldn’t handle all this touching and fondling. I just wanted him to screw me and be done.

He wrapped his fingers around one of my hips and pushed inside me. I bit my lip to keep from wincing. *Relax, relax, relax*. He worked himself in slowly, and I gripped the pillow and the headboard, keeping a firm hold on my lip to keep from whimpering. He was bigger than I was used to and it was uncomfortable as heck.



“Oh, God, Angel,” he panted and with a flick of his hips he slid the rest of the way in. I bit down and tasted blood.

He rubbed my back. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and his hands stopped. “I’m fine.” I rolled my hips to prove it. He groaned and his hands shot to my hips, his fingers digging in. He pulled out and slid back in and I pushed against him, making him grunt and thrust. The discomfort faded and I released my lip, licking the blood off.

Marcus picked up a rhythm, his fingers flexing against my hips with each thrust. I smiled as I listened to his appreciative murmurings. I nestled my forehead onto the pillows and waited.

“Damn it,” he muttered and pulled out.

Well, that was rather anticlimactic. When he didn’t say anything, when he didn’t touch me, I dropped onto my side and looked at him. His arm was resting on his bent knee while his fingers worried his lips. He settled his eyes on me as his nostrils flared with each breath he took. He shook his head and yanked the condom off, tossing it onto the floor. It was empty.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, worried I had done something to displease him.

He flicked his hand towards me. “Angel, are you even sure you’re gay?”

“*What?* Of course I am.” My tone came out indignant. What the hell made him think that?

“You’re not even hard,” he said, lowering his head and rubbing the back of his neck. “If you are gay, you’re not for me.”

“I’ve always been like this. I get hard listening to you come then I finish myself off.” I pulled my knees up, suddenly feeling exposed. “It’s—it’s just the way I am.”

His head shot up. “*Pardon?* Have you ever had an orgasm during sex?”

I shook my head wondering what the big deal was. “I get off listening to my partners enjoy me.” I couldn’t understand why he was so surprised.

“Angel, there are so many things wrong with that, I don’t know where to start. Didn’t Todd ever jack you during sex?”

I shrugged a little. He had a few times but he was usually too into it, and it was easier to let him go and take care of myself after he was done. He always held me while he slept afterwards. It wasn’t a big deal and I really loved cuddling with him afterwards, even if he was asleep.

“Jesus. And he’d just fuck you and that was it?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I snapped.

“Yeah, I think it was. Fucker used you. Jesus, Angel, how many others have used you?”

I couldn’t stand the disapproving look on his face and turned away. “They didn’t use me. It’s just...” *Todd loved me. I knew he had.* And what happened wasn’t any of Marcus’s business. “I don’t want to talk about this.” I got up and grabbed a pair of sweats from the dresser then stormed out of the room.

*He has no right to judge me, or Todd, or how I am.* There were a lot of people who didn’t have orgasms during sex. I stopped in the hall to slip on my sweatpants. There were, weren’t there? Of course there were. I wasn’t so unusual. Was I?

Without warning, the times Todd had called me a freak and frigid crashed over me. *Oh, God, I am unusual.* No wonder he’d left me. I cried out, crumbling under the weight of it all.

Marcus dropped to his knees in front of me. “Oh, Angel.”

He reached to touch my face and I turned away, burying my face in my hands as my body shook out of control. He should just go. I didn’t want his pity.

He pulled me against him and I struggled, pushing against his chest. His grip tightened until I could barely move.

“I’m not letting you go,” he breathed, pressing his lips against my temple.

*But you will...* I tried to say, yet all that came out was a pathetic squeak. When the tears fell I couldn't stop them. I hadn't cried when Todd left, I'd been too shocked. Now they came in body wracking torrents. Marcus sat back and pulled me into his lap, stroking the back of my head. I had no fight left and sagged against his chest.

I felt so insecure now. Knowing I was the reason behind my few failed relationships. Frigid. A cold fish. A bad lay. And what had Marcus said? *Unresponsive*. I shuddered.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Wake up, you need to eat something.” A hand brushed down my cheek and I rolled into the pillow, grumbling.

My brain engaged then, and I opened my eyes, my lashes catching on the pillowcase. I turned my head towards the deep voice and blinked, trying to recall how I had made it into my bed. Marcus sat on the edge watching me with a soft pensive expression. I struggled onto my elbow.

“What... how...” I scrubbed my face trying to dislodge the mire of sleep.

“You passed out and I carried you in here.” He smiled tentatively. “I only almost dropped you once.”

“You carried me in here?” I may look it, but at just under two-hundred I wasn’t exactly light. I couldn’t believe he had done that, or that he was still here and acting as if nothing had happened.

He nodded. “It didn’t seem right to leave you in the hall. I think it’s only fair you pay my chiropractic bill though.” He rubbed the small of his back.

My lips twitched as I stretched. “Good luck with that. I’m a lowly teacher and a single parent—Crap, what time is it?” I whipped my head to the nightstand and groaned when I saw it was almost nine.

“Relax. She’s fine. I already put her to bed.”

I opened my mouth to make sure he had fed and changed her then closed it knowing he had. Marcus was a good man, a good father, and someone, until this afternoon, I had hoped to explore a relationship with. The quaking in my gut reminded me that was over now.

I threw back the covers. “I can’t believe I slept so long. You should have woken me. I feel bad about keeping you here this late.” My feet landed on the grey carpet and that was as far as I went. I felt heavy and uncoordinated. I sat there, slumped over as I gained my bearings.

“Don’t worry about it. My sister’s keeping Riana tonight. I didn’t want to leave you alone, not when it’s my fault you ended up here.” He rubbed his forehead after gesturing to the bed.

I let out a half-snort, half-grunt. “Yeah, better to find out I’m a freak now rather than later.”

“God dammit, don’t ever say that, you’re not a freak.” He sighed and leaned his hands on the edge of the bed, but didn’t get up. “I’ve thought a lot about this, us, what I said, how you reacted. I had the whole afternoon to think.” He paused, pulling his leg up and resting a foot on the bed as he stared at the wall straight ahead. “I’m a really, mm, *affectionate* person, and your lack of passion has thrown me for a loop. Angelo, plain and simple, you were abused.” He held up a hand when I shifted and opened my mouth. “Not in the classical sense, but used nonetheless. And I keep telling myself to leave, walk away and find someone else.”

This was it. What I knew was coming. Marcus had shown me something about myself I wish I had never seen. Moldable, sexually repressed, basically a doormat. I shuffled back and crossed my legs, leaning heavily on my elbows. I felt like I had been in a wreck. Sore, tired, depressed and I didn’t know how to go forward.

He frowned slightly then turned his head my way. “But everything in me wants to stay and try to work through this.”

“What?”

“If I take away everything I know about your relationships with other men, I’m able to look at you as a virgin, a clean slate, someone who might blossom,” He ran his fingers over my knee, “possibly with me. And that,” He gave me the sexiest smile, “excites me.”

*But, why would he...* “Why would you want to stay with me?” I asked utterly confused. I was pretty sure even I wouldn’t want to stay with me.

“Because I like you, a lot I think, and I believe, deep inside you is a very passionate person just waiting to be let out. I’d really like to be the one who

opens that door. Maybe that's selfish." He shook his head lightly as his brows pulled together.

I gazed at the beautiful man picking nervously at my comforter and couldn't believe he wanted me. I very much wanted him to find that door and let out the person he thought I was.

He looked at me then bowed his head and went to get up. "Right, I understand."

"Wait." I lunged for him and lost my balance, slamming into him and toppling us both onto the bed. My elbow rammed his chest and he grunted. I ignored the damage and looked into his surprised face then without realizing I was doing it, I kissed him hard.

The instant sensation sent a tremor through me that could only be desire. I'd never had anyone who made me want them with just a kiss. It was... *fantastic*. I plunged my tongue into his mouth wanting to taste him as my fingers feasted in his soft hair. His warm hands moved aggressively up my back making me shiver.

After a few seconds he pulled away and took a deep breath. "I take it I can stay?" His voice came out husky and my cock stiffened against his thigh.

I looked into his green eyes. They were so dark they were the color of jade. I licked my lips and they followed the movement of my tongue, emboldening me.

I nodded slowly then bowed my head. "Show me, Marcus... Show me what I've been missing." I nuzzled against his neck, filling my nose with the musky scent of him as my hand ran down his chest, his glorious stomach. "I want to feel. Make me feel," I whispered into his ear as my hand reached its destination. I felt the shiver run through his body and smiled against his neck.

"Mmm, definitely want to do that. But, um, God, Angel, I can't think when you are stroking me. *Please...*"

I grazed my teeth along his neck, reveling in the control I was having over him. His leg came up underneath me and pushed against my cock. The heady

sensation caused me to bite the skin on his neck. His hips thrust against my hand in response. I sucked and licked the spot I had just bitten as he continued to rock against my hand, letting out little hums of encouragement. I'd never met anyone who liked to be bit. This was a first for me. Todd, and my first boyfriend Eric, used to flinch whenever my teeth came out.

My fingers strolled down his chest until they encountered the nub beneath his shirt. I ran my thumb over his nipple until it was erect then pinched gently. He arched into my touch.

“Ahh, Jesus, Angel, stop, please.” His hands closed over mine, arresting them both. He pushed his groin into my palm once more before he removed my hand. His fingers tangled with my fingers as he moved them both to the bed. He met my confused gaze and shook his head slowly.

“This isn't what I had in mind. I, um, had this whole thing planned out. You seducing me wasn't part of my plan.” He kissed me, running his tongue along my lips. “I'm supposed to be seducing you. I want to make you writhe in ecstasy. I want to show you how a real man treats his lover.”

He kissed me then. Soft and sweet and laced with so much promise he took my breath away. Yes, I wanted him to love me. As I drowned in his kiss, I felt myself falling and knew this might be a hard landing if he didn't catch me. My fingers tightened around his. Maybe if I held on tight he couldn't let me go.

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## CHAPTER NINE

I sat at the table while he made me a grilled cheese sandwich and heated tomato soup. He had insisted on feeding me, afraid I might pass out from hunger. I hadn't been hungry at the time, wanting to stay in bed with him, but once the smell of sizzling butter hit my nose I realized I was starving.

“What is it about *Barney* that kids are so infatuated with? When I was a kid it was *Sesame Street*. I turned it on, but Chey would have nothing to do with it. Not even a minute. The second Barney hit the screen she was watching.” He shook his head as he stirred the soup. “He is one annoying dinosaur.”

“I think it's his voice. She actually tips her head like a dog when he sings. It's hilarious.” I leaned back and enjoyed the view of Marcus in my kitchen actually cooking. I couldn't remember the last time someone had cooked for me. My mother, I think.

He came over and set the bowl and plate in front of me.

“Eat. If it's truly awful don't tell me, you'll hurt my feelings.” He turned a chair and settled next to me.

“I don't think anyone can screw up grilled cheese and soup.” I frowned. “Aren't you eating?”

“Oh, I can. Ask Riana.” He chuckled. “No. I had the rest of the pizza with Chey.” He pointed to the food in front of me and I picked up half the grilled cheese and bit into it. He'd used a lot of butter but my stomach didn't care as it rumbled wantonly.

“You didn't give Chey pizza did you?” I didn't mean to blurt that, dang it.

“I wasn't supposed to?” He was regarding me with a remarkably concerned expression, and for a second I thought he was serious then I saw the glint in his eyes. I shoved him with my foot. He caught it and drew it into his lap refusing to give it back even when I tugged.



“You can be a brat you know?” I couldn’t help grinning. I liked him playful, even if it took me a second to get some of his jokes. His thumbs dug into the pad of my foot.

“Mmm,” I hummed around the fingers I was licking.

He wrapped his warm hands around my foot and rubbed from my ankle to my toes making me melt against the chair.

He stopped and moved his hands to my ankle. “I don’t think I should do this until you’ve finished eating.” He laughed.

I was still sucking on one of my fingers and slipped it out. “Do I have to beg? I will. Oh, God, will I.” I wiggled my toes.

He glanced down at my foot, running a hand over the top. “As long as you eat, I’ll rub your feet.” He tipped his head up and smiled maliciously.

I slid the soup over. “Fine. What’s this infatuation with me eating?” I shoved a spoonful into my mouth and he went back to massaging my feet.

He snorted. “You had a bowl of fruit loops for breakfast. You’re not exactly fat.”

I knew what he meant. I was a thinner build. I couldn’t help teasing him though. “So, you have a thing for fluffy guys?” I swallowed another spoonful of soup and was rewarded with his thumbs pushing into the ball of my foot. “Oh, Jesus...” My eyes closed and the spoon fell from my hand, plopping in the soup.

“No, I think you’re perfect the way you are. I just don’t want to see you pass out again.” He paused both in his speech and the movement of his hands. “What does this do for you?” He sounded amused and I opened my eyes to look at him. He was amused.

I bit my lower lip. I felt uncomfortable admitting it but I wanted to be honest. “My feet have always been connected to my groin. It’s like a line directly to my cock.”

“I noticed that. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

I didn't have to look down to know I was hard. My dick had sprung up the second he touched my foot, becoming a tent pole beneath my green sweats. I reached down and adjusted myself, reducing the drag of fabric across the sensitive head. I gave myself a few cursory strokes.

"No touching," Marcus said firmly, causing me to glare at him a little. "That's my job." He removed his hands from my foot and pointed to the other half of my sandwich.

I growled at him but took a big bite. His eyes locked on my cock as he attended to my foot again. How did he expect me to eat when he was looking at me like he wanted to eat me himself? My cock jumped at the thought. I reached down and pressed it against my body. Marcus ran a thumbnail along the bottom of my foot and I thrust against my hand.

"Dammit, Angel." He dropped my foot onto the floor, my heel hitting the linoleum hard enough I winced. He was up and striding down the hall before I knew he had even left.

"Crap." I wiped my fingers off on a napkin and was about to follow him and see what I had done wrong when he returned.

"Sit." His demanding tone had me sitting without question. He dropped onto his knees and wrenched the chair, with me in it, to face him. His hands slid up to my hips as he dropped his head and nuzzled my crotch. *Oh, that was... hot.*

His fingers dug into my backside. "Do you know how hard it is to live with someone you can't stand to touch?" He buried his face and took a deep breath. "I was patient as I waited. Knowing someday I would find someone. Six years I waited, and you had to keep touching yourself—I'm done being patient." He raised his head and I saw the flush across his cheeks. Definitely one of the hottest things anyone had done or said to me.

"Lift your hips."

I squirmed. The blinds were turned open on the slider and anyone could see us. They'd have to look over the fence but still. We were in full view.

He looked up at me rather surprised. “Please don’t tell me you don’t like blow jobs.”

“What kind of a man would I be if I told you that?” I tried for a teasing tone but it came out breathless. I could ignore the slider. It was dark... even if the kitchen was blaringly bright.

His lips twitched. “Then lift your hips or I’ll rip them off.” He took hold of the waistband of my sweats and began to pull. I leaned on the table and he tugged my sweats all the way off, tossing them to the side.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

The admiration in his voice sent a thrill through me and I felt myself tremble under his hungry gaze.

I squeaked as his warm, wet mouth took me in, swallowing all of me. My fingers landed in his hair as my throat constricted. I locked eyes with him as his mouth slid up. His hand stroked my base as he suckled the pre-come drooling from my tip. His tongue swathed around my head and I groaned at the sensuousness. His eyes softened before he looked down and sucked me back in.

“Ahh... danngg.” *Okay, screw the neighbors.* If anyone was peeping they deserved—*Oh, Jesus.* I gripped the silky strands as his head began to bob. Man he was good. Not that I had a lot to base it on, but I knew what I liked and Marcus was sucking and tonguing me quickly to insanity.

I rocked into his mouth and his fingers cinched down around my waist, almost pulling me off the chair. His hands ran down my thighs and he lifted one of my legs onto his shoulder. His head rose and I opened my eyes at the sudden departure. When had I closed my eyes?

“I want to feel you quake, Angel.” His hand ran possessively over my hip as he nuzzled against my crotch. “And I will make you scream my name before morning.” His tongue traveled up my shaft as a lubed finger entered my ass. That explained his hasty departure a few minutes ago.

I tensed at the invasion, finding it hard to enjoy his enthusiastic mouth devouring my cock. I gripped the edge of the table with one hand as my other fell to his shoulder. I took a deep breath, trying to relax as he slid his finger out then back in deeper.

Suddenly he lifted his head, and glanced at me curiously.

Something was wrong I could see it in his face. "What?"

"Maybe nothing. Put your foot on the table." He pulled his finger out of my ass as I wedged my foot against the oak trim. He lubed up his middle finger and slid it slowly in with a look of concentration I wasn't feeling very comfortable with. I felt him rooting around and watched his tongue peek out between his teeth.

I just about jumped off the chair. "Oh, fuck." I gripped the table as the shot of sensation powered through my balls and straight down my dick. It left a tingle in its wake that had me wanting to stroke my now throbbing cock. God, it was like Marcus had rammed a live wire up my ass.

He massaged my thigh and zapped me again. I groaned, my toes curling around the table as my cock jumped begging to be touched.

"You've never felt that before?" His face was awfully serious for someone with his finger up my ass doing God knew what.

I shook my head. "No, I would have remembered that." *Oh, Jesus, I was panting.*

"That's what you're supposed to feel." He removed his finger and stood up. For the first time ever I felt rather disappointed over someone vacating my ass.

"Why did you stop? Because I definitely would have screamed your name." I was still trying to catch my runaway breath.

He chewed on his lower lip for a second before meeting my eyes. "Listen, I'm not a proctologist, and it's been a long time since I've had a finger up anyone's ass but my own, but something's not right. There's a mass or

thickening or something where it shouldn't be. Um..." He moved to the sink and began washing his hands and I took that as a really bad sign.

"Shit." I lowered my foot to the floor and rubbed my head and neck. Cancer was the first thing that entered my head. I dismissed it immediately. I'd been sexually active for ten years and if it was cancer then I probably would have had a lot more problems before now. At least that seemed a logical argument.

Marcus came back over, sliding his chair in front of me and gently removing my hands from my face. His concern was touching but it was one more wall we would have to climb and I couldn't ask him to do that for me. Regardless of that fact, he looked like his whole world had just crumbled around him.

"My brother had an infection a few years back. It messed his sex life up something fierce, but once they found it and treated him he was better than ever." He lifted my hands to his lips. "It could be something small, something easily treated."

"Yeah, or it could be something nasty or permanent." I knocked my head against our hands and felt his fingers unfurl and brush down my temple.

"Let's not jump to conclusions and think the worst before a doctor takes a look."

"Marcus, I don't expect you to go through this with me. We've only known each other a month and this is our first date."

He let go of my hands and lifted my face. "Would you shut up? I can't believe—I'm not..." He kissed me and I felt the desperation in his lips. I grabbed his forearms and held on, not wanting to let him go even if I knew I should. We'd spent one day together, yet I felt I had lived a lifetime in that short time. He'd done more for me, shown me more compassion, more love than anyone ever had.

He feathered several short kisses across my lips then leaned his forehead against mine.

“Don’t push me away. When I found you crumpled in the hall I felt the world tilt, then it shattered when I felt that abnormality. It might only be lust but I’ve never lusted after anyone so completely in my life, and I’m not going anywhere until this craving burns out.” He kissed my forehead. “That could be weeks, months, or even years from now.”

“So, you’re just going to keep me around as a sex toy?” I tilted my head and managed a smirk.

“Well, not in your current condition, but yeah, that was my plan.”

We smiled at each other glad some levity had re-entered the room.

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## CHAPTER TEN

I took a bite of my tuna sandwich and sneered at it. Not my favorite. Marcus and the internet had proven to be a bad combination. Somewhere on a website he found out fish oil was good for me, but he also compiled a list of what was bad for a man with a possible prostate problem; like cheese, beef, sugar, salt, basically everything tasty. And let's not forget sex, or ejaculation anyway. Only he had known that from his brother's experience, yet he had even managed to find links confirming his hypocrisy on the internet, dang it.

It had become apparent my libido hadn't read the same information. Every time I thought about what I had felt, which was proving to be often, I was instantly hard. Unfortunately I also had a lush vision of Marcus naked seared into my mind, and that was equally as tantalizing. I had never been so wrecked in my life.

I bit down on the sandwich Marcus had packed for me, and chewed voraciously, trying to clear my mind. It didn't help. Stupid over thinking contraption. My phone buzzed, skittering on my desk. I grabbed it and looked at the screen then answered it.

"You know I'm going to get arrested today."

"*What?*" Marcus belted.

"I don't have tight enough underwear."

Marcus's deep chuckle drifted across the line. I sighed not finding it nearly as amusing as I had found his admission. I supposed I deserved his mirth.

"I guess you'll be giving Dr. Peters a show then."

"Who?" I asked.

"He's a gay friendly proctologist that my doctor recommended. We have an appointment at 4:00 tonight."

There was that *we* again, as if this was our problem not mine. He hadn't even asked if tonight was good before making the appointment. Not that I had anything going, but what if I had?

"We? Is he sticking his finger up your butt too?" I said, a bit angrier than I intended.

"If you want him to," Marcus replied cautiously.

I sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm just—I don't know, on edge I guess."

"If you want to make your own appointment, I'll cancel with him."

I smiled, listening to Marcus back pedal. I leaned back making my chair protest. "No, it's fine. I'll meet you at the house around 3:30?"

"That works. I, ah, I miss you."

I missed him too, but I wasn't ready to admit how much. If this ended up being something big I wasn't about to let him stay with me, no matter how cold my bed had been without him last night.

"I'll see you then." I turned off my phone just as Jolene scurried in whimpering and holding her arm. Blood seeped through the sleeve of her teal shirt.

"I fell," she said shakily. She wasn't really crying though. What a tough girl.

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I sat on a burgundy chair, waiting pensively in the small exam room. I wished I had let Marcus come back with me now, but I hadn't wanted Chey in here during the exam. Not that she would know what was going on, or even remember it, but it was the principal. It just seemed wrong. Honestly, it seemed wrong to have my... what was he? I guess future boyfriend? Boyfriend in training?

I rubbed a hand over my face and shook my head. That would be more like me. Regardless of what he was at this point, I hadn't been sure I wanted him in here while another man rooted around in my ass.



I glanced over at the oversize poster of a crosscut of the male genitalia. It was the same picture Marcus had found online. The door opened and I turned to see a loose-jawed balding man with tiny black-rimmed glasses looking at me, a chart in his hand.

“Mr. Tucco?”

I nodded.

“Dr. Peters.” He smiled but didn’t offer his hand. He flipped a page back. “I thought the age on the chart was wrong, but you are young. So, according to your partner you have a mass that maybe shouldn’t be there.”

I nodded again. For some reason it seemed to be all I was required to do.

“How long have you had problems?”

I shook my head. “I don’t really know.”

“All right let’s take a look. Pants down, hands here.” He patted the edge of a padded table. “Do you want a nurse present?”

I unbuttoned my pants and shook my head. “No.”

Dr. Peters came off cool but I wasn’t getting any pervy vibe from him. Pants around my knees I leaned my hands on the paper covering the exam table. It wasn’t your typical exam couch like you saw in a general practitioners office. This one was a mint-green vinyl mat on an actual stainless table.

“Might be a little cold.” His hand pressed onto my back as he started his groping. The lube was definitely cold. A few *hums* and an *interesting* later, the exam was done. I blew out a breath when I heard him pull off his gloves.

“Up on the table, lying on your stomach please. You can take your pants off if it’s easier. I need to take a closer look with my little camera.”

“Okay.” I kicked my shoes and pants off. The man had obviously found something but he appeared rather indifferent, like it wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before. I hoped that was a good sign.

The camera was tiny and I hardly felt it at all. It was all over in a few minutes, and other than having a stranger's hands on me, the experience hadn't been all that bad.

“Get dressed and I'll meet you and, if you wish, your partner in my office. Turn left and it's the second door on the left.” He gestured to over his shoulder. I didn't correct him on the partner reference.

A few minutes later I walked into the waiting area. Marcus looked up while continuing to bounce a thrilled Chey in his lap. She was reaching for the huge leaf of a fake banana plant. So close, yet just far enough away. I scooped her up and she shrieked in surprise.

Her big eyes looked at me, blinked, then she said. “Da!”

I'd never get tired of hearing that. I kissed her cheek and glanced over her shoulder at Marcus. He appeared about to come unglued. I held my hand out to him and he snapped it up. He hadn't been doing well since meeting me at the house. He had been waiting when Chey and I arrived, and if I had to wager, he had been there quite a while. You'd think he was the one with the problem. Regardless, his concern had touched me more deeply than I ever would have imagined.

I squeezed his hand and he tightened his grip enough that I winced. “I don't know anything yet. He's meeting us in his office.” I tugged him past reception while Chey happily sucked on my shirt.

Dr. Peters was waiting when we walked in and he gestured to close the door. His office was rather bland. The only color in the room was a small shelf of books behind his beige desk and two abstract art prints on one wall. We sat down in the tan chairs in front of his desk.

Without preamble, he launched in. “You have a mass in the most inconvenient of locations. At first, I thought it might be a poorly healed fissure but it isn't a scar. It appears to be something you've had for a while.” He shrugged and looked over his glasses. “Hard to tell, but you might have even been born with it. It's a simple procedure to remove the mass and I can do it

here in office. We'll send a sample out for testing, however I doubt anything will come back. It's not irritated and doesn't appear to be growing."

He arched his eyebrows as he pushed his glasses up. "If it had been in any other location, or you had been straight, you probably never would have found it. I'm rather surprised you didn't question it earlier. But you're here now and I can get you fixed up. Any questions?" He tossed his hands apart then clamped them back together as he looked from one of us to the other.

Even though I knew I needed to ask questions, I couldn't think of a single one. That wasn't true. I could think of one but I was too embarrassed to ask. I thought I already knew the answer based on my experience in the kitchen. Oh, Jesus, how different was I going to be in bed? Was this Marcus's door?

Marcus began talking and asked all the pertinent questions I should have been asking. However, I only heard about every third word. I couldn't seem to process anything past the man sitting next to me or our future. And of course Chey, who was sticking her fingers in my mouth.

I must have looked shell-shocked and I didn't hear the room quiet. Marcus appeared in front of me and crouched down, laying an arm behind Chey.

"Hey, it's good news." He palmed my neck.

I just stared at him wondering where he had come from, and how he had ended up in my life. Chey wooed and leaned back, looking at him fondly. Okay, our life.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

My *procedure* was Friday and Marcus had already arranged to spend the weekend coddling me. He said taking care of me, but I knew it would be coddling since he'd been doing it all week. It was driving me nuts. He'd barely touched me since my appointment and the few times he had, had gone from frigid to inferno in seconds but he always stopped, saying he didn't want to take a chance. Ten days until my follow up, it seemed an eternity away.

I was put under with a short-term anesthetic, which enabled me to forgo the injustice of actually meeting the female nurse that shaved, and then swabbed my ass during my procedure. I woke up feeling queasy and they gave me juice, and some crackers I managed to choke down. Then without any preamble they sent me on my way with a maxi pad stuck to my underwear, blow up donut pillow, antibiotic ointment, prescription for antibiotics, and a sheet of ridiculous didacticisms. I swear the medical profession thinks us all idiots. *Don't put anything up your rectum* and right below that *No anal sex...* I would have thought the two went hand in hand.

I wasn't sore. Not until we arrived at the house and I had to get out of the car. Marcus must have seen me wince because he hustled over and grabbed me. Of course the loud *Sonofabitch* might have had something to do with it too. I rarely swore, but the feeling of a knife being twisted inside my rectum, I felt, justified it.

"You should have waited for me." He clasped me around the waist.

"Yeah, well, it didn't hurt until I moved." I leaned on him and gripped his other hand. "Don't take this the wrong way, but this is *really* embarrassing." I started walking very slowly and rather bowlegged to the house.

"How so?"

"Do I really have to count the ways?" I asked dryly then whimpered as I made my way up the one concrete step to the door.

“Angel, this is what couples do for each other. You shouldn’t feel embarrassed.”

I stopped at the threshold and looked up at him. “But we’re not a couple.”

A small flash of emotion streaked across his handsome face, so quick I couldn’t be sure what it was. Then his face solidified and became quiet.

“I thought we were, maybe I was wrong,” he said quietly then went to help me through the door and I stopped us with a hand on the doorjamb.

“Wait. Marcus, you barely know me, and what you do know isn’t exactly the most romantic of discoveries.”

He looked at me as if I was Riana’s age. “But I do know you. You’re kind and a good person. A great dad who loves his daughter despite everything he went through to get her. You forgive people for things you shouldn’t.” He made a face over that. “You don’t take compliments well, which I actually find endearing, so of course I’ll just keep giving them. Not to mention you’re sexy as hell without realizing it, despite the fact you haven’t had a satisfying sexual experience possibly ever.” He moved to within an inch of me, letting go of my hand and taking hold of my waist. “Now you look me in the eye and tell me I don’t know you.”

I stared at him. I was surprised at how accurate that was. I blinked and smiled coyly.

“You think I’m sexy?”

He growled and I watched the flush bloom on his face as his eyes darkened so quickly I actually swooned. I gripped his shirt to keep my body from falling. I was pretty sure my heart and soul already had. He kissed me and I again felt the possessiveness there. Only this time it rocketed through me leaving me dizzy. I had definitely fallen and I was his for the taking. Body, heart, and soul. I clung to him and kissed him back with a desperation that surprised me. Of course, this could all be due to the anesthetic, and I kicked that possibility right out of my head.

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I managed to nap while Marcus picked up the girls. That had been an experience, dropping Chey off this morning. Nancy and Molly didn't know my sexual orientation, and even though I introduced Marcus as a friend, Molly kept fanning herself and giving me the thumbs-up sign. Marcus leaning against me, rubbing my back had probably been a clincher that we were more than friends.

Thankfully, neither seemed uncomfortable, and I had breathed a sigh of relief over that. I didn't do well with people who were uneasy around gays, and having to move Chey would have devastated me. She liked it there, and I liked, and trusted, Nancy and Molly.

I jerked awake and found Riana on the bed perched on her hands and knees staring at me.

"Is the classroom still in one piece?" I rolled onto my side and perched my head on my hand.

She rolled her eyes and let out a sound of disgust. I tried not to grin and failed. Obviously, I'd been missed and that made me feel good.

"Nobody liked the teacher. She was old and mean. Are you sick? Will you be back Monday?"

"No, I'm not sick. I got something cut out of me. Sort of like going to the dentist. I'll be back on Monday."

"You remember how much you hated going to the dentist," Marcus said just as Chey pushed on his chest and screamed. He cringed and wrung a finger in his ear. "He's right there. Geez." He wrinkled his face at her then set her next to me. "She wasn't too happy to find me alone when I picked her up. She's been voicing her displeasure ever since."

I looked down at her and grinned. "Did you miss me? Did you give Marcus a hard time? I bet his ears are ringing, yes they are." I lifted her ladybug shirt and gobbled her belly making her squeal in delight. Now my ears were ringing. She better grow up to be a rock star or an opera singer with that volume.

“Ow.” Riana made a face and scooted back. “Daddy, was I that loud?”

“No, thank God.” He looked to the heavens then grinned at me as he slid onto the bed and cuddled up against me.

I shot him a quizzical look then glanced at Riana who was blinking rapidly at her father wrapped around her teacher. He groaned and buried his face against my back for a second before sitting up.

“I guess now’s as good a time as any. Riana—”

“I like Mr. Tucco a lot better than I liked Mommy,” she blurted out and now it was our turn to blink stupidly.

On the one hand, it was sad to hear her obvious dislike of her own mother, but on the other hand her instant grasp of the situation was astounding.

“Honey, what do you mean?” His hand balled up the back of my shirt. I wasn’t saying a word, unless he really needed rescuing.

“You’re going to marry Mr. Tucco right? Sarah has two dads. She’s so lucky.” She looked at her dad as if this was all obvious and *normal*.

I snorted loudly and buried my face in my pillow hoping to muffle my amusement. It didn’t help. They launched onto my head, using my ear as a handhold, and giggling with glee over what she thought was a game of peek-a-boo.

“Who’s Sarah?” He asked.

I lifted my head. “A girl in our class. But I didn’t know she had two dads. How do you know she has two dads?” I looked at Riana. “Don’t suck on your hair.” I reached out and pulled the strands from her mouth. She let out an annoyed sigh and went to twirling it around her finger instead.

“She talks about them all the time.” She said it as if I should know this and maybe I should.

“Well, we won’t be getting married for a while but, um, would it bother you if we did?”

I knew he was searching for the easy answer from her, yet I didn't miss the softening in his voice and my heart beat faster because of it. Marriage, lifelong commitment, something I couldn't even get Todd to approach, and here Marcus threw it out like it was easy, the most natural thing. His hand unfurled and gently stroked my back and I knew he hadn't thrown it out there lightly.

I felt my heart beating in my chest and was sure he could feel it too. It was too soon to think about that kind of commitment. Yet my mind was whirling with the idea. I turned my head and Chey poked me in the eye.

"Ow. No poking, you little monster." I pulled her against my chest and hugged her. Her timing was impeccable. Riana laughed.

"Riana, you didn't answer me." Marcus lowered himself and leaned into my back, looking at her over my shoulder. She looked at him in total confusion having already forgotten the question.

"Does Mr. Tucco's and my friendship bother you?"

"No, why? Chey can be my sister." She took Chey's hand and Chey screamed at her and pulled it away.

Riana laughed and tickled her.

Chey squirmed. "Nao," she huffed.

Yep, they definitely could be sisters. Riana smiled and looked at her dad.

"Just wondered," he breathed then collapsed and buried his face in the nape of my neck. I felt his breathing heavy against my skin and I reached down, removing his hand from my waist and planted a kiss on his palm. He shuddered and I realized it had taken everything he had to have this conversation with his daughter. I knew how resilient kids were but he must have been worried she wouldn't accept him, us, this. She had though, with all the openness only a child has.

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I walked into my classroom on Monday, not really wanting to be there. The weekend had been wonderful. Chaotic, but wonderful. Riana decided annoying Chey was her new job in life and she was very good at it. Sunday afternoon



They had finally quit screaming every time Riana touched her or one of her toys. It had been a few hours of bliss. Then it all started again on the drive in this morning. They didn't like Riana sitting by her and kept throwing toys at her. When Riana picked them up to hand them back, they screamed because Riana was touching her toys.

"Can I pull the chairs down?" Riana looked at me expectantly.

"Sure. Go for it. Thanks." Kids found joy in the strangest things and if she wanted to put all the chairs down, who was I to say no?

I set my messenger bag down and dropped the donut pillow on my chair. I still couldn't sit comfortably without it. I watched Riana while leaning against my desk, sipping my coffee.

"Welcome back." Lily Dupree glanced at Riana and raised her eyebrows then smiled knowingly. "Obviously I don't need to ask how things are going."

"Hi, Mrs. Dupree. We stayed with Mr. Tucco all weekend. My dad's going to marry him."

I choked on my coffee and winced over the pain in my ass. Coughing, not a good idea.

"Is he really? Are you excited?"

I reached out to smack her arm but she ducked away, grinning. She was remarkably quick for a woman wearing stiletto heels. So much for keeping things on the down low. Lily was going to have a heyday with this.

"Riana." I gave her a look, feeling a little too much like her father.

"I know, Dad told me it was a secret." She looked at Lily. "So, don't tell anyone okay?"

Lily locked her lips and threw away the key. "I won't, I promise."

Satisfied, Riana went back to her task.

"Wow, he moves fast. What has it been... two... three weeks?"

I rolled my eyes at her. "We had to have *the conversation*. It just ended up coming out that way. So wipe that silly grin off your face. We are not

engaged.” I flopped down on my chair. “Ow.” I centered myself on the pillow making Lily cackle when she saw what I was doing. “Don’t even go there,” I warned. She only knew I had an outpatient procedure and I wasn’t about to discuss what that procedure had been.

“You better invite me to the wedding.”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding.”

“Yet. Whenever the blessed event happens, I want to be there to see that my vote helped someone I know.”

I glanced at her. “So let me get this straight. *If* I ever get married, I have to invite you only because you voted *yes* on Referendum 74?”

“No. I hope you’ll invite me because I’m your friend. But if that isn’t enough, then because I’m your boss.” She smiled sweetly, only I knew there was nothing sweet about that smile.

“Great, now I’m being threatened at work.” I dropped my head onto the desk.

“Was that a threat? Oh, maybe it was.” She laughed as she sashayed out to the common area.

*Bitch.* I loved her though, and if I ever did get married she would be on the guest list. It was sad, but she was about the only person I could loosely consider a friend. I shook my head feeling the sting of Todd’s and my friends’ betrayal again. My class began arriving in a noisy array, saving me from my own mind. That seemed to be happening a lot lately. It was as if I was no longer allowed to mourn my past. Maybe I should take the hint and start living in the present.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I have to leave.” Marcus sounded frantic and way past upset.

I gripped my phone. “Okay, slow down. What’s wrong?”

“I just—Oh, God. I just received a picture of Toby from Ms. Taylor. He doesn’t look so good. Of course the, ah, picture is from a ways away. Angel, he looks so small.” His voice broke and I heard him clear his throat.

“Who’s Ms. Taylor and are you sure it’s him?” Marcus had been getting more and more worried the past week as the PI he hired had lost Claudia’s parents thus losing track of Toby.

“Yeah, it’s him. Claudia’s dad is in the picture. Taylor’s the PI I hired. Listen, if I leave now I can be there before dark.”

For some reason I assumed the private investigator had been a man and was rather surprised to hear she was a woman. I wasn’t sure I wanted him driving so upset but I knew going with him was out of the question. I didn’t have anyone to watch Chey, and missing another day of work in a week’s time was a bad idea.

“Where is *there*?” I asked, pacing the front of my classroom.

“Bend, Oregon. They’re at a campground there. At least they are right now.”

“What about the sheriff? Can’t you call the police?”

“I already did. They don’t extradite to Montana. Told me to call them if things become violent. Claudia’s parents are idiots but they aren’t *that* stupid. If I show up they won’t stop me from taking him.”

I didn’t like this at all. “Will Ms. Taylor be there?”

“Yeah.”

That was a small consolation. I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “I know you need to go but please stay in touch so I know you’re okay. Don’t worry about

Riana, I'll take care of her." They had been practically living at the house for a week now and I knew she had clothes in the dryer.

"I can call Kim. She'll come get her."

"What, you don't trust me?" I tried to tease him.

"I trust you explicitly. I thought you might like a night off."

"I wouldn't know what to do with both of you gone. You've kinda become a fixture at the house. All right, you better get going. Just... Come home safe."

"We will. I, ah—I'll see you tomorrow night."

He hung up and a second later my phone beeped. I opened the text and sat down on a table, winced, and rolled onto a hip. Sprawled across the screen was a picture of a thin elderly man in ragged clothing leaning over a stroller that contained a gaunt yellow-skinned baby. I knew Toby was only two months younger than my daughter, yet he appeared to be half her size. Even though the picture was grainy, I couldn't dismiss the fact he appeared lifeless. His mouth was open and shadows engulfed his closed eyes.

It had been a month since the last sighting and Marcus had been too late. They had disappeared again before he had arrived. I hoped for Toby's sake Marcus wasn't too late this time.

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Riana was pulling on her red windbreaker while I put the last of the chairs up. Today we had made glitter pictures and the grey carpet sparkled with a myriad of colors. There was no way the janitor would get it all out in one vacuum.

I picked up my bag then walked over and took Riana's hand, leading her out the door. "Your dad had to go out of town and he won't be back until tomorrow. Are you going to be okay staying with me and Chey?" I glanced down at her as we walked to the Volvo.

She looked up, squinting in the sun, and nodded. "Yeah. Is he getting Toby?"

“I hope so.” I squeezed her hand and she smiled up at me and squeezed back. “You want to sit in the front?”

“Yeah!” She jumped up and down as I unlocked and opened her door.

“Your chariot, my Lady.” I bowed and winked at her.

She rolled her eyes at me. I guess she wasn't the princess type. I closed her door and wondered, as I walked to the driver's side, when had six-year-olds become so opinionated and grown up? I remembered being confused at what to do with a large box when I was her age, and didn't even know how to make a telephone call until I was in second or third grade. Riana knew how to play games on Marcus's cell phone. Something neither one of us could figure out. We had tried after she went to bed the other night and it had been a hilarious travesty.

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The girls were asleep, Chey in her crib and Riana set up on the couch when my cell finally rang. I scrambled for it, knocking it to the other side of the table.

I finally got my hands on it. “Are you okay?” I blurted in lieu of a greeting as I headed to my bedroom so as not to wake up Riana.

“I could be better. I was arrested for stalking.”

I stopped in the hall. “Arrested? How? What the heck happened?” I didn't even ask if he had Toby. His dejected tone was answer enough.

“I didn't think they'd run but I'll be damned if they did. The second they saw me they locked the doors and took off. I followed them and the next thing I know a sheriff's stopping me. I can't believe they did that.” The emotion was thick in his voice and my heart went out to him.

I continued into my bedroom and closed the door. “Is there anything I can do? I mean, I could come down there.” I wasn't sure what I would do with the girls but if he needed me I'd figure it out. I found myself looking around my room for things to pack and had to stop myself.

“No, I’m out now but impound has my car until morning. The cop wouldn’t even listen to my side. He just cuffed me and tossed me in the cruiser. It took three hours for them to pull up the kidnapping report proving my innocence. Then they had the nerve to ask why I hadn’t called them in the first place. Assholes.” He sounded exhausted and I hoped he wasn’t planning on sitting at the station all night.

I sat down on the bed wishing he hadn’t gone, or at least that I could have gone with him. I grabbed the pillow Marcus had slept on when he was here and cradled it against my chest. It was a poor substitute for his warm body but I could still smell him on it.

“What a crappy system. Our tax dollars at work, arresting the innocent and letting the bad guys get away. Where are you now?”

“Some crappy motel with olive green carpet, and gold curtains, that’s *conveniently* located right across from the station. I think they rent by the hour as I’m pretty sure I saw a cowboy dragging another cowboy into one of the rooms. They looked awfully friendly.”

He sounded like he was being facetious. Even so, I felt my pulse take a hike and my jaw tense. I couldn’t believe I was jealous.

“What, do you have a thing for cowboys?” The second the words were out of my mouth I knew how stupid they sounded.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind seeing you in a pair of chaps someday. That tight round ass of yours along with leather... mmm, yeah, I’d like to see that.”

I chuckled. “I don’t know how you do it, but you always say the right thing, even in the middle of a calamity.”

“Was that the right thing?” He sighed.

I hugged his pillow tighter. “Yeah, it was. Now I miss you,” I said gently.

“You didn’t miss me before? Shit, I’ve been missing you like crazy.” I could hear the tease in his voice and it made me smile.

“The girls kept me busy. Are you going after them tomorrow?” I hoped he said no. I didn’t want him chasing them in case they proved to be dangerous when threatened.

“Give my girl a kiss, tell her Daddy misses her and I will be home tomorrow. So, no, I’m not chasing them. That’s what Ms. Taylor’s for.”

“Where was she through all this, by the way?” I hadn’t forgotten about her but his cowboy comment had thrown me off track.

“Bathroom. That’s the ironic part, where I come off stupid. She told me to wait until she came back, and I didn’t. I already received a lecture from her...”

“I wasn’t going to give you one. I know you’ve already beaten yourself up enough. Get some sleep and we’ll see you tomorrow. By the way, I can still smell you on my pillow.”

“Hey, that’s *my* pillow. I suppose I can let you use it just this once, but I’m taking it back tomorrow night.”

“I can handle that.”

We said goodnight and I shuffled down and buried my face into Marcus’s scent.

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“Have you had any pain or discomfort?” Dr. Peters asked.

“Not in a few days.”

“Good. Climb up, let’s take a look-see.” He patted the table then pulled green gloves from a wall dispenser.

I dropped my slacks to my knees and shuffled up onto the crinkly paper. Marcus had really wanted to be here, but Dr. Peters had been kind enough to squeeze me in immediately after work, and Marcus just couldn’t get the time off. It worked out though since Nancy agreed to watch Riana during my appointment and I could pick up both girls when I was done here.

Dr. Peters rolled over a screen. “Just using the camera today. Might be a little cold.”

*A little? What, do they keep their lube in the fridge? Dang.*

“Relax, Mr. Tucco.”

*Let’s see you relax with an ice cube up your butt.* “Sorry. It is a little cold.” I seemed to recall reading somewhere about crazy people that actually liked ice cubes shoved into their orifices. Marcus better not even think about it, or we’ll definitely be having words.

The last few days had been hard on both of us. But no matter how much an act of virtue sleeping in the same bed became, Marcus refused to go home. Not that I had actually asked. I rather liked having him there.

“You’re healing nicely. Just another minute and we’ll be done.”

I nodded, not sure what to think of the healing rather than healed part. Marcus was being a saint and refusing to even play until I was completely healed. He decided since he had been waiting for six years, he could wait two more weeks. I, on the other hand, felt like a horny teenager waiting for his first time. The brat knew what he did to me, but then I had heard him grunting in the shower on more than one morning, so I knew the exasperation was mutual.

Dr. Peters pulled the camera out and I sighed. Crap. Shouldn’t have been thinking about Marcus, and sex, and Marcus stroking himself in the shower... This was going to be embarrassing. I could feel my cock hard beneath me.

“All done. Love my laser. It was the best investment I ever made. You’re perfectly smooth in there now, not even a pimple of skin out of place. You still have some redness in the area but it should go away in the next three or four days.”

He turned to clean his equipment and I slid off the side of the table, yanking my underwear and pants up.

“So, um, when, um, how long...”

He cleared his throat loudly and I knew he was trying not to laugh. “Give it four more days and go easy until you’re sure there’s no discomfort. If anything hurts, stop and wait a few more days.”



My face felt sunburned and I knew I was blushing furiously. I managed to face him despite my discomfort.

“Thank you, Dr. Peters.” My eyes began to sting and I blinked hard, managing to dispel the flash of emotion that had hit me. I wasn’t ignorant. I knew this small thing was about to change my life forever, and I found it exciting and terrifying all at once.

Dr. Peters smiled. “I’m glad I could help. If you have any problems at all, you call me.” He opened the door with a reassuring smile, and I managed a nod as I passed him. I was sure the man knew what he had done for me.

I sat in the car for a few minutes until my emotions were back under control. Riana was an intuitive girl and didn’t miss much. She would see immediately that I wasn’t quite all together.

My phone rang as I turned down Nancy’s road. I pulled off and answered Marcus’s call, surprised he had been so patient.

“Well?”

“Hello to you too,” I said wryly.

He chuckled. “Just worried.”

“Mm, yes, worried.” Suddenly I felt the need to know the answer to *what if?* “What would happen if I told you the surgery wasn’t successful?” I held my breath waiting.

“Oh, Angel, I’m so sorry. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you. I wanted this for *you*. There are so many other ways I can make love to you.”

The fact he would still want me was overwhelming. I swiped at the wetness on my cheeks.

“You always say the right thing.”

“Angel, baby, are you crying? I’m so sorry—”

“I’m not crying.” My voice hitched. “Okay, yes, I’m crying, but not for the reason you think. It was mean, I needed to know. I don’t know why, I just did.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“I know. I, um, the surgery was a success. I’m sorry, Marcus. I needed to know—and you said those wonderful things, and now I feel horrible for deceiving you.” I sniffed loudly and grabbed a napkin from the glove box.

Marcus started laughing. Laughing I didn’t expect. Anger, hurt, distrust... Not the loud breathless sounds coming across the line.

“You didn’t deceive me. I can’t blame you for needing to know. But Angel, I’m not going anywhere. However, now I have an obscenely large anticipatory woody and a client due in about five minutes.” He sighed loudly then chuckled again.

I felt the smile on my face. “Sorry. This might help with your small, um—large problem. My ass is still off limits for another four days.”

“Doesn’t help. That’s Sunday. A whole day... Oh, man, what I could do to you with a whole day. I’m calling Kim; see if she can take the girls.”

I laughed at the huskiness that had crawled into his voice. “You’ll have to pry Chey out of my hands you know? I’ve never left her with a babysitter or anyone but Nancy and Molly.”

“I’ll just occupy you while she kidnaps the girls. Damn. All right, too many visions. Throbbing painfully now. Oh, man, I need to take care of this before I embarrass myself. Maybe I should stay at my apartment tonight.”

“You have to pick up Riana remember?” Eek my voice had dropped just listening to him.

“Don’t talk about her right now.” He grunted and I recognized that low primal noise.

“Are you jacking off with me on the phone?”

“Say something dirty, Angel.”

I guess he was and... “Oh, God, that’s fucking hot, thinking about you stroking yourself.” It was too. This was not a good place to have a hard-on. Two blocks from a daycare in a residential neighborhood. Marcus was going

to get me arrested. I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and my phone with the other.

“Are you hard?” His voice was gruff.

“Bastard.” I closed my eyes but that made things worse as images of Marcus naked, Marcus licking, Marcus sucking. Crap. My hips rocked. I reached behind the seats and fumbled around until I found something soft and pulled it onto my lap. One of Chey’s blankets. Yeah, not happening. I tossed it in the back.

“Tell me you’re stroking that sexy cock of yours.”

Oh, he called my cock sexy. *Okay, tight and uncomfortable now.* I undid my slacks and threw my jacket over my lap. “Not fair, Marcus. When did this turn into phone sex?” I wormed my hand beneath my briefs and my head fell back the second I ran my hand along my length.

He chuckled. “The second you told me I could have you Sunday. I’m going to make you scream my name, Angel. Over... ahh... and... mmm... over. Oh, fuck.”

Marcus started grunting and my hips began thrusting in time to his guttural vocalizations. I reached over and laid the seat back and pumped into my hand like a madman. Listening to Marcus, knowing he was doing the same thing, was one of the most erotic things I’d ever experienced. I ran my thumb through the pool of slickness oozing from my head and moaned as my thighs and belly tightened.

“Ohh, I’m gonna come.” I caressed my tip and groaned as my pelvis lifted. “Oh, yeah, oh, Marcus.”

“Oh, fuck, that did—ahhh, *shit.*” Marcus continued to swear for several seconds and the thought of him coming that long had me moaning as I pushed into my hand faster, harder, *ohhh, Jesus.* My whole body seized at once as heat exploded up my shaft. I jerked as I came, my knee hitting the steering wheel. *Sonofabitch.* I kept stroking until it became too much and I had to pull my hand away so I could breathe again.

I lay there with my eyes closed, trembling. I couldn't remember the last time I had been so excited, or come so hard. My whole body felt like overboiled mush. Marcus's voice brought me out of my euphoric haze.

"Angel, you there? Did you drop your phone? Angel, hello?"

I scabbled a hand on the floor and found my phone. "Yeah, dropped my phone."

"You sound deliciously breathless."

He actually did too.

"So do you. You know I could have been arrested." I wrestled some napkins from the glove box. The inside of my jacket was a mess and my shirt wasn't much better. I should have used the blanket.

"Did the allure of getting caught make it more exciting?"

"I forgot completely, to be honest." I glanced around quickly as I righted my seat. There wasn't a soul around.

"You know, you made these growly purring noises. God, they were sexy."

I wiped off the liner of my coat and looked at the wad of napkins, not sure what to do with them. "Did I? I didn't know I was making any noise." I shoved the napkins in my tiny garbage bag and stuck it under my seat.

"Oh, you were quite vocal. You sounded like some wild cat. It was—God, I can't wait to hear that again. I missed the climax when you dropped your phone. Why didn't you have your Bluetooth on?"

"If I had, this wouldn't have happened. I would have been sitting in front of Nancy's and would have hung up on you. That might have been better actually, since my coat and shirt are, hm, yeah." I chuckled as I wrestled my jacket on. Yuck. At least it would cover up my slightly slimy shirt.

"Mmm, that would have been perverted for sure. All right, you're forgiven for leaving me hanging. You are so-damn-sexy over the phone, and as much as I would like to keep you here for hours, I have to go make money."

I smiled over his disappointed tone. “And I need to go get our kids before Nancy wonders what happened to me. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I awoke to Marcus's lips traveling down my spine. Last night, after getting a less than positive call from Taylor, he had spent over an hour massaging me with this fabulous oil that made me warm everywhere. It was as if he needed to touch me, or maybe it was a way for him to work out his frustrations on my body. When he was done, he pulled me into his arms and immediately fell asleep, leaving me hard, hot, and completely bothered. I didn't think I would ever fall asleep but I must have.

I stretched the kinks out of my back and his hands traveled up my stomach and over my chest. He'd been more forthcoming with his affection over the last four days and I was blossoming under his avid ministrations. I'd never been so bold with anyone and each day saw me more confident in our relationship.

It wasn't only sexual. He touched me in ways no one ever had. Sometimes his hands were so gentle, as if he thought I might break and other times they were rough and possessive. But the times he held me tight, like he had last night, left me breathless. He was always so still, like he was afraid to move, afraid I would disappear.

Right now, he was touching me as if I might break or bolt like a frightened animal. But I wasn't going anywhere. For as long as he would have me, I was his. I'd realized that last night as he slept pressed against my back. It's amazing how four short days can change a person and their entire outlook on life. Marcus had shown me what real desire was and I wanted to explore that world with him forever.

I turned to face him and captured his smiling lips. He tipped his head back and I deepened my kiss. His hands slipped under the waistband of my pajamas and as his fingers slid down my ass, for the first time I pushed my derriere against them rather than tensing or pulling away. He groaned into my mouth and pulled me roughly against him.

They squealed out her morning greeting.

I threw my leg over his waist and ground against him until he was panting against my mouth. I parried with his tongue one last time then flounced off the bed.

“Hey...” He leaned over the edge and tried to grab me.

“Daughter, crying, will only get louder until Riana comes in.” I raised my eyebrows at him. He looked so sexy all flushed and exasperated.

“Brat.” He sighed and rolled into the pillows letting out a holler of indignation.

“That’s my line.” I chuckled as I found my robe kicked under the bed.

He turned his head and I hummed appreciatively at the seductive look plastered across his flushed face. He tensed his shoulders and pushed against the mattress with a little sound that was pure sex. I couldn’t believe this glorious man was in my bed, let alone my life. His hair was every which way, while his green eyes glittered softly at me. I couldn’t even look at his muscular back without my fingers itching and cock throbbing.

“When is Kim picking up the girls?” I asked as I tucked my cock against my body. It didn’t help and my hard-on jutted proudly back out.

Riana flounced through the door without knocking. “Two o’clock.” She pounced onto the bed, causing Marcus to tuck the comforter around him quickly before she sidled up to him.

I tied my robe closed and decided it might be time to start locking the door at night, or at least get firmer on the knocking policy.

“I’m gonna go get Chey. I think Denny’s would be a good idea for breakfast.”

At least it would get me out of this house and into a public place until the girls were gone. It was a good plan in theory. Riana agreed, although for a completely different reason I was sure.

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I watched Marcus helping Riana decide on her breakfast from the kids menu, and felt like we were on our first date. The tension was definitely there, although more of an adult content since we were past that first kiss and wondering if the chemistry would be there. We already knew it was, in spades, and building by the minute.

The kids had made our relationship different. They had pushed it forward in a way I never would have thought I could handle. But everything had come so naturally with Marcus that it just felt right; every step, every laugh, every trial, and every emotion.

He caught me staring and smiled softly before pointing at Chey. “Napkin.”

I glanced over and started picking the soggy pieces out of her mouth. “How did you get a hold of that?”

She swung her head back and forth as she shoved at my hand. When that didn’t work, she squealed. Her indignation grew louder as I opened her mouth to make sure I had all the pieces. Satisfied, I slid everything another few inches further away then handed her a blue hippo teething toy. She threw it on the table.

I dug through her bag and found the pink glittery gel heart. I handed that to her, and content with that one, she shoved it in her mouth and immediately went to drooling.

“Oh, how sweet. I love seeing fathers out together giving moms a day off. Hi, I’m Susan, and I’ll be your server. Let’s start with the pretty young lady.” She pointed her pen at Riana.

“We don’t have a mommy. Angel and my dad are going to get married and then Chey and I will have two dads,” Riana explained. “I want the strawberry pancakes.”

Susan didn’t bat an eye as she wrote down Riana’s order. “Lots of whipped cream?”

Riana nodded enthusiastically while I grinned behind my hand.

The waitress scribbled on her pad. “Orange juice?”



Riana shook her head. “Chocolate milk.”

She looked up and winked at her. “Good choice.” She turned her attention to Marcus and I noticed the wide-eyed blank look on his face.

“I’ll have the French toast. Scrambled, and an orange juice,” I said giving Marcus a chance to recover from his daughter’s announcement. Obviously, this was the first time she had dropped *that* one on him away from home. Susan wrote my order down and still Marcus was blank. I reached behind Riana and squeezed his shoulder. He turned, and upon seeing me, shook out of his daze.

“Sorry, I’ll have the French toast too, over medium and orange juice. And pardon my daughter. She’s six.” He gathered up the menus and handed them to her with an awkward smile.

“I’m not one of those weird ones. Nope. I support the gay community and voted the same as Obama. People should be allowed to love and marry whoever they want.” She gave us both a knowing grin. *Nope, she wasn’t weird at all.* Marcus and I shared a look as she left.

“What’s gay mean?” Riana asked as she began coloring her placemat.

Marcus looked lost for the second time in five minutes so I stepped up. “It’s what your dad and I are. Two men who are happier together than apart.”

She thought about that for a moment and nodded. “Do you love each other?”

I swallowed and glanced at Marcus. He was gazing at me with that soft intensity I had come to love. I smiled at him and he smiled back. “Yes,” we both answered. I reached behind Riana and Marcus found my hand, twining his fingers with mine.

“I knew you did.” She glanced from one of us to the other. “I can see it in your faces.”

I leaned down and kissed her temple then Marcus did the same and Riana giggled.

“No,” Chey yelled. “Da, kee.” She threw the gel heart and it landed with a plop on Riana’s picture.

“Eww.” Riana picked it up between a finger and her thumb. “I’m glad I don’t drool like that anymore.” She handed it back to Chey, and she blinked her big eyes at Riana for a moment, then giggled and snatched it away. A second later she tossed it at Riana again. Riana laughed and Chey laughed and a new game took form.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We walked through Eastside Park in an awed but comfortable silence while Riana skipped a few feet ahead. I had Chey in her sling against my chest, Marcus had his hand in my back pocket, and I had mine in his. He kept leaning over nuzzling my neck, or kissing Chey's cheek, or every now and then nibbling her neck then mine, making us both giggle. He couldn't stop smiling and neither could I.

As we reached the edge of the garden, Riana ran back.

"Can I play on the playground?" She was moving from one foot to the other like she had to pee.

We both looked over at the colorful jungle gym with all the slides, and Marcus nodded.

"Yeah, be careful."

She turned and dashed off. "I will."

"Does she need to use the bathroom?" I asked.

"No, she does that when she's excited." He grinned. "I seem to be the only one who doesn't wiggle my hips."

"Shut up." But I laughed in spite of myself. Marcus traced down my cheekbone then turned my head and kissed me. It was so sweet it made my heart ache. His hand cupped my neck as his thumb continued feathering my cheek. I grasped his arm and leaned into him trying not to crush Chey in the process. I'd never felt anything so perfect and I wanted to feel with my whole body. His hand traveled down, his thumb caressing my jaw and my eyes closed.

Chey palmed my cheek and I opened my eyes to see she had Marcus's cheek with her other hand. Marcus smiled against my mouth then moved to kiss my cheek.

“Thank you for everything,” he said quietly before laying his lips carefully on my neck.

I froze at his words just as his phone rang.

“Talk about bad timing. That’s Taylor. I have to take it.” His hand slipped out of my pocket and I removed mine as he let me go and answered his phone.

I staggered sideways and wrapped my arms around Chey. What did he mean by *thank you for everything*? I felt my stomach begin to tremble and turned away from him, walking towards the playground. I stopped at the fountain and took a drink. The cold water hit like a punch in the gut.

“Da?” Chey placed her hands on my face then bonked me with her head.

“I’m okay.” But I wasn’t. His words were burning through me, destroying everything in their path. It was the same feeling I’d had when I realized Todd had left me. That kiss, I thought so full of emotion, ate at my lips. I refused to believe it might have been a goodbye kiss.

I sank onto a bench and stared at Riana waving at me as she slid down a blue slide. Suddenly Marcus was yelling and I turned to see him running towards us waving his phone.

“Toby, here, now, here.” He reached me and shoved the phone in front of me. “Do you know this restaurant?” He scrolled through a few pictures and I recognized it immediately.

“That’s Ma’s Place. It’s about twenty minutes away. We used to go there when I was a kid.” I looked up at him and saw the tears just as they spilled over.

“Riana!” he yelled. “We have to go now.” He looked down at me. “He’s there, right now.” He was seconds from a full out meltdown and I’d never seen him like this. I couldn’t just turn away. Even if he was planning to leave me, I loved him and couldn’t stand to see him fail again.

I glanced over to find Riana moving towards us in a sulky manner. “Riana, honey, hurry. We have to go get Toby.” I stood up and tightened my hold on Chey before looking at him. “Let’s go get your son.”

His eyes closed for a split second and when they opened he had managed to somehow pull himself together. He nodded and scooped up Riana, who was talking a mile a minute. She protested but clung to him like a monkey as we started sprinting across the park towards my car.

They worked like a siren as she screamed and squealed over the fast pace and excessive bouncing. People glanced back then moved out of the way. When we reached the car, I was huffing twice as hard as Marcus despite carrying a lighter load. I managed to unlock the doors and get Chey strapped into her car seat in about a minute. She thought all this was great fun and was giggling so hard her face was pink from forehead to chin. Riana on the other hand looked about to lose her breakfast.

As I turned the key, I leaned over to retrieve a bottle of water from under Marcus's seat. His hand brushed through my hair, making me jump and hit my head on his knee. He reached for me and I pulled away.

"I'm fine." I held up my hand to him then handed the water back to Riana. Her pallor was getting worse so I handed her one of Chey's blankets just in case. I knew the journey wasn't going to help her stomach one bit. She set the water next to her and cuddled up to the blanket.

I backed out then headed towards the freeway, and hopefully Toby. I hadn't looked closely at the pictures but I doubted he had improved much from eleven days ago. He needed his father and if it was my last act as Marcus's boyfriend I would move heaven and earth to make sure he got him. Or maybe it should be hell and earth in this instance.

I tromped the gas as I merged onto the freeway. Poor Riana moaned but she held her breakfast. I wished my parents were alive. My dad would have rallied some of his retired buddies from the force and had Toby in his custody by now. But he wasn't alive, and I hadn't seen any of his fellow officers since the funeral. They had a tendency to look on me with pity, like I had been born without legs instead of being born gay. So, despite the customary stay in touch, I hadn't called a one of them. I wished I could have called on them now.

Marcus sat in solemn silence thumbing through the four pictures over and over, throwing a text in now and then. I assumed Taylor was keeping him apprised of the situation, and would let us know if they left. We reached the exit in record time. I would have to thank my old Volvo with an oil change. She'd maintained eighty the whole way without a shudder or cough.

"Taylor says they just got their food. How much farther?" Marcus looked up from his phone. The creases above his nose were deep and he was ravaging the side of his lip.

"No more than ten minutes. Less if the lights are with us. There's a door in from the back lot if it's still in use. It opens into the hall where the restrooms are. They won't see you coming. I can drop you there and swing around to the front." I glanced at him quickly and he was staring at me in what I could only assume was awe. "What? I know the restaurant and my dad was a cop. Maybe some of him rubbed off on me."

"Or you could just be his son and it comes naturally."

"Mm, maybe. I was never like my dad though. He was always attentive wherever he was—always watching out for the little guy. I'm nothing like that." I hit the brakes as the light ahead flipped to yellow. "Riana, you doing okay?" I glanced in my rearview mirror. She didn't seem as pale now.

"Yeah."

I smiled at her in the mirror and she smiled back. "Good girl. Chey asleep?"

She glanced sideways and nodded. "Yeah."

"I figured. She's only this quiet when she's asleep." I turned my eyes back to the road and waited for the light.

Marcus shifted sideways and leaned over the headrest. "We're almost there, sweetie. I want you to stay in the car with Angel and Chey. Can you do that for me?"

"Mm-hm."

"That's my girl." He turned back around and laid his hand on my headrest.

I tried really hard to ignore it but then he began stroking the back of my head absently, and I began to wonder if I had jumped to conclusions. I really hoped I had. An ache had already set up residence in my chest over the possibility and if he left me, I knew my body would be one big mass of pain. I knew now that I hadn't loved Todd, at least not in the way I loved Marcus. My love for him was all-consuming and was there every minute of every day.

I wasn't going to think about that right now though. I turned left on Center then right into the side alley that would take us behind the restaurant. I slowed down and pointed out my window.

“There's the place. I don't see a motorhome though.”

I stopped as Marcus wrapped his arm around my shoulders then leaned over me and looked around the area. “There, across the street.” He pointed. “At least they won't be running this time.” He turned towards me and lowered his forehead to mine. “Now I'm scared,” he whispered so Riana couldn't hear.

I palmed his neck. “You'll be fine. He's your son, and I'm here if you need me.”

He closed his eyes as his jaw and hand on my neck tensed. He still didn't believe in himself as a father but I knew he would do right by Toby. Finally, he nodded against my forehead and opened his eyes. He gave me a quick strong kiss then took a deep breath as he settled back in his seat.

“I'm ready. Let's go.” He smiled and I noticed it was strained. But I knew him well enough now to know he would be fine no matter what happened between him and me. His kids were lucky to have such a strong father.

I shifted into drive then took his hand. He cinched down tight as if he could draw strength from that very connection. For all I knew he could.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I drove to the back as he texted Taylor one handed, refusing to let go of me. I crawled up to the door and was relieved to see it was still an entrance. A woman dressed in jeans and a grey T-shirt, with shoulder length dark hair and glasses came out the back typing on a cell phone. She looked up and Marcus cleared his throat. With a bone-crushing squeeze of my hand, he stepped out of the car. Taylor came to my window and I rolled it down.

“Ms. Taylor, I presume?” I asked.

“Ha-ha, very funny. You have thirty seconds to get to the front. So move, but don’t leave the car unless there is no other option. Understand?” she instructed in a clipped matter-of-fact way that reminded me of my father at times.

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded.

“Smart aleck.” She turned and gestured Marcus into the building.

I headed around to the front. “Riana, can you either duck down or cover yourself with the blanket so your grandparents can’t see you?” I watched her in the rearview mirror for any signs of remorse, regret, or possible excitement over seeing her grandparents, but there was only compliance. Like her mom, they must have done a number on her too. With a nod, she lay down on the seat and covered herself.

“Just tell me when I can get up.” She popped her head out.

“I will, sweetie. Thank you.”

She shuffled back under as I pulled into a parking spot left conveniently for me one slot down from the door. I scanned the front windows but couldn’t find Marcus or Taylor. I looked to the back right corner and I could just barely see the ivy restrooms sign painted on the wall.

The place hadn’t changed other than looking more rundown than I remembered. It was still black and white outside with chocolate brown booths



inside. I was sure the carpet was the same threadbare burgundy it had been ten years ago.

I sat up when I caught sight of Marcus striding from the hallway and across the dining hall. He was frowning and right on his heels was Taylor with her cell phone in her hand. It looked like she had her thumb on a button. Maybe she had the sheriff on speed dial. I'd have to give her props if she did. I hadn't been impressed with her thus far. Three months getting to this point. Not impressed at all.

Marcus walked past the cash register near the door and into the other side of the dining room. Taylor stopped near the door with her phone held up and her thumb still in position. I leaned forward but I could no longer see Marcus. I kept my eyes on Taylor, watching for any sign of trouble since she seemed to have her eyes glued to something important. She looked like a dog staring at a cat just waiting for that cat to move so she could attack.

Suddenly her thumb hit the button as she raised the phone to her mouth and jumped into action. My heart sank all the way to my toes as I watched her run across the restaurant and out of sight. Every muscle in my body wanted to bolt from the car, but I gripped the steering wheel instead knowing I couldn't leave the girls.

Taylor reappeared moving in a swift, awkward way. When I could see all of her I noticed the bundle held tightly against her chest and knew it was Toby. She turned towards the door and I opened mine and stepped out of the car.

She was already talking as she pushed the door open. "Assholes. Take him and lock the doors. Cops and ambulance are on the way." She carefully handed him over. He was so small and the blanket he was wrapped in smelled musty and like urine.

"Where's Marcus?" I asked as she turned her head back inside.

She looked at me over her shoulder and her face was pinched in making her look like an angry bird. I didn't think my heart could sink any lower but I felt it fall.

“The old man stabbed him with a steak knife. Idiot. Marcus just stood there and let it happen.” She pressed a hand to her head. “The old man was so shocked Marcus didn’t move that I was able to swoop in and grab Toby. A busboy came out of nowhere and stopped him from stabbing Marcus again. I don’t know...” She shook her head as she glanced back inside. “I’m going to find out and I’ll come back and let you know. Ambulance should be here any minute.”

I was hyperventilating, I just knew it. I felt like a car was sitting on my chest and my lungs wouldn’t expand no matter how hard I tried. Taylor headed back in with her head bowed. I felt my knees go numb, then Toby coughed. This weak, croupy, wet sound, and with that one small sound, I was myself again.

I gently took the blanket off him refusing to let the foul thing in my car. What I found beneath the blanket made me gasp. I’d never seen a jaundiced person in real life but I knew the signs. Even the whites of his eyes were pale yellow. His hands were dirty and he was trying to suck on one. I pulled it from his mouth and he opened his eyes. Marcus’s eyes. Bright green and just as expressive. He looked up at me and blinked. His eyelashes were dark blond and I found myself wishing they were auburn like Marcus’s and Riana’s. Then he did something amazing and smiled.

This tiny, sick child that had been through only God knew what, smiled, and the happiness went all the way to his eyes. I bent my head down and kissed his forehead. His hands grabbed at my neck.

“Such a strong boy. You’re going to be just fine aren’t you?” I kissed him again and realized he smelled rather fierce. Old sweat, rotten milk, and what I suspected was a fairly dirty diaper. This I could fix right away. I climbed into the car and moved my seat back a few notches.

“Riana, you can quit hiding. Hand me Chey’s diaper bag, please. And a blanket. If you don’t want to give up yours there should be another one behind your seat.”

The blanket she had been using came forward then Riana grunted and dropped the diaper bag into the passenger seat. She leaned between the seats and watched quietly as I went to work cleaning him up.

When I peeled off his onesie she sucked in a breath and went to touch his arm.

“Don’t touch him. I think that’s a staph infection and you’ll get it. Sorry, honey.”

There were several spots where his skin was dark, thick and scaling off. I suspected staph but hoped it wasn’t. Until I knew for sure, I couldn’t touch Chey though.

“Is he going to be okay?”

I glanced back at her and saw the worry on her sweet face. Cleaning up Toby had taken my mind off Marcus for several minutes but now, looking at his daughter and son, an emotional tidal wave threatened me. Where’s the damn ambulance and why hasn’t Taylor come back out?

“Yeah, he’s going to be fine. He’s going to be fine.” *Please, let him be fine.*

A few minutes later, the parking lot became a swirl of lights and people in uniforms. They charged in and out of the door, past us in the car, and I felt like I was watching a scene. Detached from the reality of it all, forgotten in our little bubble.

Toby had fallen asleep in the passenger seat the second I cocooned him in the blanket. His onesie had joined the blanket on the pavement. I was resting my head on the steering wheel while Riana read a picture book. Someone knocked on my window and I was so emotionally drained, it didn’t even startle me.

I looked at the round-faced woman with the ponytail as I rolled the window down. She was in a brown polyester suit the same color as her hair and looked nothing like a cop or paramedic.

She leaned down, resting on the window ledge, and gave me an apologetic smile. “Hi, I’m from Child Protective Servi—”

“You’re not taking him.” I couldn’t believe how vehement my voice was but I wasn’t about to let Marcus lose him again.

“Actually it’s within our right to take him based on his condition, but no, he needs medical care and we’ll be investigating the situation while he’s treated. Right now, all I need are a few pictures.”

“All right. Try not to wake him.” I gestured to the passenger door while I unlocked it.

She took her pictures, shaking her head the whole time.

“It’s a good thing Mr. O’Keefe beat us to him or he would have ended up in our custody and it would have been a lot harder to get him back. Is that Staph?” She took an exam glove from her pocket and put it on, then leaned down and picked at one of the lesions. The scruff flaked off and underneath the skin was inflamed. She shook her head. “It looks like bedsores. It’s not staph, but might be a fungal infection, so be sure you all shower when you get home.”

“We will. Thank you.” Relieved, I glanced in my rearview at Chey drooling in her sleep.

A hand clamped around my shoulder through my window. And this time I did startle with a loud squeal that sounded more pig than Chey ever did.

“Sorry.” Taylor raised her shoulders and grimaced apologetically. “They’re bringing Marcus out in a minute. He’s going to be okay but he needs to be checked out and stitched up, so they’re taking him to the hospital down the hill. South something.”

“South Hill Medical. What about Toby?” I knew the hospital and it was only a few miles away.

“An EMT should have come and collected him already. I’ll check, be right back.” She went over to one of the paramedics stowing gear back in his rig. He

pulled out a red box he had just put away and followed her over. They were waylaid by an officer. Bureaucratic bullshit I was sure.

“Mr. Tucco, I’m done for now. Here’s my card, please call me when you have a few minutes. I’d like to get a statement from you for his record.” The CPS officer held out a card and I took it, nodding. She closed the passenger door and I locked the door again.

A bang and rattle brought my eyes around and I jumped out of the car as they wheeled Marcus out on a stretcher. My hand clamped over my mouth when I saw the large red circle on his shirt. I glanced at Riana and she appeared to be immersed in the book but I knew her. I knew she would spot him in the next minute or two.

“Riana, get out of the car and come take my hand.”

She glanced up, but thankfully there were too many people between us and the ambulance to see her dad clearly now. She did as I asked and I locked the car. I made a stop on our way.

“Watch the car, please. There are two very precious babies in there.” I handed Taylor the keys and she nodded.

“We’re going to get Toby ready for transport, just so you know.” She patted my shoulder as I turned to where they were about to load Marcus.

“Come on, honey.” I reached down to pick up Riana and she put her arms up without question.

We made our way over and when she saw him she whimpered. “Daddy?” She buried her head in my neck and started to cry.

I rubbed her back. “He’s going to be okay. It’s just a cut. He’ll be back with us very soon.” She nodded at my explanation but continued to cry softly. Marcus’s kids were so strong, just like their father. I would have been wailing. I actually wanted to.

“Wait. We need to see him, please,” I called out to the paramedics about to lift the gurney. Marcus looked at us and his hand fell over his eyes. As we drew closer I saw his lips trembling.

“Hey.” I reached down and touched his cheek and had my hand captured as he pressed into it. He held it against his cheek for several moments before letting me go and reaching to rub Riana’s leg.

“Hey, quit crying.”

Riana looked down at him, nodded and sobbed.

“I’m okay. It’s just a scratch but they have to give me some stitches and a big Band-Aid. I’ll be good as new by dinner. I think I need ice cream though. Will you help me eat some ice cream?”

She sniffed and nodded. “You’re really okay?”

Marcus managed a smile for her and nodded then looked at me and his face crumbled.

“Toby’s going to be fine. He has a little bit of a road ahead of him, but he’s a strong, resilient boy.” I set Riana down, pointing her to the other side of the gurney and her dad’s hand. She walked over and clasped his hand with both of hers.

“Thank God.” Marcus looked at me with that soft intensity of his. “Come here.”

I gestured to his side instead. “Does it hurt?” I had always wondered why people asked that when it was obvious. Now I knew. *Because you don’t know what else to say.*

“Only when I breathe.” His eyes narrowed. “So, no rough stuff for a while. Now come here so I can talk to you.”

I searched his face and he was giving me that fierce look of his that usually meant I was in trouble but not necessarily in a bad way. I leaned down and he grabbed my neck tightly and pulled me next to his head.

“How could you think I was going to leave you? Don’t deny it, I can still see it in your face,” he whispered against my ear causing me to duck my head. I didn’t know if I did it out of shame or fear. “Honey, Daddy needs his hand.” His other hand landed roughly against the back of my head. “That hurt. It hurt so much, that you would think that. I love you, dammit, and I thought you

knew that.” He kissed my ear then my neck as his hands gripped me, holding me in place.

“I did, I do. I—I should have trusted you.” I clasped his forearms as the emotion rolled over me. Toby was safe, Marcus was okay, and he still loved me, *he still loved me*. “I’m sorry...” I said in a voice barely there. I shook as I realized I had been a fool to even think he would leave me. He wasn’t Todd, or Eric, or even Scott who had taken my virginity then ignored me at school. Marcus had only ever loved me for who I was, not what I wasn’t.

I turned my head into his neck. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see.”

“Can you now?” he asked hesitantly. I nodded and breathed him in. He smelled like desire, and life, and...

He smelled like home.

He guided my head over and kissed me hard, his fingers digging into my head and neck. I could feel it all the way to my toes. So many emotions at once. All I could do was hold on for the ride.

He pulled away and stared at me. His eyes damp and his face flushed. He was so beautiful.

“Tell me, I need to hear you say it.” His hands relaxed their hold, then stroked my neck and cheek.

I gave him what I hoped was a sexy smile. “I love you, Marcus.”

His eyes drifted closed for a moment. When they opened again they were soft and incredibly warm.

“I love you too, Angel—and don’t ever forget it.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stupid things. Why did everything pretty have to be such a pain in the butt to grow? I picked the dead Rhododendron pods off my gloves, only to have them stick obstinately to the fingers in a large rust colored clump.

The tap of a car horn had me glancing over my shoulder. I smiled as the black Accord rolled around the corner. What was Marcus doing home so early? I tore my gardening gloves off and tossed them in the bucket with the dead blooms. I hadn't been a fan of them anyway. They had been the only ones in stock at the hardware store that fit me. Teal and bright pink. You can't get much gayer than that.

I walked over as Marcus pulled in next to my grey Volvo. He climbed from the car and leaned on the roof, a smile as big as the sun on his face.

"I thought we were meeting at the hospital at six?"

He nodded. "We were. I received a call though." He paused and the smile lit his face again. "They're releasing Toby. We can pick him up first thing in the morning. So, I decided to take the rest of the day off and already went to see him. I can't believe how normal he looks now."

"He's a different little boy now isn't he?"

He nodded and watched me come around the car. As I grew closer, his expression changed.

*Oh. Oh, God, yes.* I wasn't about to get overly excited about the heated look on his face though. The girls were home, and it was still forever before they went to bed. He turned towards me as I rounded the bumper, and it was clearly evident he was excited, and obviously not wearing his tight briefs. *Drooling*—I wiped my chin and swallowed.

"I can't believe he's coming home already." I stopped in front of him and shook my head in disbelief. That boy had been a miracle to say the least. When he had been admitted, the doctor had told us to expect two weeks in intensive care, but they moved him to pediatrics in less than a week. He'd been



improving so rapidly we never knew what we were going to find when we visited him. Last night he had pulled himself up and cuddled against Marcus's chest making his father quietly cry.

Marcus nodded and swallowed then cleared his throat. I had learned over the past eighteen days that, although Marcus did cry, he preferred not to and would swallow his emotions whenever he could. It didn't make him cold as one would assume, but quite the opposite. If one knew where to look, they would see he was a very passionate man, and I knew right where to look.

I laid my hand on his chest and was immediately engulfed. He buried his face in my neck and held me tight. I cradled him in my arms, rubbing his back, as he muttered over and over against my skin. "He's coming home."

A hand squeezed one of mine and I lifted myself onto my toes to see who it was.

"He likes you to think he's all tough, but inside he's always been a big softy." Kim rubbed her brother's arm.

I glanced to the curb and was surprised I hadn't heard her puke-green Prius pull up. It was a quiet car but not *that* quiet. Marcus quit his little mantra and threw an arm around his sister's neck, giving her a quick hug.

"You're early," he said.

"Early for what?" I asked.

She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows at Marcus. "Girls in the house?" She gestured at the front door.

Marcus looked to me. "I assume so."

I nodded dumbly. "Early for what?" I asked again.

She patted my cheek before heading into the house. I blinked at her back, then at Marcus unlocking his trunk, knowing I was missing something.

"Help me put this stuff in the garage." He lifted a box from the trunk and passed it to me.

“You’re not going to tell me what you’re up too are you?” I juggled the box against my chest.

“Nope.” He grabbed his keys and hit the garage door opener.

I followed him into the garage and set the box down with the others from his apartment. I gazed over the ever growing pile and had no idea where we were going to put everything.

“You’re worrying again.” He pulled me back against his chest. “If you’re having second thoughts we could move back to the apartment for a while.”

I shook my head and leaned against him. “I’d be too lonely, and if Riana wasn’t here who would Chey scream at?” Three days after Toby’s rescue, Marcus and Riana had spent two nights at their apartment cleaning and catching up on paperwork Marcus had been neglecting. It had been awful without them. Even Chey had seemed out of sorts with them gone. I called him that second night and asked them to move in. Marcus almost broke down and brought over the first load before breakfast.

Regardless of how chaotic things became, or where we ended up down the road, I’d never regret that decision.

He kissed my temple. “That’s good because I cancelled the lease today. If you kick us out, we’d be homeless.” He let me go and headed back to his Accord. “Last two boxes.”

“Really?” I followed him, enjoying the view. Marcus in slacks was a handsome devil, but Marcus in jeans and a tight T-shirt was downright sinful. I could see every muscle bunch and coil along his shoulders as he moved, and his thighs, *mmm*, I knew every brawny inch of them.

The baby monitor crackled and Chey’s wails reached me from inside the house. I turned and trotted towards the front door.

“I’m sure she’s fine. She’s probably figured out Kim’s taking her,” Marcus called.

“Taking her where?” I hesitated at the front step just as the door opened and Chey’s outrage reached an all-new volume. I reached for her and Kim batted my hands away, losing the diaper bag in the process.

“She’s fine. She always calms down once I start driving.” She hoisted her onto a hip as Riana heaved the bag up and handed it to her aunt.

I stepped in front of them and placed my hands on my hips. “All right, what’s going on?”

Kim glanced at Marcus who was setting the box he had been carrying on the hood of his car. “I think you might need to tell him.”

“Mm, maybe.” Brother and sister shared a look.

Chey leaned towards me almost toppling out of Kim’s arms. “Da—DA!” Her face was already red from screaming but now the lip came out and the tears spilled over.

I reached to grab her and Kim hugged her to her chest, ducking off just as Marcus seized my waist and swung me away from them.

I huffed at him, yet he held on to me as Kim hustled to the car. I could hear her laughing over Chey’s undignified screaming.

“I’m not going to chase after her, so you can let me go.” I had already figured out Marcus was up to something, I just wasn’t sure what.

He let me go only long enough to spin me around. It would have been a graceful move if my feet hadn’t gotten in the way. Marcus caught me and hauled me against him. When I looked up at him he was chewing on his lip and looking anywhere but at me. His fingers dug into the backside of my jeans as he released his lip then he blew out a breath before letting me go and striding back towards his car.

“Marcus, how long are the girls staying with Kim?” I asked curiously, turning around and heading over to grab the last box.

He glanced at me, scooping the box off the hood, then just as he turned away I saw the smirk. Girls gone, an empty house and Marcus acting weird, *breathe Tucco*.

“Until I call her.”

“And when are you planning on doing that?” I wrestled the box out of the trunk and closed it.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged but the smirk was morphing into a rather sexy grin making it hard to breathe again. “Probably after we bring Toby home.” He took the box from me and set it with the rest then turned and picked part of a Rhodie flower from my hair. I seemed to have lost the ability to move and felt like I was about to melt into a puddle at his feet. “Is that okay?” He tried to frown, yet his lips didn’t seem to be cooperating. *Mmm*, love those lips.

“Yunnmm,” was all that I managed before he bent down and kissed me oh so sweetly.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Alone.* For the first time in over two weeks, we were alone! I grabbed his shirt in one hand, and his hair in the other, tugging hard on both as I pressed my lips firmly against his. He responded immediately and the second my mouth parted, his tongue shot in and aggressively began exploring. God, he was a good kisser and, oh, I wanted, definitely wanted...

He grabbed hold of the back of my jeans pulling them tight as I tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, unable to find my way beneath it.

I pulled away and managed to jerk his shirt up. "Has to go," I said, fighting to get it over his head. He reached up and ripped it off then wrestled mine off. I ran my hands up his ribs, over his pecs and down his stomach. So beautiful. I buried my face in his chest hair and breathed in his musky scent.

I felt Marcus yank the buttons free on my jeans then his hands slid under the waistband and he groaned as he cupped my ass. Hands, warm, strong, *mmm*. I laved my tongue through his chest hair relishing the salty taste of his golden skin. My tongue skittered over his nipple and he levered me against his thigh, throwing his head back and letting out a hiss. My cock twitched over the erotic sound and I rubbed against his thigh, latching my lips over his nipple.

"Ahh, yesss." Marcus dug his fingers in and hoisted me up as he shoved me back. We hit something unforgiving and I realized he had me wedged against the metal rack that held cans of paint and my gardening supplies. A shelf dug into my back but the second Marcus's mouth crashed down on mine I forgot about everything except the feel of him pressed against me.

My hands roamed every inch of his back, savoring the hard curves and shallow valleys. Fingers pressed between my cheeks and caressed, making me whimper, making me want, and I tore my mouth free.

"Lube, lube, we need lube," I said, surprised to hear the gruffness in my voice.

Marcus blinked at me, his face flushed and eyes blazing. “Um,” His eyes wandered to his boxes and he dropped me onto my feet. I was amazed my legs weren’t shaking more than they were. Even so, I had to grip the rack to keep myself from slipping to the floor.

I watched him shove a few boxes out of the way then punch through the top of one and rip it open. I licked my lips staring at the play of muscle and the sweat beginning to glisten on his skin, highlighting his natural golden tone. I’d seen him naked more than once but this was different somehow. I couldn’t put my finger on it, more erotic maybe, or sensual. I didn’t know, but I did know I wanted him desperately, and not just to make him happy, but to make me happy.

I leaned my head back against one of the supports, and as I looked out into the neighborhood, I laughed. Marcus stood up and looked at me.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Do you have your keys?” I pointed to the open garage door.

He gave me a sexy smirk. “You don’t want to educate the neighbors?” Even as he said it, he fished out his keys, and hit the button.

I shook my head. “Maybe another time. Did you find lube?”

He held a silver tube up, along with a condom and walked back over, kicking his shoes off as he came. He set the condom on the shelf behind me, dropped the lube at our feet, then bent down and ran his lips and tongue over the front of my body while his hands caressed my back. *Numnumnum*. By the time he reached my belly button my fingers were latched in his hair and I was breathing hard.

He pushed his face into my crotch and I ground against him, feeling pre-come ooze from my cockhead. I marveled at my own boldness, and was in awe of the man who had found a part of me I never knew existed. His hands flattened on the small of my back as he latched his lips over the wet spot on my boxer briefs and sucked on the fabric.

“Oh, God, do you know how hot that is?” I gripped his hair and rocked against his lips.

His hand came around and tugged my waistband down just enough to free my tip. I watched his head nuzzle in closer, then his tongue swathed across my tip and my hips jerked.

“Anh-ahh.” My head lolled back and my lungs quit working for a second. My dick drooled in appreciation and Marcus sucked off the dribble as his hands took hold of my waistband and yanked my jeans and underwear down on one swift move. I should have felt exposed, normally I would have, but I didn’t. I just wanted to feel Marcus’s hands, his mouth, on every inch of me. One hand palmed my ass while the other wrapped around my cock and my hips went to thrusting. Too much touching. *Shit.*

“Oh, God, Marcus, you’re going to make me come.” I pulled on his hair.

He let go of my dick and kissed my hip. “Lift your foot.”

I did and he slid my jeans over one foot then the other, and tossed my pants aside.

“Turn around,” he breathed.

I turned to face the shelves and grasped a support above my head as he pushed my feet apart with his knees. I was breathing hard but I wasn’t sure if I was nervous or excited. Maybe a little bit of both. His hands ran over my hips, my thighs, and my lower back as he laid kisses all over my buttocks. His hands disappeared and I took a deep steadying breath. His tongue laved up my crack and I yipped then shuddered over the odd sensation. That was a first and I think I liked it. He ran his tongue up again, finishing with a small suck at the top. I moaned, pushing back against his mouth. *I definitely liked that.*

He caressed my hole with the pad of his lubed thumb, and it was warm and I think—yeah, nice. His hand massaged my thigh as he pushed his thumb in. I tensed even though I tried not to. I felt his hair tickle.

“Relax, Angel.” His warm breath touched my skin. He continued to massage my thigh as his thumb lubed me up, and I felt myself relaxing into his gentle ministrations. When he removed his thumb, I found myself slumped against the rack, my breath stirring up tiny clouds of dust.

“God, you are so damn sexy.” He stood and leaned against me, running his hands over my chest as he rubbed his hard-on slowly against my ass. I pushed back and sighed as my grip tightened on the shelf.

“You think I’m sexy?” The words came out in short puffs. I leaned my head back as Marcus’s hand ran up my throat.

“So, fucking sexy.” He thrust his hips and his chest vibrated against my back. My ass clenched hard and I felt a little flutter of sensation travel through my groin. He wasn’t even inside me and I was already falling apart.

“*More,*” I pleaded.

“Tell me what you want, Angel? I want to hear you say it.” He rocked against me, his cock sliding up my crack, leaving a warm slick trail.

My dick leapt so hard it slapped my belly. I just about lost my grip on the shelf, my stomach tensing as I ground my ass against Marcus. He swore and began to shake as his hands seized my hips. He moved away, keeping me firmly pressed against the rack.

“I need a minute. Don’t move. Stay right where you are.” He took his hands off my hips, and I glanced back as he walked away with his hands running through his hair.

He was sweating, panting, and marred by smears of dirt from the shelving unit. He was glorious, strutting along, trying to pull himself together, his dick so hard it barely moved as he wandered around the garage. My mouth watered as I stared at the dark veins standing out. God, he was downright erotic. He had the type of cock you begged to see in pornos, yet never did. There wasn’t anything pretty about it, but it was magnificent in that rough-boy sort of way. Thick, and ugly, and meant to be used—hard.

My ass clenched apprehensively even as I trembled in anticipation. He glanced at me and gave me a lopsided smile.

“I, ah, yeah.” He clasped the back of his neck, shook his head and looked at the floor.



I couldn't help grinning. "Marcus, first times are flurried things full of lust and overactive hormones. We have all night to play and find each other." The fact he could barely contain himself with me made me lightheaded. I'd never had that kind of power over anyone.

He turned his head towards me, a smirk on his face. "That was not the right thing to say to me." He took a deep breath, came back over and pulled me against him. "I'll be lucky if I last two minutes." He kissed me, a rough, deep, mind-spinning event. His finger worked its way inside me at some point but I hardly felt it until...

"AHHH." I practically climbed up his body as the charge fired through, tightening every muscle.

"Oh, Angel, you're like a virgin without all the nervous bullshit," Marcus breathed into my ear. I think I answered with one of Chey's favorite noises—*numnumnum*.

He held me tight and continued to torture me. And it was torture; wonderful, brain twisting, body wracking torture. I'm not sure how many times I swore, or leapt into his arms, or almost puddled on the floor, and through it all he held me tight, kissing my neck, my face, my lips.

The whole episode probably only lasted a minute or two, but it felt like an eternity, and when he removed his evil fingers, my legs were around his waist and I couldn't remember how I had ended up there.

I doubted I would have even noticed the garage door open at this point or even the whole neighborhood watching if it was. I was flying and I wanted more, regardless of whether my trembling body could handle it or not. He had called me a virgin and although that was fairly apropos, I didn't feel like a virgin, more like awakened.

"I so want to fuck you like this but, baby, my legs are beginning to shake," Marcus said.

I kissed him and dropped my legs to the concrete floor, surprised at how solid they were. I let his lips go, traced my hand across his chest, and turned my ass to him, hoping I was wiggling it enticingly.

He swallowed noisily and snatched up the condom. I felt a little slutty, and a lot naughty, as I grasped the support and extended my derriere behind me. I wanted to know what Marcus would feel like inside me, and whether his cock could finish what his fingers had started.

He settled between my cheeks and leaned over. “You tell me if anything’s uncomfortable. You hear me, Angel?”

I nodded and pushed back, forcing his head in.

“Jesus.” Marcus’s hips jerked and I felt his fist butt up against my ass.

I was about to tell him to go all the way when his hands came up, linking with mine, and he slid steadily in. His fingers were squeezing mine hard, and I could hear his labored breathing as he tried to control himself. I didn’t want him to hurt me but I didn’t want him to control himself either.

“I’m not a virgin. You don’t have to be so careful; my ass has seen a lot of play.”

“I didn’t need to hear that...” He drove the rest of the way in with a hard flick of his hips. “*Oh, fuck.* I didn’t mean to do that.”

I chuckled both at his apology, and over the fact that I didn’t feel a damn bit of discomfort. As a matter of fact, I *really* wanted him to move.

“Quit laughing, dammit.” He let out a breathy snicker even though his hips were keeling in short bursts, wanting to move too. I rocked my pelvis forward, then back, and Marcus finally gave up his attempt at control and started to move in long thrusts.

There wasn’t any pain, or that God awful uncomfortable tightness, but it wasn’t as pleasurable as I had hoped it would be. I concentrated on Marcus moving inside me and the sexy little sounds he was making in his throat.

He pushed all the way in and stopped. “Lift your leg onto the first shelf.”

“What?”

“Angel, I know you’re not feeling what you should be. Lift your goddamn leg.”

“I’m okay. It’s not uncomfortable like it used to be—I’m even still hard.” As I argued, however, I set my foot on the shelf and Marcus slid his leg under mine, raising it onto his thigh.

He didn’t give me any warning. He twisted his body and rammed into me. I saw stars, or at least oddly shaped spots of light that looked like stars as they danced across my vision. I think I even yelled, not a word just a loud expression of surprise as the current zipped up my spine.

“Oh, fuck yeah.” Marcus groaned and thrust hard, over and over until my whole body was so tight I thought it was going to break.

I didn’t even have time to recover from one electric shock before another ripped through me. I wasn’t sure if I was crying out or whimpering wantonly. And just when I thought I couldn’t handle anymore, just when I was sure I was about to collapse, sweat broke across my body and that harsh pleasant tickle licked my balls.

“Oh, fuck, coming, coming...” I tried to get a hand free, I wanted to hold my cock but Marcus reached it first and pumped me. My hips thrust into Marcus’s hand and I groaned as I came.

“Fuck, so fucking hot.” Marcus drove into me as his hand slid over my now slimy cock.

His thumb caressed my slit and my back inverted as a last blast of heat shot forth before my body gave out. I gripped the shelf to keep from collapsing and felt a flash of pain across my thumb before my mind blanked.

A few seconds, or maybe minutes later, I couldn’t be sure since time seemed to have stopped, Marcus let out a long groan as he wrapped around me, his whole body shivering violently.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Marcus held me and I leaned against him, hugging his strong arms, while we both came down from the euphoria. As his breathing regulated, he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You. Hold on...” He let go of me for a second and pulled out, tossing the condom in the garbage near the workbench. He turned me around to face him, his expression soft and his eyes burning. He shook his head slowly, amusement still playing with his lush kiss-swollen lips. “I can’t believe how *energetic* you become when you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Do I?” I really couldn’t remember much past the incredible orgasm.

“Yeah, you do, and it’s a major turn on, but if you ever become passive like that again I’m going to beat you senseless.” He tried to be serious, yet he couldn’t straighten his face and his threat lost any edge he might have intended.

His stomach *rowled* loudly and he rubbed it. “All right, I didn’t eat lunch and I’m starving.” He grazed over my body. “Then maybe a shower—” he sniffed along my shoulder—“mmm, or maybe not. God, you smell good. Sex and sweat, and that soft sweet smell that’s so damn enticing.”

“What do I smell like?” I asked, rolling my head to the side when he nudged. He buried his face against my skin.

“I can’t explain it. You smell clean and pure and good—and right now a little sinful.” He chuckled and I laughed. “I corrupted the Angel.” He leaned back and gazed at me, his eyes glittering as he bit the side of his lip.

I shook my head still laughing. “I was already corrupted. You awakened me—with a little help from Dr. Peters.”

“I think I owe that man a debt of gratitude. Maybe flowers or a card or a side of beef—I’ll think of something.” Marcus took my hand and tugged me into the house. He lifted my hand as we entered the kitchen and glanced at the

damp spot on my thumb. “Eww, blood.” He dropped my hand and looked away, clearing his throat. “Go put a Band-Aid on please.”

I laughed. “How in the world do you clean Riana’s cuts?”

He made a face. “Quickly. Thankfully she’s a hardy kid or she probably would have died of an infection a long time ago.” He opened the fridge and pulled out the leftover garlic shrimp and fruit salad. Then without looking at me, he ushered me out with a few flicks of his hand and a grimace on his face.

I chuckled all the way to the bathroom. I couldn’t believe blood made my big, masculine man queasy. I looked at the smear of red down my thumb. It was just a shallow slice, similar to a bad paper cut. I peed and washed the grime off my hands then covered the cut with antibiotic ointment and a Band-Aid.

I glanced in the mirror and smiled. There were a few swaths of dirt across my cheeks and one up my neck. My face and narrow shoulders were still pink, and with my fair skin the flush would probably stick around for a while longer. My thin lips were plumper than I had ever seen them and red from Marcus ravaging them. I touched them and grinned feeling giddy then silly for feeling that way.

I headed back to the kitchen. It was only once, yet I felt my life had shifted and Marcus was in my house, our house, living with me, sharing a life, and the way he looked at me—like he could have me for breakfast, lunch and dinner and still want more, made my heart race, and my skin tingle, and yeah...

As I entered the kitchen, Marcus turned and shoved a chunk of cantaloupe at me. I opened my mouth and let him feed it to me. He glanced down at my woody and the corner of his mouth rose in query.

“I thought you just went to get a Band-Aid? What were you up too?”

I felt the blush burn across my chest and cheekbones. “I was just thinking...” I picked a strawberry out of the bowl and popped it in my mouth.

His eyebrow lifted. “About?” He speared a shrimp.

I gave him a thoughtful look. “My first boyfriend actually.”

He quit chewing for a second then continued slowly before swallowing. “Are you trying to piss me off? I’m not normally a jealous person but your ex’s seem to bring out the worst in me.”

I swiped my thumb across his lower lip, catching the butter about to drip down his chin and sucked my thumb. “You’re too damn sexy for your own good when you’re pissed off.”

He chuckled and continued feeding us both. I nipped his fingers a few times and his cock jumped to attention. As he pushed the last grape into my mouth, I bit down and watched his eyes close rapturously. When I sucked, he hissed and his hand found my ass and kneaded it roughly.

He bent his head down, stopping half an inch from my lips. “Are you sore?”

“No.” I bit his lip and gripped his ass hard.

He didn’t say another word as he literally dragged me to the bedroom. I had to jog to keep up with his long stride. He pushed me down on the bed, donned a condom from the nightstand, and lubed his cock up in a minute, maybe less. I squeaked like a mouse as he dropped on top of me. He pulled one knee up and I drew up the other. He kissed me and it was a raunchy, needful, sloppy, and erotic kiss. Tongues fought, teeth clashed, lips bruised and in the middle of it he pushed into me and immediately started to move... fast. He was grunting in seconds and my dick was tapping my belly, drooling uncontrollably.

The sensation he elicited from me ricocheted through my groin like an anomic Ping-Pong ball, driving me crazy. I was panting into his mouth, and his body, slicked with sweat, slid seductively against mine. It was a salacious, greedy, dirty fuck and I was so damn turned on my orgasm was already spiraling up and would soon be out of control.

His arms wrenched my legs higher as he grasped the headboard, leveraging against it and increasing the power of his thrusts. My back arched, my legs pushed against his biceps as I clasped his forearms, meeting every thrust. He drove his tongue in and out of my mouth as if he was fucking me with it. *Oh,*

*God, so good, sooo good.* I sucked on it and his whole body hitched for a second then he groaned so hard his body vibrated. He buried himself inside me in one forceful thrust as his arms shook then caved, and he crumpled on top of me.

I untangled my legs and wrapped them around his waist as I kissed his temple, cheek and neck while my fingers caressed his damp hair. I held him until his body relaxed. It was okay that I didn't come. Even though my cock throbbed, I felt more liberated than I ever had. Free to want, to need, and to instigate for the first time in my life.

Marcus stirred and pulled out, moaning as he did so. He discarded the condom then settled between my legs and began kissing down my chest. I stroked his hair and watched him.

“So, sexy...” Kiss.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Lick.

“I'm so lucky...” Suck.

“To have you...” His tongue laved across my cockhead and I moaned as my eyes fluttered.

“I love you, Angel.”

I tried to respond but his mouth closed over my dick and my ability to speak fled. He slid one of my feet up then pushed a finger in and immediately found my spot. He stroked, I thrust, his tongue teased and my fingers grappled with his hair. I felt my balls tense, and my hips began pumping erratically as my body wound tight.

“Oh, God. Oh, God, ahhh fuck, *Marcus*, ah, yeessss.” My head snapped back as he sucked me, and I came on a bone-rattling shudder. He kept teasing my cock, and stroking inside me, and I swear I kept coming in short harsh spurts. It finally became too much and I whimpered like the whapped boy I was. My body trembled and I could feel the haziness trying to take me down.

Marcus kissed me lazily as his hands caressed me until my body calmed. He curled up next to me and cradled me in his arms. I immediately began to doze, fighting to keep my eyes open, but I was losing.

“My amazing Angel,” Marcus whispered, and I clung to his arms as I lost the battle and sleep overtook me.

The dusty pink of dawn woke me and I wondered if the smile stretched across my face had been there all night. Marcus was cozied up to my back, snoring softly, his palm flat on my chest as if I might try to get away. I wasn’t going anywhere though. Except to the bathroom but that could wait a minute or two—maybe—or maybe not.

I went to slide out from under Marcus’s arm and his fingers clutched at my chest. Eek, was I glad I didn’t have more than five chest hairs. I managed to wiggle out from under his hand and was headed towards the bathroom when he stirred.

“Where are you going?” he mumbled through a yawn.

“Bathroom.” I pointed to the wood door. “Go back to sleep, I think it’s still early.”

After I peed, I washed my face and wiped the smudges from my neck and arms before heading back out to cuddle. I knew I wouldn’t fall back to sleep but that didn’t stop me from wanting to go back to the warm body waiting for me. Only he wasn’t waiting for me. The bed was empty.

We only had one bathroom in the house and I had a sinking feeling he had gone outside to pee. Marcus didn’t have any problem with PDAs, or educating the neighbors, or even strangers for that matter. I, on the other hand, was a bit more reserved about that sort of thing. Not that my unease ever stopped Marcus from ravaging me in public.

I was about to go find him when I heard him coming down the hall. I never realized he walked so heavily, but then the house *was* dead quiet right now. Well, except for the creaking of the floor beneath Marcus’s heavy feet. I crawled back in bed and snuggled under the comforter.



He was guzzling a bottle of water and scratching his back when he re-entered. His hair was trashed and his morning woody, that had been poking me minutes earlier, hung limp.

I gave him a questing look. “Did you pee outside?”

He nodded and I rolled my eyes. “What? I’m a Montana boy, we pee anywhere. Besides, there’s a six foot privacy fence, and if a neighbor is peeking over it at seven a.m. on a Saturday they deserve what they get.” He handed the last of the water to me and climbed back in bed.

“You told me you grew up smack dab in the middle of Missoula and didn’t have a single friend who owned a cow or a horse. I don’t think you qualify as a rough and tumble Montanan.” I gave him a wry look.

He shrugged. “Probably not.” His fingers gently ran down my arm. “Are you sore?”

I narrowed my eyes at him and lowered the bottle from my mouth. “Why do you keep asking me that? And no I’m not, but I won’t get into why since it would probably raise your hackles.” I took a drink and set the bottle on the nightstand. He didn’t need to know Eric, my first real boyfriend, had handled me none to gently, and any soreness I might experience now couldn’t come close to comparing with what I felt after he used me.

Marcus looked at his hands then raised his head and rested his lips on my shoulder, peeking at me from under his auburn lashes. “I just—I was worried I had gone too far last night. I told you I was an affectionate person but I, um, have never...” He dropped his forehead onto my shoulder and took a deep breath.

I knew he wasn’t a virgin. He had admitted that he had only had sex with his wife a handful of times, but I was under the impression he had done a lot of experimenting prior to marrying her. So if this sexy, assured man was about to tell me he had never been with a guy, I knew I would faint straight away.

“Just tell me what you’re trying to say.”

He looked up at me, and his eyes were the brightest green, and a myriad of emotions were swirling, unsure in their depths.

He shook his head slightly. “I’ve never loved anyone, and the first time I said it to you I wasn’t sure it was true since I didn’t know what love felt like. I mean, I love Riana and if anything ever happened to her I’d end up in a ball somewhere for days, but...” He stopped and his face screwed up as if he was in physical pain.

He was babbling and I’d never seen him like this. Obviously, something was upsetting him and he was having a hard time telling me what it was.

I reached over and moved the curl of hair out of his eye. “What is it, Marcus.”

He stopped fidgeting and looked right at me. “If anything ever happened to you I wouldn’t be able to go on. If I ever hurt you—I don’t know what came over me last night, you do that to me, and I was rough and I’m not exactly small but you are—well, you’re so tight and the surgery and...”

I started laughing and he looked at me incredulously. God, he was adorable with his eyes wide and his mouth open.

“Honey, you can do that to me anytime. I was so turned on that you wanted me so desperately. No one has ever wanted me so much, and you’re not going to break me so easily.” I scootched down and laid my forehead against his.

His eyes pinched closed. “I was so worried. I lay awake for hours. If I hurt you, if I upset you, if you told me to get out...”

I kissed him to shut him up, and this time he clung to me like I was the one who would leave him at any minute. No one had ever been so concerned over me, or made me feel so cherished, so loved, and I would be a fool to ever let him go.

He pulled away and said. “Don’t freak out, okay?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn’t when he rolled over and leaned off the bed. He turned back to face me and the worried look had returned to his handsome face. He began chewing on his lip as he brought his hand forward

and revealed two black velvet boxes. I stared at them feeling my chin beginning to tremble.

“I’m not asking you to marry me—well, I am, but not this second because I know it’s too soon. Not for me, but for you it probably is, ahm, so, think of these as partnership rings. I just, I don’t know, I’ve known for a long time, since that day we got Toby back, it was what I was trying to say in the park when Taylor called, I knew then I loved you and I wanted to spend my life with you, that is if you want...”

I started crying and he stopped, his teeth grabbing his lower lip. I reached out and pulled it loose.

“Don’t do that, it drives me nuts.” I sniffled and wiped off my eyes. “And yes, I want to spend my life with you too.” I held out my left hand and Marcus swallowed. “I’m not ready to get married tomorrow, but maybe we can be engaged until we are both ready?” I suggested. Waiting was the smart thing to do, and even though I suggested it, I didn’t feel like being smart. My heart was racing, and I knew if he had wanted to get married tomorrow I would have been right by his side doing just that.

Marcus tackled me, and crushed both me and the ring boxes underneath him as he kissed me. I wrapped my legs around him, and felt that little spark of desire that had arrived with Marcus ignite.

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## EPILOGUE

“He was being an asshole and he deserved what he got.”

“Language,” I chastised as I handed Chey a bag of frozen corn. I lifted her chin, surveying the bruising along her eye and cheek. It had been a defensive elbow, not a fist. Even so, the damage had been done. She blinked at me, annoyed.

“And now you’re going to be beautiful for graduation.” I sighed and released her chin.

“She was just defending my honor. You and Dad used to think that was cute.” Toby smirked, raising an eyebrow. He was rocking his chair on its rear wheels and I pointed to the floor. He let go of the grips, dropping the front end with a thud. He drove the thing like an Indy car and I was constantly amazed our floors weren’t more torn up from him ripping his wheelchair through the house.

I pointed at him. “You’re not helping.”

I couldn’t be mad at her though. Jerry *was* an asshole. Ever since Toby came out, very loudly at that, Jerry and his football buddies had been verbally picking on him, and knocking his wheelchair over. They knew Toby, by himself, couldn’t stop them, but they never bothered him when Randy was around. I’d heard Randy had a *talent* for taking care of things in a quiet, firm way that everyone respected. I wasn’t sure what that way was, but I never saw a bruise or any busted knuckles on him, so I assumed it was a verbal lashing rather than physical.

This time Chey had just been in the wrong place at the right time, and finally heard the faggot bashing first hand. She hadn’t taken it well, beating the crap out of Jerry and one of his buddies. Chey was tall and willowy, but ten years of Judo had made her a tough adversary for anyone, and she was a tenacious thing you didn’t want to mess with. It was her never give up attitude that had carried her to district wrestling champion four years in a row.

It wasn't the first time she played vigilante, and it wouldn't be the last. She didn't tolerate bullying of any kind, whether the victim was family or not. Someone picking on Toby had always brought out the badass in her though.

"Graduation is still ten days away. And I seem to recall—" She tapped her lips—"there is something called foundation. I think it's makeup that covers imperfections and comes in several shades and thicknesses." Chey waved the corn at me just like I waved my pen at my class when making a point.

"Smart aleck." I gestured for her to put the bag back where it would do some good. I couldn't remember the last time she had worn anything other than lip balm. I wondered if she even knew how to apply it.

"If you need some, Chey, I think I have your skin tone. I might even have a concealer that would work," Randy offered.

"Of course he does," I muttered under my breath as I glanced at Randy flat out on the couch, his thumbs moving so fast across his phone a mortal man couldn't follow them. They did have a similar skin tone, smooth and fair like mine, and for the first time I realized if Randy had dark brown hair he could almost be my son. I shuddered at the thought, not that he wasn't a good kid, he just had a propensity for smarting off.

"I heard that." He looked up just long enough to stick his tongue out at me.  
*I rest my case.*

I shook my head and waved my hand at him. "You spend all that time making yourself pretty, but no one can see your face through all that hair."

It was true. Randy's black hair engulfed his face making it impossible to see his eyes, or the elaborate make up he wore to accentuate their unusual lavender color. People had been telling him for years he needed to model and he always laughed them off. Then a Christian rock band came up to him on the street, and asked him to be the dark angel on their album cover, and suddenly he began taking all the comments seriously. After the shoot, the makeup became a regular thing. We all teased him for a while, but I had to admit, the way he applied it transformed him from pretty to stunning.

“Toby likes my hair this long. Gives him something to grab,” Randy said seriously without lifting his eyes off his phone.

Toby smacked Randy’s leg hard, while he snorted back a laugh. Chey chortled behind her hand. I rolled my eyes to the heavens, but couldn’t hide my amusement over his brash statement. Ever since *they* turned eighteen, *they* had become completely unabashed and considered themselves adults. Which by law, they were—barely. Marcus and I were still adjusting, and most days had a hard time seeing them that way. To us they were still our kids. But then, they would always be our kids.

I wasn’t sure where the time had gone. I still remembered the first time I held Toby as if it were days ago, instead of years ago. He had been so tiny, and now his shoulders were wider than Marcus’s, and Chey had breasts for God’s sake. I couldn’t even think about Riana clear across the country in New York, trying to find her way in that big city. I missed her so much, we all did.

“Dad, you okay?” Chey asked, staring at me with her expressive hazel eyes. At least her eyes hadn’t changed. Marcus was always saying she looked like a female version of me, but she was so much prettier. She had fuller lips and higher cheekbones and those big round eyes that made everyone swoon.

I looked at Chey and smiled. “Yeah, just reminiscing.”

“Dude, I just cleared 10 million on Flare.” Randy bolted off the couch.

“*No way*. Did you really?”

Randy nodded, wrapping his arms around Toby’s shoulders and shoving his phone in front of him excitedly.

“Oh, shit, you did. We gotta go post this, man.”

Randy moved Toby’s blond hair, geez they *both* needed a haircut, and kissed his cheek. He hooted and started dancing around behind his wheelchair as they headed to Toby’s room. I supposed it was actually their room since Randy had practically lived here for almost a year now.

“Door open,” I called.

“When is Angel going to realize we’re over eighteen?” I heard Randy ask.

“Our house, our rules, Randy.” Not that they actually abided by them, but at least they were still rather covert about the sexual aspect of their relationship. Marcus and I were extremely grateful for that.

He turned around and grinned as he walked backwards. “Yeah, but think about it. We’ve been sharing a bed since we were twelve.”

I glared at him. He liked to make that point as often as possible. I think he did it just to make us squirm. They had been friends since they were eleven, but when Toby came out at fifteen and instantly snagged a boyfriend, the fighting between them began. Then, during a rather heated debate right here in our living room, Randy kissed Toby in front of all of us. It hadn’t been just a peck either.

That was all it took. Randy was out, Toby dumped his boyfriend, and they’ve never looked back. It would be a sweet story if their teenage hormones weren’t always getting in the way.

“I try not to think about it,” I said dryly then added. “You know I can send you home.”

I wouldn’t, but it was usually a good enough threat to bring him back into line. Randy’s parents weren’t as open or welcoming as we were. They had a tendency to treat Toby with unintentional disdain whenever he was over there, making everyone uncomfortable. Unfortunately, by doing so, they were pushing their son away, and he now spent ninety percent of his time here. I doubted he even had any clothes left at home.

“Sorry, Mr. O. Open it is.” Randy turned back around and muttered something to Toby, making him chuckle.

“You know, he might be a jerk at times, but he loves you guys more than his own parents.”

I turned to Chey who was prodding at her bruises with her fingertips. “I know he does. I just like to assert my authority now and then, lest he forget who owns this house.” I leaned against the wall and rubbed my tired eyes.

I should have taken a nap. I was going to fall asleep on Marcus tonight and that wouldn’t be a good thing. Of course, he was the one who wanted a quickie

in the shower this morning. Not that I was complaining, but he had gotten me up an hour early just to sate his urges and now I was dragging.

“Lest? Your smarts are showing.” She stood up and slid her chair in. “Are you two going out tonight?”

I shook my head. “I want to cook.”

She stopped in front of me and smirked. “Let me guess. New recipe. Something exotic, or—maybe erotic? Dessert with whip cream, or maybe honey. Oh! I know. Melted chocolate, strawberries and champagne?”

“Gad, you’re as bad as the boys. What we decide to do after dinner is none of your business, young lady. But if you must know—I’m making Prosciutto Carbonara and stuffed Portobellos.”

She grinned and tipped her head, and for a second I saw the little girl she used to be.

“When did you get so big?” I brushed her wavy brunette hair off her shoulder. I couldn’t believe she was almost as tall as me.

“I grew up, and you’re getting all misty. Honestly, you get this way every year. Now give me a kiss before you start blubbing.”

She turned her cheek allowing me to give her a kiss. These moments of affection were getting fewer and fewer, and I never missed a chance when she offered. I kissed her un-bruised cheek and even snagged a quick hug.

“You know that was your first word?” I said.

“I know.” She rolled her eyes, but the smile stayed on her lips. “You’ve told me that like a million times, Dad.”

“That was your third word. Kiss, no, then dad.” I ran my thumb lightly over the bruise on her cheek and shook my head slightly. She’d always been a tough girl, and I wasn’t sure where it had come from. Definitely not me, I was a wuss.

I couldn’t believe my little girl would be gone in a month. She had been snatched up her junior year by the U.S. women’s wrestling coach as a first



pick. We were extremely proud of her, but she was going so far from home, and I couldn't stop missing her even though she hadn't left yet.

"See, I had my priorities straight even then." She plopped the bag of corn in my empty hand.

I looked at it as she patted my cheek and turned to leave. "You know the fridge is only six feet away." I gestured towards the big white rectangle.

"Ten and you're a foot closer," she threw over her shoulder as she headed towards the hall, hips swinging. *That* she did get from me.

I tossed the corn in the freezer and heard Chey yell. "Gross. Close the door if you're gonna do that."

I bonked my head against the enamel and wondered if I even wanted to know how far they had gone before getting caught. I heard some muffled talking and pushed off the fridge to investigate.

"Just kidding, Dad." Chey said, laughing.

I rubbed my face again. I really wanted a nap.

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"Where is everyone?" Marcus called as I heard the front door close.

"Kitchen," I called back.

"Where are the kids?"

I glanced over my shoulder as he set his briefcase near the buffet. "Mm, Chey is probably posting pictures of her newest battle wounds online, and your son and his *fiancé* are more than likely fornicating in their room." I didn't miss the small grimace that past over his face at the word *fiancé*. He still hadn't accepted it even though we had talked the boys into waiting a year.

The fact we had waited a year had helped to sway them, even if we had waited for an entirely different reason. It had been a rough time for us, with Toby going into renal failure and needing dialysis on more than one occasion, not to mention his recurring anemia. A light box lived in our home for months so we could treat his jaundice without running to the hospital every time.

Then, right before the wedding, we found out his joints weren't developing correctly and he would never walk. Against all odds, we made it through though, and came out the other side a stronger couple.

I still remember how cute Chey had been in her pink and white dress, racing up and down the aisle showing everyone the rings tied on her pretty pillow. She ended up with the pillow. Getting it away from her would have resulted in an all-out war, and to my knowledge she still had the thing.

"I thought we were going out?" He huddled against my back and kissed my neck. He lingered, his way of letting me know he was feeling rather amorous. Not that it was hard to get Marcus in the mood, but he became extra affectionate on special occasions. Even the kid's birthdays brought out the emotional side of him.

"I never said that." I stirred in the pesto and lime juice as Marcus ran his hands over my chest. The amorous part of him pressed firmly against my backside.

"All right, I assumed."

"Well, you assumed wrong." I scooped some noodles from the pan. "Taste."

He licked my neck. "Mmm."

I turned around, chuckling. "Not me." I held the fork up and he opened his mouth, wrapping his lips around the noodles. "Well?" I waited.

His tongue ran across his lips then across mine. "Delicious," he murmured against my mouth.

I tasted my lips. Definitely delicious. I let the fork clatter to the counter and let Marcus kiss me thoroughly senseless. Something the man could still do after all our years together. Suddenly he pulled back and frowned.

"Did you say the boys were fornicating in their room?"

"I haven't checked, but probably. They've been awfully quiet." Neither one of us had actually caught them in the act, but we were positive they had lost their virginity about a year ago. One day they were still nervous and

jumpy, the next they couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other and the apprehensiveness had disappeared. I gave the boys props for waiting so long. Both Marcus and I had lost ours when we were fifteen, and not to anyone either of us cared about, or that cared about us.

Marcus's face transformed into an evil smile if ever I'd seen one. "I think we should go check. It's our parental right. You know, fear of God and all that."

I barely clapped the lid on the noodles when Marcus dragged me by my hand out of the kitchen. We snuck down the hall, listening for anything that would give them away, but it was eerily quiet considering there were three teenagers within twenty feet of us.

Marcus peeked around the doorjamb, grinned and pulled out his phone. He tugged me forward and I stepped up as Marcus clicked a few pictures. The boys were curled up asleep, facing each other with their hands clasped between them and heads bowed. Their bodies were almost a perfect heart. They were precious, and the pictures Marcus had just taken would be a welcome addition to our growing embarrassing photos collection we planned to unveil at the reception. That is, if they ended up getting married.

We couldn't deny we were excited about the wedding, but they had a long road ahead with Toby's first year at the university and Randy trying to launch his modeling career. They would be apart more than they were together, and we knew a lot could happen in that time. If they survived the next year, then they should be able to weather anything.

Marcus hugged me against his side and we watched them sleep for several minutes. It was a rare moment of tranquility in an otherwise chaotic household.

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"Oh, God, I'm stuffed. I don't know why you didn't become a chef, Mr. O." Randy leaned back and stretched, having practically licked his plate clean.

"Thank you, but I'm not sure you even tasted it." I chuckled then shook my head. "I like my job. I get to try and mold future generations, fix the little

problems before they become big issues.” I shrugged. “At least that’s what I keep telling myself.”

“He learned how to cook to impress me.” Marcus ran his hand down my spine then settled it on the back of my chair.

“I did not,” I said, incensed. “I already knew how to cook when I met you. My mother taught me some and I learned the rest from the *Food Network*. Besides, I seem to recall I didn’t have to do anything to keep you. You were too stubborn and stupid to leave me.”

Marcus chuckled. “True. But I had to be stubborn to deal with your pigheadedness.”

Toby groaned and flopped back in his wheelchair. “Not again. We’ve heard it all a hundred times.”

Marcus gave him an exasperated look. Toby was right though. They had heard it all *many* times.

“Well, you haven’t heard *everything*,” Marcus said, amused.

Toby held up his hand. “Oh, we’ve heard *everything*. Trust me.” He snickered and glanced at Chey, who was concentrating on her empty plate trying not to laugh, and when his gaze settled on Randy, Randy grinned lecherously.

He laid a hand on his chest and grabbed hold of Toby’s shoulder. “*Ah eff, Angel*,” Randy cried, panting for emphasis. My mouth fell open as Chey broke up and dropped her head on the table. *Well, at least he had given us the PG 13 version.*

“When did you hear that?” Marcus asked, not as appalled as he should have been.

“This morning. You know the tile in the shower magnifies sound.” Randy pointed to Marcus and nodded with a knowing grin on his smart-ass face. “I think the neighbors might have even heard you this time,” he said thoughtfully.

“All right that’s enough, smart aleck.” Marcus bowed his head and shook it. However, I saw the curl of lips he was trying to hide. It was my fault he had been so loud, though I wasn’t about to admit that to the kids. He had been murmuring his appreciation quietly to the wall then I nipped his shoulder hard enough to leave a mark, and it had thrown him violently over the edge. I loved that I could still do that to him, but maybe I needed to keep my biting to the bedroom—at least when the kids were home.

“Okay, It’s getting late and I have wrestling practice at six,” Chey said, sitting up and pulling herself back together. She could turn serious in a second and that had always amazed everyone.

“Yeah, we have to hit the gym before school ourselves,” Toby added then waved his hand at her. “Well, get on with it woman.” He grinned.

I felt Marcus shift, controlling his urge to say something about Randy and Toby’s insane workout schedule. Toby’s knee might be new, but his chances of walking were still slim to none. Even so, Toby held on tenaciously to that slight possibility he might walk with crutches. His other leg would always be useless, yet his very talented surgeon had managed to rebuild his left hip and replace his left knee a year ago, giving him what Marcus and I believed was false hope.

Regardless, he could now leg press a hundred pounds with his left leg, and stand for more than a few seconds, provided he had someone or something to lean on. It was incredible progress from barely being able to lift his feet from the rests on his chair. Still, he was pushing himself way too hard and we worried about him doing more damage than good in the long run.

“Okay, here we go, and I’ll try not to cry...”

“Please don’t. I never know what to do with you when you cry. It’s totally out of character,” Toby said, smiling fondly at his sister.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Quiet you. Okay, so, you know we love you and we couldn’t have asked for better parents—even if it was odd at times.” She smiled at us and I took Marcus’s hand and brought it to my lips

knowing they were up to something. “You’ve always been there to support us in everything, even our bad ideas.”

“Like when I entered that downhill race and ended up at the ER,” Toby broke in. “I couldn’t believe you let me do that.” He shook his head. “And look at the monster you created by letting Chey take Judo instead of ballet, like Angel wanted her to.”

Chey threw a spoon at him, and Randy caught it before it pegged Toby, setting it back on the table.

“That was Marcus, not me.” I laughed and squeezed Marcus’s hand, remembering the gift he had given her on her eighth birthday without even consulting with me first. We had argued over that for days, and I had been so obstinate I even slept on the couch two nights. I wanted her to be a girl, and she wanted to do Judo. Marcus had just given her what she wanted.

“Hello, trying to make a speech here.” Chey leaned onto her elbows and slapped her hands down on the table. “Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted—you both have always been here for us, and you’ve never done anything for yourselves. You’ve never even taken a vacation together. Not one night away. So, we talked and decided it was about time you took a honeymoon.” She caught the envelope Toby slid across the table.

Marcus and I shared a look, and I opened my mouth to object when he leaned over and whispered to me. “Don’t you dare. Look at them. You’ll break their hearts if you refuse their gift.”

He was right on both counts. He knew I was about to object and it would have devastated them. My aversion towards gifts had caused more than a few tears through the years. I took a deep breath and hid behind Marcus’s hand.

“We’re all grown up—” Chey’s voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “This is from all of us.” She handed the envelope to Marcus, knowing from experience not to give it to me. I would just stare at it.

Marcus took his hand back and opened it. He leaned against me so I could see, or maybe he felt I needed the support. He pulled out a card they had made, and I smiled. Our kids knew I did better with gifts they made, and they had

become quite talented at making elaborate cards. This one was a masterpiece I knew they had worked on for a while. A picture of Marcus and me from our family vacation to Long Beach two summers ago was set into an oval cardboard frame. We were on the boardwalk with the kite festival in full swing behind us. Riana had taken the picture and it was one of her favorites.

The card was decorated with tiny satin bows along with blue and green jeweled hearts. It looked more like a Valentine's Day card than an anniversary card. But the kids could be sappy that way. Marcus opened the card and a second envelope fell out. He set it on the table as we read the card.

*To most, the time you have spent raising our family would be considered a feat unto itself and the end of an era. We know better. It was only the beginning...*

*So begins the next adventure...*

*Love always; Riana, Chey, Toby and, yes, even Randy.*

*Oh, by the way, Riana will be coming home for graduation! Yeah!*

Marcus covered his eyes after reading the last line. It had been over a year since we had seen Riana. The fashion designer she had been working for in New York had to let her go right after Thanksgiving. Instead of flying her home, we decided to send her the money we had saved for her ticket so she could pay her rent, and survive safely until she found another job. It had been the first Christmas without her, and we had all taken it hard, but no one more than Marcus. I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him against my shoulder.

She had a better job as a buyer for a large fashion house now, but she had told us she couldn't take the time off. I knew our kids, and was sure that had been a ploy from the beginning. I also knew they understood the turmoil they had just put their father through.

He raised his head. "Is she really coming home?"

They all nodded. "She'll be here in six days and she's bringing someone with her but won't tell us who," Chey said, flipping her hand in exasperation.

“Yeah, she’s still a brat, being all secretive and shit.” Toby grunted.

“Language,” I muttered out of habit.

Marcus picked up the other envelope and held it out to me. “I think you should open this.”

I noticed his hand was trembling and took it from him, opening it. I pulled the thick contents out and stared at the six tickets and green brochure. This was worse than I ever could have imagined. Even so, my insides fluttered excitedly. Two cruises and a two week tour of the interior by train.

“Oh, my God. I can’t—we can’t...” Marcus stuttered.

I turned to him. “Those are my lines,” I said and he shook his head in disbelief at me. “Remember what you said. You’re going to hurt their feelings,” I added softly.

“You will hurt our feelings. Besides, the tickets are non-refundable. We made sure of it. We know you better than you think,” Toby stated.

I set the tickets on the table and ran my fingers over them reverently as I blew out a deep steadying breath. I turned to Marcus and found him watching me carefully, but I could see the excitement building in his eyes too. The kids were all watching pensively and I wasn’t about to ruin this. I leaned forward and whispered into his ear.

“I’ve never been fucked on a boat.”

“Ship,” Marcus corrected. “And I’ve never been fucked on a train,” he whispered directly in my ear, sending a shiver down my back. He knew I only swore when extremely agitated or extremely turned on. It was the latter in this case. A whole month alone with Marcus. He better pack his Viagra, the stubborn S.O.B.

We had been drooling over going for years and I couldn’t believe the kids had given us Alaska. I grinned at them all then kissed my husband, letting the excitement unfold.

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“I can’t believe they did that. How long have they been planning it do you think?” Marcus hadn’t stopped grinning, and the instant the kids had said goodnight he had dragged me to our bedroom. It had been the garage at one time, but when Toby was old enough for his own room, we had remodeled, turning it into our bedroom. We had saved a ton of money by not moving, and the area was practically soundproof except near the door.

I kicked my shoes into the closet. “I have no idea. A long time I bet. It was definitely a surprise.”

He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Married sixteen years and we’re finally getting to go on a honeymoon.” He kissed my neck and I leaned back against his chest, tipping my head to give him better access. “I wish I could have given you a honeymoon back when we were married,” he said, ruefully.

I shook my head slightly and hugged his arms against my chest before letting them go. “I don’t. I’ve never regretted even a minute of our life together.” I turned to face him and began unbuttoning his shirt.

He looked down at me. “Not even the rough spots?”

“Not even the rough spots. They made us stronger, and they made the kids stronger.” I pushed his striped dress shirt over his shoulders and ran my hands across the breadth appreciatively. Marcus was still a sight to behold at forty-two, and I doubted I’d ever get tired of touching him. I pushed my fingers through the graying forest on his chest as I breathed in his musky scent. He always smelled so damn sexy.

His hands slid down and cupped my butt. “Mm, yeah, me neither. I wouldn’t change anything.” He pushed me against him as he nuzzled my neck. “Not one damn thing.”

“Not even your outburst this morning?” I ran my thumbs teasingly over his nipples, knowing he would prefer my mouth there.

“Especially not that. They’re always telling us they’re adults. They can handle it.” His breathing started to increase.

I bent my head and paused over his left pec. His breath caught in anticipation. My tongue flicked across the nub, sending his head back on a small sigh. I tickled with my tongue again, and his fingers flexed into my flesh.

“Knock it off.” Marcus looked at me as his chest rose and fell swiftly.

I cocked my head coyly. “Knock what off?”

“You’re being a tease and I’m about to fuck you against the wall and be done with it.”

I pinched one of his nipples, making him wince slightly. “Now you’re teasing me.” I unzipped his slacks and reached inside to tease him some more.

“Don’t. I’m about to explode as it is. I’ve been fucking aroused since lunch. You’re a Goddamn hussy you know that?” Regardless he pushed against my hand and closed his eyes.

“Pardon? Who called who?” I ran my knuckles down his length, smiling when his hips jerked.

His eyes opened and gave me a monitory look as he removed my hand from his pants. He pulled me roughly against him and kissed me as only Marcus could. I loved him when he was like this, agitated and demanding. It made my toes curl and my insides quiver. He reached down and cupped my butt then hoisted me against his chest. I had to grab his shoulders not to topple backwards.

“Marcus! I’m too heavy. You’re going to hurt yourself.” I wiggled, trying to get him to let me go before he pulled something.

He glared at me. “Don’t tell me what I can’t do. Jesus, it makes me feel like an old man. I carried you across the threshold after our wedding. I can carry you four feet to the bed.” He grunted and shucked me higher against his chest. “Quit squirming. Damn, when did you get so heavy?”

“Our wedding was years ago and I’ve only gained a few pounds since then—and you know that. You’re just out of shape.”

He growled at me then dumped me unceremoniously on the bed. He reached for my jeans and unbuttoned them then yanked them over my feet. I wasn't into pain like Marcus was, but damn if I didn't like it rough at times, and this was one of those times. I shimmied out of my underwear then pulled my shirt over my head as Marcus finished undressing.

When he leaned over a bead of pre-come dripped to the floor in a long glistening strand. My dick leapt, and I began stroking myself while I watched Marcus digging around in the nightstand drawer. Even after all these years I couldn't believe he was mine.

“Use the Slick,” I suggested, my voice coming out a purr. Marcus had this deep, husky voice when he was turned on. Mine sounded like a cat in heat and always made me cringe despite Marcus calling it sexy.

He glanced over and gave me a quirky grin. He knew what I was asking. That particular lube had a slimy consistency that held up through even the rough stuff. His eyes lingered on my hand pulling slowly on my cock.

He turned back to the drawer and found the lube. “Quit touching yourself.”

Now he was just being a brat and I ignored him. He kneeled on the bed and reached over, running his thumb across my wet tip before sliding it in his mouth. I had to close my eyes against the erotic image. He'd made me come once by doing that and it still brought me close to the edge.

I let go of my dick and he dropped on top of me, grinding his hips as he kissed me. His tongue darted in and wrapped around mine, sharing my sharp tangy taste. I moaned as my hands shot into his hair holding him there. He smiled against my lips. God, he was being a brat.

He went to move away and I latched my legs around his waist and thrust my hips.

He chuckled. “Naughty. I swear you're trying to make me come and I don't think either of us wants that—yet.”

I nipped his lower lip, but loosened my grip. He moved and kissed down my breastbone as his hands slid along my ribs. He had the warmest hands, and

they were always firm and sure. His tongue traced the tat directly over my heart then he kissed it reverently. Marcus had one too, in the same spot.

We had gotten them the day after our wedding when he dragged me to a tattoo parlor and insisted I change the tat along my arm. He'd never once commented on it, but he had obviously been stewing over it, and knew it had been for Todd. I couldn't blame him, and thought it sweet he couldn't stand another man's mark on me. I added *My Daughter* to the beginning, and had the tattoo artist cover the *r* in lover with a heart, making it read *My Daughter, love of my soul*. He had been satisfied with that.

Then in a crazy-romantic move, we decided to have each other's names tattooed over our hearts. I ran my fingers gently through his hair as he nuzzled against the mark that told everyone I was his. I didn't need the tattoo to know I would always belong to him, but I liked having it. I knew he did too, as I'd caught him time and again running his fingers over my name with the goofiest look on his face.

Our other matching tattoos held a much different meaning, and were in a place only we would ever see. As if he had read my mind he rolled off me and urged me onto my stomach. His hand caressed the scars down my side, and hip, as he feathered kisses over the ones on my back. I knew where he was going and closed my eyes against the emotion that flashed through me.

When his lips closed over the small 6 on my right buttock, I trembled remembering the crash exactly ten years ago, the morning of our sixth anniversary. We were all headed to the mountain when the driver of a fuel truck had fallen asleep at the wheel and barreled through a stop sign out in the middle of nowhere. Riana had ended up in a body cast, and I almost lost my life as our side of the car caved. Marcus and the truck driver were pulling Riana free when the fire erupted. Marcus still had nightmares about it, and if he reached for me and I wasn't there, he became hysterical, his mind tricking him into believing I had never made it out.

I was in a medical coma for months as the burns healed. It was years before Marcus quit fretting every time I got behind the wheel. He never has grasped the fact it would have happened regardless of who was driving.

Every once in a while he still became overly emotional about it all, and I suppose I couldn't blame him, but I hoped this wouldn't be one of those times. I wanted my dominant lover tonight. Marcus squeezed my ass gently then I felt his lips land on the Y at the top of my crack. I could feel them trembling and sighed, sure I had lost him in an emotional maelstrom.

Suddenly his lubed thumb pushed inside me as his hand dug into my waist. *Oh, God, yes.* My leg shot up and I pushed against his thumb.

He snickered and drove his thumb in. "God, you're a slut."

I glanced over my shoulder at him and licked my lips. "Only for you."

He removed his thumb and slid in two fingers. I rocked back and he twisted them until he found the spot that made me shudder and arch my back.

"On your knees," He commanded and I complied quickly. He bent around and his mouth clamped around my dick and suckled the pre-come off my head. His fingers continued to slide in and out, stroking and pushing until my hips started thrusting. Marcus moaned and sucked hard as I gave up the first small spurt on a little squeal. He licked my dick clean while I caught my breath.

He pulled his fingers out and looked up at my face hanging between my shoulders. "I love that about you."

"What? That you can torment me for hours before you let me climax?"

He grinned and ran his knuckles along my stomach. "Yep. You're awfully hot when you beg."

I laughed. "Sadistic bastard."

Honestly, the first time it had happened had amazed me, and delighted Marcus. He had been stroking my long buried prostate when I groaned and squirted. He thought I had come, but I was still hard as marble. He'd played with me that day until I was exhausted and collapsed into a happy heap, still hard. I'd immediately fallen asleep and he hovered over me, afraid he'd overdone it. When I woke up I asked for more and he fucked me until I came so violently I thought my body would shake apart. It had been wonderful, and

I couldn't get enough those first few months. But now I swear he used it against me at times just to keep me in bed all day.

Marcus began stroking himself then reached out with his other hand and fondled my balls. I widened my stance and bit my lip as the tiny jolts of sensation traveled up my dick and tingled inside me. My fingers dug into the pillows as my ass clenched and unclenched. Marcus had worked hard to desensitize my testicles, much to my chagrin since he thought it amusing to make me yelp like a puppy. Even so, I still couldn't handle his mouth on them. Not that it stopped him from sucking on them now and then just to see me jump around, squealing.

When my hips shot forward he let them go, and wormed his way up. He pulled me onto his chest and kissed me slowly at first, then deeper and more desirous as my fingers ran through his hair, then caressed his neck and shoulders.

He rolled me onto my back and continued to kiss me as he donned a condom. When he settled back on top of me I pulled my legs up and grabbed my knees. He tried to keep kissing me, but when his cock tapped my hole he groaned and tore his mouth away.

"I can't believe you're still so damn limber."

I gave him a cocky grin and pulled my knees higher. He reached between us and rubbed his tip against me causing my head to loll back in anticipation. He watched me as he pushed in. He always watched me to make sure I didn't feel any discomfort. But that hadn't happened in years. He stopped and pulled back and inch.

I looked right into his green eyes. "Damn it Marcus, all the way, go all the way. I want to feel you inside me—*now*."

His eyes darkened and his jaw tensed as he tenaciously held onto his control. *Damn him*. He did it his way and slid in slowly until we were both breathing hard in anticipation. I let my right leg go, settling my foot in his raised thigh. I threw my other leg over his shoulder as he began to move. He wrapped his arm around my leg and pressed his fingers into the inside of my

thigh with every thrust. He wasn't quite there, and unless he shifted, I was never going to come.

"Marcus," I said, and instantly his hand shot to the headboard as he twisted his hips then drove in hard. "Oh, God..." I grasped his wrist over my head and dug my toes into his thigh. He pounded into me sending shockwave after shockwave through my body. The headboard creaked beneath his hand, threatening for the thousandth time. One of these days it was going to give up and break on us.

Marcus sent me spiraling with a few short, quick jabs.

"Ahhhnnuunn." My back arched, and my other hand dug into his shoulder. My cock was throbbing, but I knew better than to touch myself no matter how much I wanted to. One stroke and I'd be gone.

"Ah... mmhh... ahh, damn." Marcus thrust hard, his wrist pulsing beneath my hand, and I tipped.

My insides quivered as my ass clenched down. Marcus began to grunt and I felt his sweat drip onto my chest. I groaned as it trickled down my body mingling with my own. I levered against him and tilted my hips up. Marcus hit me spot on and my mind flashed white.

My stomach muscles tensed hard trying to keep my hips up. His cock caressed me over and over, and suddenly everything went at once. Every muscle tightened as my head snapped back into the pillows. I felt the hot rush push down my dick just as the shock of sensation shot up my spine.

"Ahhh, fuck," I cried as I came, holding onto him, hoping I wouldn't disappear in the miasma of emotions storming through me. It didn't work, and my mind fogged as the emotions crashed over me, pulling me under.

Marcus growling my name against my neck brought me back. My leg was off his shoulder and he was holding me tight as his body shook. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, holding him just as tightly as the last shudder wracked his body. He sagged against me, and I stroked his soft hair while he panted hotly against my skin.

God, I was lucky to have him. He'd taught me so much about myself, never once giving up on me no matter how hard I had tried to retreat. He had given me this wonderful life I had never even dared dream about.

I looked at him still clinging to me, and pushed the damp strands off his forehead. If I lost him tomorrow I knew there would never be another. He was the love of my life.

He lifted his head then touched my face. "Hey, why are you crying?"

I shook my head and sniffed. "I just—because, I love you."

"Awwhh, Toby, right there." Rent the air, clear as day.

We both looked to the door then back at each other incredulously. I never would have thought...

Marcus gestured towards the door. "I'm going to choose not to have heard that right at this moment." Marcus grinned, rather proudly considering they were breaking one of our biggest rules. I didn't blame him though. For Toby to go from where he started to where he was currently at, obviously topping his boyfr—fiancé, was remarkable. Marcus blinked and suddenly I saw our humorous, chaotic, perfect life revealed in his eyes. I smiled up at him.

He rubbed his nose against mine. "Where were we? Oh, I remember—I love you too." He kissed me and I held on, knowing as long as I had a hold of him he was mine and he'd never leave me.

**THE END**



## **Author Bio**

*Tara Spears has only been writing for a little over a year. She started in the urban fantasy genre, then in an odd twist of fate, her first M/M novel erupted from the closeted area of her mind, and The Darker Side of Trey Grey was born. This first book has gone on to garner numerous hook and opener awards and she's been writing M/M ever since. She has a few short stories due out in 2014 through various publishers, as well as the above mentioned book being released for Kindle and Nook the first of June, with the paperback due out by July 1st, 2013.*

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