

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**JUST A FEELING**

**J.H. Knight**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## JUST A FEELING

**By J.H. Knight**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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## Photo Description

A man holds his sleeping newborn. The baby clutches a set of dog tags while resting his chin on the man's shoulder. The word "family" is tattooed across the father's back.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*My name is yours to give, I'm a new father, whose best friend in the world just died and took with her all the magic of being an uncle, leaving only the harsh reality of being a father with no idea how to do that, AT ALL. Thing is, I'm looking for a nanny, my child is a colicky baby trying to wake the dead screaming, I haven't slept in a while, and this handsome stranger who's knocking on my door seems to be the answer to my desperate pleas... Only, he seems to know an awful lot of things about me and my baby that even I don't know, can I trust him? Should I let him near my child?*

Please only light BDSM, if necessary, no historical, dystopic, or Sci Fi. Paranormal of any kind, contemporary and mpreg are okay, just enjoy! And I hope you have as much fun writing it as I will reading it.

*Thank You!*

*Sincerely,*

*Alecto*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** men with children, grief, slow burn/UST, male nanny, ex-military, IT, psychic

**Word Count:** 28,351

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Mark scrolled through the website on his phone. Image after image of baby stuff flitted by. He knew Tracy needed a metric fuckton of stuff for the kid, but he had no idea how to choose any of it, or what she'd want. She had a bassinet already—he'd even gone along with her to pick it out. She had a frilly diaper bag with little ducklings all over it, pink and blue and yellow. She'd teased him, saying she was going to make him carry it. He'd pretended to mind, but secretly he got a kick out of the idea. He liked that she was already calling him Uncle Mark. Loved it, even.

He didn't love the way the doctor's brow had furrowed when he'd come in to check on her, or the way the nurse had ushered him into the hall, showing him the waiting room. He really didn't like how long it had been, but hey, no big deal, right? Women had babies all the time, every second of every day, probably. And it's not like they were in the middle of some third-world country. The hospital was a good one, the doctors were top-rated. She would be fine. Tracy was a trouper. No way would she let a little hiccup in her delivery stop her, right? Right.

He kept telling himself that.

He told himself that until the nurse walked into the waiting room with a pained look on her face.

"Are they okay?" Mark couldn't remember standing up from the uncomfortable chair, but suddenly he was on his feet.

"Let's go into the quiet room so we can talk." The nurse set a reassuring hand on his arm to go with her less-than-assuring words.

The quiet room.

Somehow he knew what that meant.

Goddamn it all.

And what kind of a prick followed along silently, secretly hoping Tracy had lived. He wasn't so attached to the kid, and, hey, she could have more, right?

Mark waited for the nurse to close the door behind them. "How's Tracy?"

With a long exhale, she tried to explain. “There were... several complications.” Her words got fuzzy all of a sudden. Mark’s ears started ringing, like that time Miller stepped on an IED and blew himself to pieces. The entire world shook with the boom of it, his head had spun, his heart kicked against his chest, and Mark had damn near pissed himself.

Now, he felt like the whole planet had shifted sideways, and the nurse was still sitting there, offering comfort as she tried to give him some details. Details didn’t matter now, did they? Tracy was gone. His best friend in the world since he was nine years old. Gone. Forever.

Even as he tried to make sense of it, he looked up, and there she was. Tracy looked just as beautiful as she did four years ago when she picked him up from the airport after he’d come back from his last tour, after he’d signed all the papers and gotten himself out of the Army.

The kid was in her arms, and Tracy smiled brightly as she tried to hand the screaming little bundle of terror to Mark.

Some small part of his brain kicked in then, woke up enough to realize it was all a dream—nightmare, memory. “Fuck.” Mark scrubbed his hand over his face and sat up in bed. The baby was crying, loud and sharp, less than an hour after he’d fallen asleep. “I’m here, kid, just hang on.” He lifted Baby Boy Huntsman from his bassinet and tucked him up onto a shoulder. “You and I need to come to some sort of arrangement, little man,” he muttered as he shuffled out of the room, flicking on a light in the hall so he wouldn’t run into the wall and drop the kid. “One that involves at least six straight hours of sleep every night, okay?”

The kitchen tiles were shockingly cold against his bare feet, but that was probably for the best. It helped wake him up a little, helped him remember the next step. Bottle from the fridge, pot of water on the stove, heat on... yeah, he could do this. He’d been doing it for almost three weeks.

When he’d told Tracy she could put his name down as the father in all the paperwork, Mark didn’t think anything of it. Why not? It wasn’t like she’d come after him for child support, and they both knew he’d give her and the kid anything he had anyway. Not listing the father as “unknown” had been a big deal to her. He’d gone to all the birthing classes with her, went to ultrasound appointments, and drove her in when she went into labor. Before he left with the baby, Mark had expected someone there to ask for a paternity test or something since they weren’t even married, but apparently, his and Tracy’s word was all it took since no one contested it.

Mark was still trying to convince himself it was a good thing. No hassles or red tape. No foster care for the kid, or trying to get custody from the state. Tracy's baby was his, on paper anyway. Tracy's mom and dad probably knew the truth, but they didn't want to raise another kid. They wanted to be grandparents, wanted to come see him on birthdays and holidays, wanted to spoil him. They wanted to know a piece of Tracy was still alive somewhere, doing well, happy. They knew Mark would do that for them. Someone else, though? Maybe not.

While he waited for the water to simmer, Mark tried bouncing the kid, shushing him. When that didn't work, he started talking. "Maybe we should go tomorrow and get one of those bottle warmer things, huh? Might make this little ritual of yours go faster, ya think?"

Mark could feel tiny fists curl up against his shoulder, as if the kid wanted to punch him, wanted to make him go away. Well, fair enough. Sometimes—maybe most of the time—the feeling was mutual. Going away, not punching. That would be wrong. So would going away, but he was too tired to worry about that.

Mark never realized how easy it would be to hate himself, but this kid managed to bring out the worst in him, the least likable aspects. Yeah, he hated himself for still wishing it'd been the kid and not Tracy. Hated himself for sometimes thinking this kid was the reason he didn't have Tracy, or a home of his own, or sleep, or even clean clothes because who the hell could deal with newborn bullshit and still go to the laundromat?

"Bottle's almost ready, bud." As he floated the bottle in the simmering water, Mark made a mental list.

Look for a new place with more room and a washing machine in the unit.

Name the kid.

Get laid.

Get a safer car because the jeep felt reckless for some reason.

Get a nanny so he could actually go back to work and talk with adults again.

Get some sleep.

He shifted getting laid to the bottom of the list. For now, anyway. He'd need a shower and some clean clothes to make that happen. And a babysitter. Jesus. As much as he resented this kid, he still hated the idea of leaving him alone with anyone.

The bottle was too hot. Mark didn't even bother to stifle his curse.

“Okay, diaper change while we wait, dude.”

He set the kid on the table and went to work. This was one thing he'd finally gotten the hang of. Diaper cover, cloth diaper, butt wipe, ointment. He had a system and it worked perfectly. Despite the constant screaming and the kicking legs, Mark had him diapered and wrapped back up in under two minutes. The nurses had been good for something at the hospital. They'd even sent him home with a small supply of cloth diapers and a one month free gift certificate for a local diaper service with their newborn care package.

Too bad they didn't send Tracy home with him too.

“It's three in the morning,” he whispered as he bounce-stepped back to the kitchen. The kid was still screaming, so the whispering seemed pointless, but some part of his sleep-deprived brain thought it might make the kid calm down a little. “I can't really find us a new apartment or a new car right now, so maybe we'll start working on that name, huh?” The bottle was ready—thank God—so Mark tipped him back into the crook of his elbow and offered. The rubber nipple was met with resistance at first, but he took it eventually. A little tear-streaked face, creased brow, sniffles.

God, Mark really was a world-class asshole.

Moments like this, his heart softened. He could almost hear Tracy's voice in his head. *It's not so bad, right? You don't mind so much.* And, for a few minutes of every hour, usually when the kid wasn't screaming, when his bright old-man eyes were getting heavy and his lids drooping, when his shuddering breaths were evening out, Mark really didn't mind at all.

Maybe acceptance was quietly creeping up on him in the silent, unplanned moments?

He could only hope.

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Three weeks later, the baby was still crying. Mark was ready to cry too, truth be told, but he hadn't let himself. He barely cried when Tracy died, only sniffled through her memorial service. No way was he going to let the infant from hell break him. He could do this.

He'd managed to pick up baby supplies and secure a new apartment—three bedrooms, with a playground in the complex, because this kid would grow up

eventually, right? The third bedroom was for the (hopefully) live-in nanny. If he ever found one.

So far the interviews hadn't gone well. The service he was using had sent six potentials for him, and none of them fit the bill. Three were college girls with busy schedules who preferred bigger paychecks over room and board, one had been visibly drunk, and one was—in his opinion—too old to properly care for the kid. Not to mention the fact she barely made it up the two flights of stairs to get to his front door. The sixth applicant had two kids of her own. Mark worried she wouldn't be able to take care of the baby if she were chasing after her two toddlers at the same time.

The new car was boring and suburban, but it would do. Four doors, good safety rating, easy access to the backseat for the baby's car seat. Good enough, right?

The damn kid still didn't have a name, though. Which meant he still didn't have a birth certificate. Not that it mattered for the moment, but there was a time limit on these things, he just couldn't recall what it was.

He was seriously considering calling the kid Howler when there was a knock at the door.

Mark had just finished bath time with Baby Boy. He was only wearing a pair of old sweats since he'd learned early on how easy it was to soak himself, and how much the kid liked to pee as soon as his butt hit the warm water.

With the baby wrapped in a clean towel—screaming, because of course—Mark went to the door. Whoever was on the other side deserved what they got for dropping by unannounced. If they didn't like him half-naked with a screaming kid in his arms, well, fuck 'em.

“Can I help you?” He didn't mean to scowl or sound so stern as he opened the door, but, come on. What kind of an asshole knocked on the door when there was clearly some shit going down?

A slight, cute guy with a flop of auburn hair falling into his eyes smiled up at Mark. “I think maybe I can help you, actually.”

Confused, Mark didn't step back to let him in. Instead he stood straighter, made sure to fill the entire doorway with his broad shoulders, taking full advantage of the six inches of height he had on the guy. “Excuse me?”

“The agency sent me? About the nanny job? They emailed me this morning with a time for the interview?” His answers sounded like questions, which were

the only hints that Mark's attempt to intimidate him had worked. "I brought a stack of references and..."

He tried to pass the folder over to Mark, but Mark only stared at him.

"You're a guy." Stating the obvious was apparently a new skill in Mark's repertoire.

"And *you're* very perceptive." He didn't sound as snarky as he probably should've because the response came with a small, friendly laugh. "It's not as unconventional as you'd think. Male nannies, I mean."

"Right." Okay, fine, call him a sexist asshole. Mark didn't care. Weren't men ten times more likely to be child molesters than women? True or not, right or wrong, it felt like a deal breaker. "Look, I'm sure you're great and all, but—"

"You should probably get a diaper on him before he pees on you."

Fair point. "Yeah, right. Listen, anyway—"

"How about you look at my references before you send me on my way, okay? There are two local families who have offered to meet with potential clients."

With a noncommittal grunt, Mark finally pulled back from the door. Too late to get a diaper on the kid because he could feel the warm wetness against his bare chest. Damn it all. "Why aren't you working for them anymore?"

"Well, most kids don't need a nanny for more than a few years—kids grow up, families move, that kinda thing." He stepped inside and closed the door before going on. "I've worked with infants all the way up to twelve-year-olds, so I've got plenty of experience."

Mark kept one eye on the new guy and one eye on the baby. "Yeah, okay. You got a name?"

"Ian Johansson, at your service."

The chipper tone of his voice set Mark's teeth on edge, but he wasn't sure why. Chipper people annoyed him these days. "Right. Ian." Mark set the baby down on the table and reached for a diaper, but they were gone. He'd used the last one that morning and hadn't opened the new bundle from the service. "I'm sure you're great and all, and I'm sure the families you've worked for before loved you, but..."

Mark had started to pick the baby up again so he could hunt down the pack of diapers when Ian passed him one from the new bundle. He thanked Ian with a nod and went back to dressing the kid.

Before he could say anything else, Ian said, “You’re not sure. I get that. You think I’m some skeezy perv, or that I’m looking to rob you blind, or sell your baby on the black market.”

“Basically, yeah.” Why try to pretend otherwise? Mark couldn’t figure out why his answer made Ian smile so brightly, though.

“At least you’re honest.” Ian shifted around the table so Mark could see him as he lifted the baby back into his arms—fully clothed and squirming. “And I’d be willing to bet you’ve seen a bunch of other people about the job and didn’t like any of them.”

True enough. Mark nodded and narrowed his eyes at Ian. “That’s a pretty safe bet to make.” The baby had settled and was resting his head on Mark’s shoulder. Mark took a deep breath and rubbed his stubbled cheek against the baby’s dark silky hair. “I’m not gonna leave him with just anyone, ya know?”

Unnamed Baby Boy had started to fuss again, naturally, so Mark stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle from the warmer on the counter.

“Of course not.” Ian stood at the edge of the kitchen and smiled at him again, this time with an understanding nod. “How about I feed him so you can look at my references and maybe we can talk for a few minutes?”

Perfectly reasonable, right? Why didn’t it feel like a reasonable suggestion? He’d never let anyone else feed Ryan-maybe-Robert-or-Jack before—not since coming home from the hospital. Tracy’s mom lived two states away and had only held him a few times when she’d flown in for the memorial. She loved him, sure, but it seemed like it still hurt her to look at the kid. Mark’s own mother hadn’t even had a chance to see the baby in person yet, just video chat from three thousand miles away. “Wash your hands first.” Mark’s voice sounded gruff even to his own ears, but he couldn’t be bothered to care.

Ian edged his way past Mark to the sink. “It’s actually good for their immune systems to let other people hold them and stuff.” Ian scrubbed his hands together, lathering them while Mark mentally counted to thirty, wanting to make sure he did a good job. As he started to rinse, Ian turned his head to look at Mark. “I know it feels counterintuitive, but it helps them down the road.”

Mark offered another slight grunt as he led the way back to the small living room.

“Great ink,” Ian said from behind him.

Oh, yeah. The tattoo. *Family*. “Thanks.” At the time it had meant a lot to him. Still did, really, but for different reasons now. He’d gotten it on leave with a few friends he’d toured with. “Have a seat.” Mark still hadn’t passed the baby to Ian. Yes. He was going to make the grown man who did this for a living sit down before he could hold Robin-or-Leo-maybe-Alex.

Ian settled himself on one end of the sofa and looked expectantly at Mark. Then he smiled and rolled his eyes as he pulled a pillow into his lap. “Better? I swear I’ve done this before.”

A huff of a laugh slipped out before Mark could stop himself, and he passed the baby to Ian. “Support his head.”

Ian only nodded as he shifted Leo-or-Carl-maybe-Steven into a comfortable position. Leo again? Huh. Wasn’t Tracy a Leo? He’d have to look it up. Mark made a mental note of that one as he watched Ian closely. He seemed to know what he was doing, but rather than sit across the room in his club chair, Mark perched himself less than ten inches from the two of them, close enough to reach out and snatch the kid back if needed.

Ian had set his folder down on the coffee table and nodded toward it. “You can take a look at my info while we give this little guy his brunch.” His tone was soft, as if he were talking to the baby, and he only glanced at Mark before turning his attention back to feeding time.

Mark didn’t want to take his eyes off them, but he forced himself to. He flipped through the (rather thick) stack of glowing reports from a few of the families Ian had worked for in the past and then looked closely at his work experience. The first job listed was over ten years ago in England. “What were you doing in London?”

“I was studying abroad for a year.” Ian set the bottle aside for a minute. “Would you pass me a burp cloth?”

The cloth diapers were across the room. Mark nearly plucked the baby from Ian’s arms before getting up, but he decided that might be excessive. He did, however, keep his eyes on the two of them for most of the fifteen paces there and back. “I usually just give him his bottle all the way and then burp him.” Mark could feel himself scowling at the change in routine.

Ian flicked the cloth diaper over his shoulder, lifted Sven-or-Leo-maybe-Michael, and started to rub his back. “Yeah, most people do, but when a baby is breastfed, they usually switch sides midway. It’s good to do the same with a bottle, gives them a chance to digest, and you get less coming back up.”

Mark didn’t say anything to that. Instead he took his seat again and went back to the file. “Next job was in Alaska?”

Ian shrugged as Mitch-or-Leo-maybe-Cyrus let out a small burp and started to root around against Ian’s neck. “I liked to move around a lot when I was younger.” He leaned the baby back, this time in his right arm, and started with the bottle again.

“Sounds a little flaky.” Mark didn’t want a caretaker for the kid who was just going to pick up and leave after they got used to each other.

“I’d say everyone is a little flaky at nineteen, but I’m guessing you weren’t.”

True enough. “I was in basic when I was nineteen. Not much room for flaky.” Mark did get to move around a lot, though.

Ian only nodded in response. After a quiet beat, he added, “If it makes you feel better, this has been my hometown for years. I’m not going anywhere else for a long time.”

Oddly enough, it *did* make him feel better, though Mark wasn’t sure why. No way was he hiring this guy. “You’ve got family in the area?”

Ian nodded. “We moved up here when I was thirteen and everyone has stayed. Mom, Dad, three brothers, and two sisters. Not to mention my niece and nephew, aunts and uncles on my dad’s side of the family, and too many cousins to count.”

Assuming Ian was telling the truth, that might be a point in his favor. Mark didn’t know why exactly, given that his own mother and father lived in Florida and his sister was in Connecticut. “Big family. Are you all close?”

“Yeah.” Ian nodded again. The baby had finished his bottle, and Ian put him up on a shoulder for the second round of burping. “Mandatory Sunday dinner, holidays, birthdays... We probably see each other more than the average family, but I like it. It’s good to have roots, backup, ya know?”

Mark knew. He wished his own family were closer, especially now. He watched as Ian patted the baby’s back and rocked ever so slightly on the couch.

No fussing, no squirming. The kid seemed perfectly content, and Mark felt like he'd been swindled. He only got so many moments like that in a day, and here he was, watching a stranger take them from him.

As if Ian could read his thoughts, he turned to face Mark on the couch and passed the baby back to him.

“What’s his name?” Ian asked quietly as he settled again.

Mark felt his shoulders relax as he took the baby, and held him close to his chest. “I’m thinking about Leo.” He laughed softly when maybe-Leo wiggled and let out a snuffly breath. “Or Michael. Maybe Michael Leo? I don’t know.”

Ian bit his lip around a smile as he looked at maybe-Leo. He lifted his eyes to meet Mark’s, his tone sober, gentle when he spoke. “Can I ask...? The agency told me Mom isn’t in the picture, but... this wasn’t a planned thing for you, am I right?”

Suddenly it felt like Mark’s veins filled with ice water. He hated fielding questions about Tracy and why she wasn’t with them. He shifted on the couch, trying to edge farther away from Ian. “She died giving birth.” Mark had to force himself to breathe again, loosen his hold on the kid.

“Did she have a name picked out for him before...?”

Mark shook his head in answer, but after a moment he said, “She joked about calling him Jack Daniels or Mark Junior, but she said she wanted to see his face before she decided.” Not for the first time, Mark wondered if Tracy had even gotten that much before she died. He’d never been able to bring himself to ask anyone. Had she seen him? Held him before she finished bleeding out? Or had they taken him from her? Was she crying? Was she even conscious by then? He had no idea and, in some ways, he didn’t want to know.

“I’m sorry,” Ian said softly.

Sorry for his loss or sorry for bringing it up at all, Mark couldn’t tell. The slight crease between Ian’s eyebrows, the downward curve of his lips—subtle, but there—made Mark think he was sincere, though.

“Thanks.” Mark cleared his throat. He didn’t mean to sound so annoyed, but it was that or outright sobbing on the couch with a stranger, so, whatever. “Anyway,” he paused for a beat. “We weren’t a couple or anything, just best friends.” Why he felt the need to share that with this guy was beyond him.

Ian’s cheek dimpled with a smile. “I kind of figured that.”

Mark stared at him in surprise. Most people assumed he and Tracy were together. She didn't like going to bars with him because guys stayed clear of her. *Hadn't* liked going to bars with him. Damn it.

"I mean, maybe my gaydar is out of whack, but..." Ian paused and looked bashful for a beat. "And maybe I've just blown this interview."

Mark almost told him he'd blown the interview when he knocked a half hour earlier, but instead he couldn't stop a soft chuckle. "It's not out of whack, just better than average."

Ian looked relieved, and Mark let the subject drop.

"Why are you a nanny? You're, what, nearly thirty? Shouldn't you...?" Mark stopped himself before actually saying the words *have a real job by now*.

A knowing smile spread across Ian's face as if he'd heard Mark's entire question. "I could go into teaching, and I think about it sometimes, but... have you ever met someone and just known they need your help?"

"Yeah, I guess so." More than a few times, if Mark were being honest.

"Do you walk away from them and decide you're going to do something else, or do you stick around and give them a hand?" Ian looked at him like he already knew the answer.

"I usually help out if I can."

Ian only nodded at first. "That's why I don't have a *real* job. One of the reasons, anyway. Instead, I make real *connections* with people—with their families. I don't just have brothers and sisters and cousins, ya know? I... move into their lives, take care of the single most precious thing they have in the world, and in return, I get a bigger family. And I get to pay my bills as a bonus." He huffed a laugh and shrugged. "I'll never be a millionaire, but I'm rich in other ways, more important ways."

Mark didn't have a response for that.

Fine. Maybe he would at least call the references.

\*\*\*\*

"I know, man. I'm sorry, it's just taking longer than I thought." Mark had the phone pressed to his ear as he sat on the edge of his bed. Leo was in his own little bedroom for one of his hour-long naps. They felt like twenty-minute pauses for breath between bawling fits, but whatever. "It's not like I'm not

working at all. I've been sending everything in ahead of deadline, so..." *So don't can my ass. My world fell apart, and I'm still trying to rebuild it, okay?*

"I get it, Mark. I do." Darren, his boss—close enough to call a friend if they didn't have the boss-employee dynamic to deal with—sounded apologetic. "When Mariah had the twins, I was out of the office for an entire month, and I was a zombie when I came back, remember?"

Mark remembered. He didn't bother to point out that Darren couldn't possibly get it. Darren wasn't in it alone. He had his entire family around them, his mother-in-law staying with them. Not to mention the lucky bastard had freakish alien babies who slept more than they did anything else. Mostly, Darren had Mariah. "I know, man. I'm trying to find a nanny, swear to God."

"Did you try that agency? They found someone for us in two days..."

"Yeah, I—" Leo's scream over the baby monitor cut through Mark's words, and he got to his feet, trying to keep up with the conversation as he went to get a bottle from the warmer on the kitchen counter. "I'm still sifting through references and stuff, but I've got it narrowed down to a couple of people." Okay, that was a lie. In his defense, he had called every reference on Ian's list and even met with one of the families Ian had worked for recently. The way they went on about him, Mark wondered if they were getting paid for it.

"Jesus, is that the kid?" Darren laughed into the phone. "He sounds like a fire truck."

Mark rolled his eyes. Everyone from the office kept telling him to bring the baby in one day and show him off. Yeah, right. "Tell me about it." He stuck the bottle into the waistband of his sweats, tucked the phone between his shoulder and ear, and lifted Leo from his bassinet. He added a crib to his list of shit to buy sooner rather than later. The kid was growing fast. "This is nothing. He's just hungry. You should hear him in the middle of the night when he's colicky."

Leo hadn't stopped crying yet, and Mark let him abuse Darren's ears for a minute while he got him shifted and settled. When the baby calmed down, Mark said, "Just give me until Monday, okay? I'll get someone to help me out and be back to work, all right?"

With a smile in his voice, Darren said, "I'm not firing you, Mark. I just wanted to light the coals under your ass and remind you that you can't work from home forever, at least not full time. That's all."

“Message received.” Mark let out a silent breath, grateful for the flexibility the IT world offered. Even more grateful he had a boss who called his small firm a family and meant it. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem,” Darren said easily. “Get your ass back here when you can. For the sake of your own sanity if nothing else. And get that kid in here one day. The girls are dying to get their hands on him.”

Feeling lighter, Mark promised he would soon and then he ended the call. He had six days to get a nanny he felt like he could trust. He’d seen three other applicants since Ian. They were all qualified. They were all nice. He didn’t think any of them were druggies or pedoes or... whatever the hell else Mark was worried about. *That* list was longer than his arm.

In the end, though, Ian was the only one who had felt... *real*. The others seemed to have their Interview Face on. Ian, though? Mark could see him looking and acting exactly the same in any situation. He seemed genuine, and that went a long way with Mark. He also thought Tracy would get a kick out of a swishy little male nanny for her son. She always told Mark she needed a gayer guy to be her gay best friend.

Mark looked down at Leo. “Your mom was pretty funny, kiddo.” The bottle was half done already so Mark shifted him onto his shoulder and patted his little back. “And, for the record, she would’ve sucked at this too.” He smiled at the idea. Tracy with her hair in a messy ponytail and tired eyes, like she’d been out partying all night. “She would’ve loved the hell outta you, though.”

Leo let out a small burp and a snuffle in response, and Mark kissed the side of his head. Up until that moment, Mark hadn’t felt any real love toward him. Leo was simply his job, his charge to protect, something he had to do, something he was doing for Tracy because that’s what she would’ve wanted. Now, though? As he leaned Leo into his other arm and offered him the rest of his bottle, Mark finally felt it. He looked into Leo’s eyes and realized with a shock that he’d throw himself in front of a train for the kid.

“We’re gonna make this work, all right? I’m gonna get this down if it’s the last thing I do.” He tilted his elbow to lift Leo’s head and kissed his cheek. “Love you, little man.” His soft whisper felt like a confession, like a secret they now shared.

When he closed his eyes, Mark could see Tracy’s smiling face.

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Mark had Leo strapped to him in some weird baby sling he'd picked up from a pregnant hippie down at the Sunday craft market. The damn thing was even tie-dyed, but what the hell. Leo seemed to like it, and Mark quickly discovered he was able to get a lot more done if he had the kid tucked up next to him with both hands free. He'd managed to unpack the entire apartment, assemble a crib and changing table, and wash every piece of laundry in the place, all with Leo snuggled happily against his chest. If he'd found the thing a week earlier, he might have decided to forego the whole nanny idea and just take Leo to work with him.

Instead, he'd called Ian in for another interview and finally hired him.

"This is just a—"

"Trial run," Ian said with a small laugh. "You've mentioned that a few times."

"Right." Mark looked at the suitcase and small duffel bag Ian had with him. "Is that all your stuff?"

"For now." Ian's hair flopped over his hazel eyes. "If you decide it's working out after a week, I'll bring the rest of my stuff."

Reasonable. Smart, even. "Okay, sounds like a plan, then." He turned toward the back of the apartment. "Your room is down here." Mark passed the bathroom and flipped on the light. "Bathroom," he said, stepping inside. "Towels are in here, shampoo and whatever if you didn't bring your own."

Ian stood in the hall and looked in with a nod. "I came prepared, no worries."

"Right," Mark mumbled as he stepped back out to the hall. "The hot water can be a little tricky, so you don't wanna just jump right in."

"Noted." Ian nodded his head and smiled. "I'll be careful, I promise."

Mark shrugged and went to Ian's bedroom. "It's not much, but, ya know, the bed seems pretty comfortable. If it's too firm or whatever, lemme know, and I'll pick up a mattress pad or something."

Ian dropped his bags in the corner and tucked a hand into his pocket. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I'm pretty adaptable."

"Okay, good. I mean. I can sleep on a stone slab, so, yeah, I'm not the best judge." These days he could fall asleep standing up, but he didn't bother to mention it. In the silence that stretched between them, Ian looked at Mark expectantly. Finally, Mark blurted out, "Are you seeing anyone?" He could feel

his cheeks heat with a bit of embarrassment. That hadn't come out how he'd meant it at all.

The laugh he got from Ian didn't help. Neither did the slightly flirty expression. He almost expected Ian to offer a seductive, teasing retort.

After a beat, though, Ian said, "I'm not in a relationship at the moment, and I don't do anonymous hookups or one-night stands. But I'm guessing what you really mean is 'don't bring guys back here,' am I right?"

"Yeah, sorry. I probably should've mentioned that earlier."

With a shrug, Ian said, "It's my personal policy anyway, so, no problem." He let out a sigh as he looked around the small room. "As long as I get a couple days to myself—Sundays are pretty much a must because of family stuff, but if you're ever in a bind, I could take Leo with me for that if you wanted."

Mark moved his hand to Leo's back without thinking, a protective gesture, as if Ian were going to grab him away. "Let's, uh... We'll take outings on a case-by-case basis." Mark wasn't sure, but he thought he had less anxiety in combat.

Another beat of silence passed between them. It seemed to Mark that Ian was about to give him a lecture. Mark braced for it, ready to toss the guy out on his ass. Instead, Ian smiled and let out a long breath, as if he were counting to ten in his head. "Okay, how about you pass the baby over while you get your head wrapped around the idea of going to work Monday?"

He should, right? Instead, Mark stood there and hitched Leo closer to his chest. "Actually, I need to run to the store."

Ian's face lit up. "Perfect. Leo and I can stay here and get to know each other while you run some errands."

"No, I mean, I'll take him with me for that, let you settle in and all."

Mark could tell Ian was struggling with his patience.

"Mark." Ian let out another long breath. "If we're going to see how this works, you're going to have to leave him alone with me eventually, okay? You'll have to trust me enough to do that, you know that, right?" When Mark nodded and offered a small grunt in response, Ian went on. "Your first full day back at work probably isn't the best time to do that, right?"

He couldn't know for sure, but Mark thought Ian was using the same tone a shrink would use to talk a jumper off a ledge. "Yeah, I get that. But..."

"I'll be gone most of the day tomorrow, so this is a good opportunity."

Yeah, Ian could've been a shrink. "Right, okay." With an aggravated huff, he untwisted the sling from his shoulders and carefully passed the baby to Ian. "His colic kicks in around seven or eight, so I'll be back before then."

Ian lifted Leo onto his chest and kissed the top of his little head. "Okay, but I've dealt with colicky babies, so we'll be fine here either way."

Mark seriously doubted Ian knew what he was getting into with that offer. More than once he'd wanted to stuff Leo in a closet just to get some peace. He never did, but he'd had the urge. Why would Ian be immune to the frustration? "Have you eaten yet?"

"Not yet, no." Ian took a deep breath against Leo's hair, and Mark wanted to take the baby back. "When did he have his last bottle?"

Mark walked to the living room, and Ian followed. "About an hour ago." He grabbed his keys and tucked his wallet into his back pocket. "There's a bottle in the fridge. You know how to use the warmer?" Ian only nodded in answer as Mark lingered by the front door. "Need anything from the store?"

"I'm good, but maybe pick up one of those vibrating bouncy seats for Leo." As he spoke, Ian grabbed one of the baby blankets from the arm of the couch and shook it out with one hand. "And some soft toys, black-and-white if they have them. And a soft mirror." He managed to get it laid out flat and then sat down on the edge. "We're gonna have some tummy time while you're gone." He set Leo on the blanket and then stretched out in front of him.

Tummy time? Mark had never tried that. He watched as Leo pushed up on his arms and lifted his head slightly before collapsing back down, kicking his feet. Mark wasn't even out the door yet, and he felt like he was going to miss something. Damn it. "I'll be back in less than an hour."

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Just as Mark pulled up at the store, Ian sent him a picture of Leo, his little cupid's bow lips turned in a small smile—probably gas, but Mark liked those little expressions anyway. Leo looked like he was proud of himself for staying calm for so long. The picture included a message.

*We're fine here! Enjoy your time out of the house. :)*

Right. He needed to make this quick.

Unfortunately, there were too many goddamn options on the shelves at the mega baby store. Mark grabbed the first black-and-white toy he saw, tossed it into his cart, but then he thought better of it and sent a picture to Ian.

*Something like this?*

Ian texted him back quickly.

*Check the package for age range and make sure it's phthalate free. Preferably not from China.*

Wasn't everything from China? Turned out almost everything was. After a half hour, Mark had found three things that fit the bill. Two of them were even made in America. The vibrating bouncy seat brought another text exchange. There were over fifteen to choose from. How many variations could they have? More than enough, apparently.

By the time he was done with the baby shopping—*And, oh, btw, pick up some books! Unless you have some stashed around here that I didn't see?*—Mark decided to skip the grocery store. He and Leo could stock the cupboards tomorrow while Ian took the day off.

When he got back in the car, Mark looked at the time. Less than an hour had turned into just over two hours. Leo would be in full swing with his screaming within minutes, if he hadn't started already. Fantastic.

Before he pulled out of the parking lot, Mark called in an order for two pizzas—one cheese and one with everything. Ian could add stuff to the cheese, or pick stuff off the other.

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Loaded down with two huge shopping bags, Mark could hear Leo crying from the stairs. He took them three at a time, a knot of tension in his gut. He hadn't meant to burst through the door like The Incredible Hulk, but he couldn't help himself.

Ian jumped slightly when Mark rushed inside, but he didn't look all that surprised. "He's fine," Ian said softly, barely audible over Leo's bawling. "He's been fed and changed."

Mark dropped the bags in the entryway and barely paused to close the door behind him. "Yeah, I know the drill." He walked the few paces to Ian and reached for the baby. "He just gets like this. Doctor says it should go away in a couple months."

"I know the drill too." Ian smiled and grabbed the bags from the front door before he took a seat on the sofa. He pulled the little chair out and started to assemble it—only two pieces, thankfully. He looked up at Mark as he put a

blanket over the seat. “I’ll wash the cover in the morning, but the blanket will do for now.” Ian stood up and reached for Leo. “Let’s see if he likes it.”

Now wasn’t the time, in Mark’s opinion. Leo didn’t like anything from dusk until nearly midnight, but whatever. Ian would figure that out eventually. He watched as Ian set the baby in the bouncy seat, his little legs tucked up against his stomach, hands balled into fists. “I don’t think he cares for it so much.” He was about to take Leo back, but Ian hit the button on the bottom of the chair, the subtle vibration started, and then without warning, Leo went perfectly still and silent. He let out a few shuddering breaths, and when Ian touched his lips with the pacifier, Leo took it happily.

Mark let out a surprised laugh. “This feels like witchcraft.” He stared at Leo. Leo’s eyes were alert, face serene. His little legs even started to relax.

Ian looked pretty pleased with himself, smug, some might say. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Mark looked at him for a beat longer than he probably should’ve, trying not to wonder what other tricks Ian had. Their eyes met for less than a second, and Mark flinched at the sound of a fist pounding on the door. “Pizza’s here,” he muttered as he went to pay the driver.

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Sunday went well. Ian had left early in the day and didn’t come home until just after eight. Mark had taken Leo on a jog in his stroller, then went to the grocery store. He’d texted Ian to find out what he’d like to have on hand for lunches and such, but that was their only contact all day.

Leo had already started with his fit when Ian came home. Mark had tried the bouncy seat, but it didn’t seem to hold the same charm as it had the night before.

“Want me to take over for a bit?” Ian asked when he came in the door.

“Nah, I got it. He’s over the magic chair, I think.”

Ian leaned down to turn it off. Mark hadn’t even bothered with the switch when he’d picked Leo up from it. “Maybe it’ll work again tomorrow. Have you tried running the vacuum?”

“Not lately. I burned the last one out a month ago, didn’t wanna ruin the new one.” He didn’t bother to mention the two garbage disposals he’d gone through in less than a month. His neighbors at the old apartment—not to mention the manager—probably hated him, but he couldn’t care.

Ian looked at the speaker dock and back at Mark. “Music?”

Mark nodded, gritting his teeth. “Tried some Mozart and stuff a few times, but he hates it.”

“Tried any... Led Zeppelin? Or...” Ian tipped his head to the side and looked like he was considering an especially difficult math equation. “Maybe Queen?”

Classic rock. Tracy listened to it all the time. “Not yet, but...” He unlocked his phone and passed it to Ian. “Probably something on there.”

As soon as “Bicycle Race” sounded from the speakers, Leo stuttered to a stop. He took a shaky breath on Mark’s shoulder and then lifted his head slightly. The music wasn’t too loud considering the hour, but it seemed to do the trick. “How’d you know?”

Ian shrugged and gave Mark a smile. “Just a feeling.”

While Mark stood in the middle of the living room looking out the window at the parking lot and the skyline beyond, Ian straightened the room around them.

“Queen was her favorite,” Mark said quietly, still wondering if Ian had somehow known. It seemed like a pretty goddamn good guess.

Ian got down on his knees to pick up another stray baby sock from under the edge of the couch. “If she listened to it while she was pregnant—babies can hear stuff pretty well by the second trimester.” He stood up again and added the sock to the blankets and clothes he’d collected. “That’s probably why he likes it.”

Mark let out a breath against Leo’s head. “Yeah, probably.” He tried not to think about Tracy, the way she would grin when a song she liked came on the radio, the way she would crank it up and sing along, try to get Mark to join in the chorus. God, she was so... *alive*. It was so fucking wrong that she wasn’t here. She would’ve really gotten a kick out of Leo liking her favorite band. “This sucks,” he whispered to Leo. The baby rested his head again, as if in agreement. *Yeah, it sucks, but what can we do?* Mark kissed Leo’s cheek and smoothed a hand down his back as Ian went to put the laundry in the washer.

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Getting out the door Monday morning had been a challenge. Not because of an emergency, or Leo being too fussy. Mark simply hadn’t wanted to go. Ian

had been up bright and early with Leo in his arms when Mark went to get in the shower. When he got out and tried to feed Leo, Ian had insisted he'd be late and told Mark he had it covered. When Mark lingered at the door with Leo, talking softly to him, telling him he'd be home by six, Ian had told him the time, tried to assure Mark that they'd be fine. Mark didn't leave until Ian promised to text him during the day and send pictures.

He was being ridiculous. The kid didn't do much of anything, mostly slept and cried. Now that Mark was working, Leo would what? Start talking and doing a jig in one afternoon?

By the time he'd gotten to the office, his mind had wandered too much. He wasn't worried about missing anything now. As he parked his car, he was doing the math in miles. If Ian had left when Mark had, he could be on his way to Canada. Or Mexico. Hell, he could be at the airport and on his way anywhere in the world. Or he could've dropped Leo. He could be... Christ, he couldn't even stand the thought of all the shit Ian could be doing.

Mark walked through the office with his fists clenched around the strap of his messenger bag as if he could choke it.

Stephanie looked startled when he stormed in. "You look like hell."

Her words barely registered as he searched his pockets for his phone. In the few feet from his car to the building, Mark had decided to talk to Darren, tell him he'd be working from home or not working at all. He was going to call Ian and check in, then head home without telling him he was on the way.

When he didn't respond to Stephanie, she tried again. "Mark? Everything okay?"

"Huh?" Mark found his phone and went to pull up Ian's number, but there was a text with a picture. Leo was sound asleep in his bassinet.

*He's finished breakfast, had a book, and now he's sleeping.  
Stop worrying. :)*

Was Ian a fucking mind reader? "Sorry, Steph, just..." He looked up from his phone, saw the concern written in her expression, and propped himself against the reception desk.

"Miss him already?" Her knowing smile reminded Mark that she'd only gotten back from maternity leave a few months earlier.

"Yeah, that too." Mark leaned in and snagged one of the mints from the dish by her phone. "I just keep thinking—"

“What if the babysitter is crazy, what if there’s a fire, what if—”

“Christ, I hadn’t even thought about a fire.” Mark pulled his phone back out, about to call, but he stopped when Stephanie laughed.

“You’ve got separation anxiety. It passes.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Are your palms all sweaty? Little dizzy? Heart pounding?”

It’d gotten better, but... “Pretty much.”

“It’s a thing.” She nodded, looking sympathetic. “It sucks, but you get over it.”

Seriously? He’d managed four tours without PTSD, seen shit that would make most people go nuts, but a baby was going to turn him into a neurotic mess? His day was getting better and better.

She came out from behind her desk and gave him a quick hug. “Got any pictures?”

“Only about a hundred.”

By the time she’d cooed and smiled at the pictures on Mark’s phone, he felt a little better. He’d at least abandoned the plan to quit his job and go home to kill the nanny.

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Falling asleep at his desk probably wasn’t the best way to earn points with most bosses, but Darren wasn’t most bosses. Mark woke up to the smell of fresh coffee, Darren passing the cup in front of his nose like smelling salts. “Wake up, Sleeping Beauty, you’ve got a client in twenty minutes.”

Mark snapped his eyes open and sat up straighter. “Shit, sorry.” He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and checked his phone. There was another message from Ian.

*He looks good in green, right?*

The picture showed Leo in a fresh little pair of mint-green pajamas, smiling. Mark turned the screen so Darren could see.

“Little heartbreaker,” he said with a teasing smile before sitting across from Mark. “You feel up to doing some field work?”

“What are they after?”

Darren shrugged. “Setting up a new network and picking up some hardware for us to work on.”

“Can I go home when I’m done?” He hoped Darren knew he was joking, but, well, he wasn’t really.

With a laugh, Darren nodded. “Yes, you slacker, go home.”

Mark took a long sip from the coffee Darren had set on his desk and then grinned. “I guess now would be a bad time to ask for a raise?”

“It’s always a bad time to ask for a raise.” Darren leaned in and looked a little more thoughtful than he had a moment earlier. “Seriously, though, now that you’ve got the kid and all, you might wanna think about upping your 401K or something. I’ve got a financial advisor you can talk to. He set up savings and shit for the girls, got me to diversify my portfolio or whatever.”

Right. Christ. It wasn’t just about getting Leo to survive the next eighteen years in one piece. Mark had to consider his future and make plans for the kid in case he wasn’t there for it. Lovely. “Yeah, I hadn’t thought about that. Like, at all.”

“I’ll dig his card out for ya, leave it on your desk.” As they both stood, Darren added, “Don’t let the big picture overwhelm you, okay? Just... one day at a time, man.”

Darren didn’t usually throw his AA quotes around, so Mark figured he must have looked as edgy as he felt. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. One day at a time. Solid advice. “Thanks, boss.”

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His new client turned out to be a pain in the ass. What they actually needed and what they had told Darren they wanted were two very different things. Their hardware was fine, their network was fine. The problem was an extremely malicious virus they’d picked up somewhere, personalized, so Mark figured someone in their office had pissed someone off pretty good. He’d sort it out, but it was going to take a lot longer than they’d originally expected. The most annoying part, though, was getting home later than he’d hoped.

Ian had Leo on his shoulder when Mark got through the door. The table had been set with a nice looking dinner, the house was clean, and Leo looked just-out-of-the-bath fresh. Mark’s heart sank. He’d come to love bath time. “Sorry I’m late.”

Ian glanced at the clock in the kitchen. “You’re three minutes early...”

“I thought I’d be home an hour ago, so I guess it just feels late.” Mark had closed the distance between them and reached for Leo. “How’d it go today?” He’d whispered the question into Leo’s ear before kissing his cheek. The tension Mark had ridden throughout the day seemed to dissolve as Leo snuffled against his shoulder. “I missed you, little man.”

“Dinner’s ready if you are.” Ian turned to look at them and then paused, a tender expression on his face. “He did fine today, Dad. We took a little walk around the block and had story time, bath, the works.”

Dad. Huh. Over two months had passed and Mark had never called himself that. “I’m not his real dad.” He hadn’t realized how much it would hurt to admit that out loud. During the interviews with various nannies, they had probably all assumed he was the father and Mark hadn’t bothered to correct anyone. But no matter what the birth certificate said—now that he’d finally taken care of that—he knew he wasn’t really Leo’s family.

Ian narrowed his eyes as he set a bowl of salad on the table. “Don’t let my father hear you say that. Should you two ever meet, anyway.”

“You’re adopted?” Mark reached for Leo’s bottle on the counter, already warm and ready for him.

“No, but my younger brothers and sisters are.” Ian passed him a burp cloth and sat down at the table. Roasted chicken, wild rice, warm bread. Perfect. “Pop nearly decked a guy for calling them his fake family once.”

Mark tipped Leo into the crook of his elbow and watched him take his bottle. “The guy had it coming.”

Ian looked pleased. “Agreed, but it’s generally frowned upon in polite society.” As he served the food, he added, “You’re missing my point, though.” He waited for Mark to look at him before he went on. “Just because you’re not a *bio*-dad doesn’t mean you’re not his *father*. You’re the one getting up with him at night, changing his diapers, feeding him, loving him. You’re his dad whether you realize it or not.”

The idea probably should’ve sent a bolt of panic through Mark. Instead, he found it oddly comforting. Dads knew what they were doing, right? They had the answers, rolled with the punches. “How’s that sound, Leo?” he asked as he ran his fingertip down Leo’s nose. “Daddy has a nice ring to it, right?” Leo kicked his feet with a grunt. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

By the time Leo finished his bottle, Mark’s dinner had cooled considerably, but it was good enough. He ate with Leo lounging in his lap.

Ian stood with his own plate and set it in the sink. “I can take him so you can finish your dinner.”

“We’re good. You’re off duty, go relax.” Mark was strongly considering holding Leo the rest of the night. He’d missed the damn kid all day whether he would admit it out loud or not.

“All right,” Ian started to clear the dishes from the table—all but Mark’s—and went to clean the kitchen. He paused and looked at Mark for a beat. “Try to remember, part of taking care of *him* is taking care of *yourself*, okay?”

Mark nodded. He knew what Ian said was true. He’d learned from firsthand experience that sacrificing yourself often meant sacrificing everyone with you. Take care of yourself so you can take care of others. But holding Leo felt a lot like taking care of himself too. “Got it.”

They were silent for a few moments. Mark finished his dinner and carried his plate to the kitchen. He couldn’t help watching Ian for a beat as he leaned over the dishwasher. The guy had a great ass, no doubt about it. Then he felt like a perv for even thinking about the nanny like that. Holding Leo while thinking it added an extra wash of ick to it. He needed to distract himself. “Hey, how’s your driving?”

“Well,” Ian lifted his head as a devilish grin played on his lips. “I usually steer with my knee so I can text and take a hit off the crack pipe, but so far so good.”

Mark couldn’t stop the bark of laughter that slipped out. “I’m going to assume you’re joking.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “I’ve never even had a parking ticket.”

“Seriously? Everyone’s had a parking ticket or speeding...” Mark had more than a few of his own.

Ian shrugged before rinsing the next plate and sticking it in the dishwasher. “Mom and Dad said they’d pay my insurance while I still lived at home if I never got a violation. I learned to be a very cautious driver.”

“Smart parents. I bet you’re all pretty safe on the road.”

Ian shook his head as he rinsed the next dish. “My youngest sister is terrifying behind the wheel. Thankfully, she takes the bus everywhere she goes.”

Mark put some soap in the washer for Ian and kicked it closed. “At least she knows her limits.”

“There is that.” Ian dried his hands on a dishtowel and leaned back against the counter as Mark started the wash cycle. “Any reason you’re so curious about my driving skills?”

Oh, right. He’d had a point, hadn’t he? “Everyone at work wants to meet Leo. I was wondering how you’d feel about bringing him in Friday for a quick visit?”

Well, damn. The smile on Ian’s face was enough to light up the whole neighborhood.

Ian pushed his hair out of his eyes. “Yeah, I think we could work that into our busy schedule.”

Mark nodded to Ian and then bounced Leo in his arm as he kissed his head. “You wanna see where Daddy works, buddy?” Leo didn’t give him much of a response, but he did kick his feet in rhythm with Mark’s steps as he walked into the living room. They sat quietly on the couch for a few minutes, Mark making faces at Leo, tickling his feet through his little pajamas.

When Ian walked into the living room, Mark looked up at him with another smile. It had only been a couple of days, but he was getting used to the guy, used to having the help. He was starting to trust him, even. Coming home and finding Leo happy and well cared for went a long way toward soothing his nerves. “I think it’s safe for you to move your stuff in next week.”

Ian beamed at him, but didn’t say anything.

“If you’re comfortable, I mean. It’s working out for you?”

“Yeah, it’s working out.” Ian bit his lip, as if to stop himself from smiling. “Mom told me to invite you and Leo to family dinner on Sunday. No pressure, but you’re welcome if you want to.”

Mark thought about it for a beat. He liked the idea of seeing where Ian came from. On the other hand, meeting his family felt a little too personal. “I think I’ll pass, but thanks for the offer.”

Nodding as if he understood Mark’s reservations, Ian said, “I had a feeling you’d say that, but it’s an open invitation.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Mark smiled at him again and pulled Leo a little closer. He glanced at the time. Ten minutes past seven. “Hey, he’s not crying.”

As if on cue, Leo bunched his legs up and started to squirm. Mark shushed him and rubbed his back, but it was too late. Within a few seconds, Leo was crying with his hands balled into fists.

Ian rolled his eyes, teasing. “You jinxed it.”

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Getting out the door was easier every day. Friday morning, Mark knew he’d be seeing Leo in a few hours, so he was able to make it to the office a half hour early. Mark grinned as he walked into work. He cruised through his tasks and practically jumped out of his seat when Stephanie buzzed him from the front desk, telling him he had a visitor.

He found Ian and Leo in the reception area. Leo was still in his little infant carrier, and Ian was putting a tray of what looked like homemade fudge on the counter. Stephanie stood with him, along with two other girls from the office. “Will you tell your security guard it’s okay for us to hold the baby?”

Mark chuckled and nodded in response. “It’s cool, Ian. They can pass him around.”

Before Ian could free Leo from his carrier, Stephanie grabbed the baby—carrier and all—from his hand and took Leo over to the big soft chairs in the conference area. The rest of the office crew followed her like little kids chasing an ice cream truck.

Ian dug into the messenger-style diaper bag—the ducklings were cute, but they’d had to go—and pulled out Leo’s favorite blanket. “It’s kinda chilly in here.” He trailed after Leo and his entourage. Mark thought he was just making an excuse to stay close to Leo, but that was fine. Mark tended to hover over Leo himself, and he liked knowing Ian had the same instinct.

“*That’s* your nanny?” Darren had appeared at Mark’s side and was leaning against the front desk with a sticky looking piece of fudge between his fingers. “Are you two...?”

Mark shot him a disbelieving look. “Are you doing *your* nanny?”

He got a laugh for that. “Hey, I’m a happily married man.” Darren popped the candy in his mouth and talked around it. “Mariah could’ve hired Natalie Portman to watch the girls and I wouldn’t even look at her. The fact that she’d kill me in my sleep if I cheated on her has almost nothing to do with it.”

The idea of finding another person he trusted to look over Leo was enough to give him nightmares. “Well, I’d rather die of blue balls than have to interview another nanny,” Mark said firmly.

“Fair point. Mixing business with pleasure rarely works out well.” Darren paused for a moment and closed his eyes as he swallowed the fudge. “You

should definitely keep him happy, though. Does he cook too, or just candy and stuff?"

"Dinners have been good." His gaze was on Ian through the glass partition. Ian was letting everyone hold Leo, but he stayed close enough to intervene if needed. Mark couldn't suppress his smile. "He's good with Leo. That's all that really matters."

"Yeah, definitely priority one for a nanny." Darren was silent for a beat, and Mark glanced at him. He had a funny look on his face, as if he were about to deliver some really bad news. "Look..." Mark's stomach tightened at the tone of Darren's voice, and he prepared for the worst. "Mariah met this guy at the toddler yoga class. He and his partner broke up shortly after they adopted their daughter..."

*Oh.* Not bad news, just awkward. "And since I'm the only other gay guy on her radar, she thought we'd be perfect for each other?"

Darren snorted another laugh. "Basically. But, it's not just that. He's a single father too, but he's been at it for over a year now. She thought you two might wanna hang out, and he might have a few tips for you, that kind of thing."

Mark thought about it for a moment. Truthfully, he wasn't in the right frame of mind to start dating. He'd never really *dated* to begin with. He'd hooked up, had a few casual relationships, but that was pretty much it. Don't Ask Don't Tell had kept his private life *very* private for nine of his ten years in the military. After that, he'd been too busy adjusting to civilian life. Now he was too busy adjusting to parenthood and the world of responsibilities that came with it. "Yeah, I just... Thanks, but no thanks?"

"I told her you'd say that." Darren didn't seem bothered at all. He grinned at Mark. "If you decide you're ready to get laid, though, maybe you can meet him?"

Getting laid wasn't a problem, but Darren probably knew that. "Yeah, if there's a catastrophic event and every gay bar in the city suddenly shuts down and there are no longer thirty guys online in a fifteen mile radius from me who wanna hook up, I promise I'll give you a call."

Darren shook his head. "Slut. I'll tell Mariah you'd rather keep some professional distance between us and you."

"How can you say that with a straight face after calling me a slut?"

“I call my friends much worse.” Darren’s grin was wider than the Cheshire Cat’s.

Before Mark could say anything to that, Ian stepped over to them with Leo on his shoulder. “He’s getting a little fussy, almost nap time.”

Mark reached for Leo and pulled him close. “Are you all done with your visit, little man?” Leo kicked and squirmed as Mark leaned him back in his arms to see his face. “Did you have fun?”

Leo’s lips tilted up in a smile as he looked at Mark. Well hell. What more could a guy want? Even if it was only gas.

“Oh, hey.” Ian dug in the diaper bag again. “I brought you some lunch so you won’t starve.” He pulled out a plastic container with a sandwich and a salad.

Darren shot Mark an oddly smug look and said, “I’ll drop that on your desk on my way.” He glanced at Ian as he took Mark’s lunch. “Nice meeting you. Don’t let him work you too hard.”

Ian beamed at Darren. “I practically have to arm-wrestle him to let me do anything.”

“That sounds about right.” Darren nodded to both of them, paused to give Leo a soft pat, and then strolled away with a bounce in his step.

“Ignore him.” Mark watched Darren go, torn between amusement and total confusion. “I’ll walk you two out.” When Ian tried to take Leo to put him in his carrier, Mark pulled back without meaning to. “I got him.”

Ian simply shook his head and followed Mark to the small parking lot.

“Thanks for bringing him out today.” Mark tried not to watch Ian’s ass as Ian leaned into the car to buckle the straps of Leo’s seat.

When he stood up, Ian shot Mark a teasing look and tipped his head. “I serve at your pleasure.” His smile faded when he seemed to realize how many ways that comment could be taken. “I mean... Anyway, no problem. Your coworkers seem cool. Stephanie and Lila are really nice.”

“Greg didn’t give you too much shit?”

“Other than calling me *Manny* about eight times? No.” Ian laughed and didn’t seem too annoyed, but Mark knew how Greg could be.

“Want me to get back at him? I could probably think of a few ways to ruin his day...”

Ian checked on Leo one more time before closing the door. “I appreciate the offer,” he said in a playful tone. “But save it for when he really pisses you off.”

“All right, but the offer stands.” Mark could feel himself grinning. There was an odd pause where he wanted to... what? Reach out and hug Ian? Give him a quick peck on the cheek? Something. Nothing appropriate, but something. “We usually cut out early on Fridays, so I should be home before five tonight.”

“Cool.” Ian shot him another one of those prize-winning grins. “I’m making chicken masala for dinner. Hope you’re okay with Indian food?”

“Personal favorite.”

Ian seemed pleased with Mark’s answer as he ducked into the car with a small wave.

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Dinner was amazing, and the company just as good. Ian sat across from Mark at the table, and they exchanged tales about their travels, favorite places they’d been, some of the people they’d met. Mark avoided war stories, and Ian seemed to understand without having to ask that those topics were off limits. Leo had his usual spot in Mark’s lap, holding a soft toy that crinkled and squeaked at him. He couldn’t quite sit up on his own, but that was okay. Mark wasn’t ready to swap his lap out for a highchair yet.

Getting home early was nice. Mark was able to finish his dinner and still have an hour or two with Leo before he started his crying jag for the night.

Ian found them on the couch and sat next to Mark with two books in his hand. He reached out and ran his fingertip down Leo’s cheek, but he spoke to Mark. “You wanna read, or you want me to?” He opened to the first page of one of the small books.

“You can do the first one.”

Leo seemed more interested in sucking on his own fingers than the story, but Mark had been told by everyone—including Tracy when she was still pregnant—how important it was to read to babies. She would sit for an hour a day and read aloud to her growing stomach. Mark thought some of her choices were questionable at best. Dean Koontz didn’t seem like age-appropriate material, but she insisted it was about the sound of her voice, not the words.

As Ian went through the tale of a little pig with a lot of bad habits, Mark wondered if Leo missed Tracy’s voice as much as he did.

It had been nearly three months and memories, thoughts like that, still blindsided him. He had to close his eyes against it, and he hitched Leo tighter in his arms.

Ian paused in his reading, but he picked up again after a beat. When the story was over, he closed the book and set it aside. "It's okay to talk to him about her, ya know? Probably good for him."

"I do," Mark said softly. He'd almost gotten used to the way Ian seemed to read his thoughts. "Not often, but sometimes." When it didn't hurt too much. When he could laugh instead of cry. "I'll take the next book."

Leo went into Ian's arms happily enough, and Mark began to read, pushing aside all other thoughts. Focusing on each simple word seemed to help ease the ache in his chest. By the time he finished, he was able to smile again. Leo didn't grin back at him, but he looked at Mark and lifted one little eyebrow as if to say, *We're gonna be okay, Dad.*

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Two more weeks passed in a blur of work, midnight feedings, and getting more acquainted with Ian. They fell into a routine fairly easily. Most nights, Mark would get up with Leo, but Ian would take over for him in the mornings. Mark would leave for the office, and Ian would have dinner ready when he got home. Ian had weekends off. He was supposed to be off the clock when Mark got home, but Ian rarely abandoned them in the evenings. That suited Mark fine. He—surprisingly—found he liked having the company of another adult. He also liked having someone who would take an extra diaper duty so Mark could get a shower. But mostly it was the company he liked.

Ian had an odd sense of humor, not to mention an uncanny—almost creepy—instinct when it came to, well, most things. Mark was getting used to it, but, Jesus, it threw him off balance sometimes. Like the time Ian had held him up before work, seeming like he was making up shit to talk about, despite the fact that Mark was rushing to get out the door. When Mark started truly questioning Ian's sanity, Ian tipped his head to the side and said, "I guess that's all I needed to ask you. You can take off now. Drive safe." If Mark had left ten minutes earlier, he probably would've been crunched between the semi and the horse trailer instead of sitting in the mess, safe and sound, albeit ridiculously late.

Mark had to admit, Ian threw him off balance in other ways too. The first time they passed each other in the night, Mark heading for the bathroom as Ian

was coming out, Mark had wanted to push Ian up against the wall and kiss him until neither of them could breathe. That night, Ian had hit all of Mark's buttons with his bare chest, his wild hair, his sleepy, friendly eyes. Even his unguarded smile seemed to say, *Here's your chance.*

He didn't take that chance, of course. But Mark had wanted to. Being in such close proximity to someone as cute as Ian was clearly a bad idea for the moment.

Mark decided it was time to do a little something for himself, as Ian kept suggesting.

Before leaving the office, Mark sent Ian a quick text.

*Mind if I come home a little late tonight?*

*Not at all. Want me to hold dinner for you?*

Christ, Ian was a nice guy.

*Thanks for the offer, but I'll be home pretty late. Don't wait up.*

*Ohhhhh. ;)*

Mark laughed at Ian's response, but felt oddly guilty at the same time. Because he was missing out on time with Leo, or because he was missing out on time with Ian, Mark wasn't even sure.

He picked familiar ground to go cruising. A club with plenty of hot guys who had sex on the brain and little else. The place was basically a meat market bathed in glitter and flashing colored lights, but Mark had been a regular there before Leo. He'd duck in once or twice a week, pick someone up, and have a fine time, no strings attached. Instant (or near enough) gratification for the bargain price of a twenty dollar cover charge. Perfect.

He used to come in at midnight, though, not eight when the doors opened. It was like walking into a different world. The dance floor looked lonely—empty and dirty—as the lights came on. Two other men came in with Mark, but it turned out they were friends of the bouncer. They talked in a corner while Mark made his way to the bar.

Mark ordered a beer and looked around. "I don't think I've ever been in here this early." He nodded at the blonde barback and got a shrug from her in return. "When do things pick up?"

"Not till ten, usually," she said over the absurdly loud music. "Until then it's older guys, some closet cases looking to score before they head home to

their wives, and—when we’re very unlucky—jocks from the stadium after an early game who don’t get the reference in our name.” Hole in the Wall. Mark had been amused the first time he’d come here and found there weren’t any glory holes in the bathroom.

He didn’t feel like waiting two hours, watching the crowd build. Mark pulled out his phone and was about to look for someone online who might fit the bill, but there was a picture from Ian. Leo wrapped up in a soft blanket with a smile on his face. An actual smile and not just a quirk of his facial muscles. The message was what got Mark, though.

*Look who isn’t crying!*

Christ, it felt like victory. The doctor had said it could take up to four months for the colic to do its vanishing act and Leo had just reached three months old.

Mark grinned at his phone and then took another sip of his beer. Before five minutes had passed, though, he got another text from Ian.

*Never mind. Spoke too soon. If you’re reading this, put your phone away and have some fun!*

“Cute kid.” The bartender had swapped out Mark’s empty with another and leaned over to see the pictures Mark was scrolling through.

“Thanks.” Mark looked up with a broad grin, then realized how stupid it was to take it as a compliment. Leo was definitely a cute kid, but DNA wise, Mark had nothing to do with it. The odds on Leo having Mark’s straight brown hair and bright blue eyes were zero. “I picked the outfit.”

The bartender—Trina, according to a nametag she was now wearing—wiped down the counter and came around to Mark’s side. “Good taste,” she said.

They stood there for the better part of a half hour, Mark looking at each picture, Trina indulging him out of her own boredom probably. The club started to fill slowly, but Mark barely noticed.

One of Mark’s favorite pictures of Ian and Leo together popped up next. “That your boyfriend?”

Mark shook his head. “My nanny.” His friend too, maybe.

*“Damn.”*

She summed it up nicely. Mark could only agree as she went back around the bar to serve a customer.

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“You’re home early.” Ian looked up from his spot on the couch and closed the book he’d been reading.

“Yeah, well.” Mark kicked off his shoes and sat down next to Ian. “Apparently standing at the bar and scrolling through pictures of an infant isn’t exactly enticing to the average guy looking to hook up.”

“That’s probably a good thing.” Ian laughed and stretched his arms over his head. His shirt rode up just enough for Mark to see a patch of bare skin above the waist of his sweats.

“True.” Mark looked away quickly, feeling restless. “The bartender agreed that Leo is the cutest baby ever, though, so she got a good tip.”

Ian grinned and said, “At least someone got what they wanted tonight.”

Mark stood up and walked to the kitchen, talking to Ian over his shoulder. “What time did Leo go down?”

“About an hour ago. Only cried for two hours tonight.”

“I should’ve just stayed home.” Mark grabbed a beer from the fridge and popped the cap off. “I don’t get enough time with him as it is.”

He hadn’t noticed Ian getting up from the couch, and Mark jumped when he turned to see him in the kitchen.

Ian smiled, but shook his head. “You need time for yourself too, Mark. It’s okay to go out once in a while.”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Mark took a swig from his beer and leaned back against the counter. “Darren and I are negotiating me working from home a day or two a week. If we can work that out, maybe then I won’t mind missing a few hours here and there.” At the question written on Ian’s face, Mark added, “I’d still want you to keep the same arrangement, if you don’t mind. I’d still need a hand with Leo so I could get stuff done, ya know?”

“I’d just get the boring stuff like diaper changes.”

Mark laughed at that. “Exactly.” He reached into the cupboard and pulled down a bag of chips. “Mind if I watch some TV?”

Ian was at the fridge pulling out sandwich makings. “Nah. If I don’t like what you watch, I’ll just go hide in my room.”

“I’ll try not to torture you too badly.”

Mark flopped down on the couch and turned on the television. He had no idea what was on this time of night, so he pulled up Netflix and started an episode of *Flashpoint*.

When Ian came back to join him, he handed Mark a plate with a thick sandwich.

“Wow, you didn’t have to do that.” Mark sat up and made room for Ian.

Ian only lifted an eyebrow and twitched his lips into a half smile. “I know.”

Mark had already taken a bite so his mouth was full as he muttered, “Thanks.”

“Does that mean I get to pick the show?” Ian’s tone was teasing, but maybe hopeful too. He looked at the television and then back at Mark. “This is what you watch in your downtime? Seriously?”

Slightly embarrassed, Mark wiped his mouth on the napkin Ian had given him with his plate. “What? I like cop dramas, sue me.”

Ian stared for a beat, but instead of running to his bedroom, he sat down next to Mark. By the third episode, he was even asking Mark questions about the characters. “What happened to Lew? How’d he die?”

“Stepped on a landmine.”

“Ouch.”

“I know, right.” Mark finished his second beer and leaned back near Ian. “He and Spike were best friends.”

They watched in silence again. When the episode ended, Mark looked at the time. “Hell, Leo’ll be up in an hour for his bottle.”

“Might as well start another one, then.”

Mark arched a brow and nudged Ian with his elbow. “Thought you didn’t like cop shows.”

“I never said that.” Ian rolled his eyes. “I only like *some* cop shows is all. But that last one was a cliffhanger, I wanna see what happens.”

“Right.” Mark pulled up the next episode.

Before the credits rolled, Leo was awake and ready for a diaper change. Ian took care of it while Mark made his bottle.

When he passed Leo back to Mark, Ian said, "I better get some sleep or I'll be a zombie tomorrow."

Mark bounced Leo in his arms and walked through the apartment, turning off lights and locking doors. "Thanks for tonight," he said quietly, hoping to get Leo back to sleep soon.

"No problem." Ian's smile was sleepy, relaxed. "Any time you wanna head out for a night, it's cool."

Oh. Right. Mark had meant thanks for the late dinner and putting up with his show and talking with him. Too late to go into all that, though. "Cool."

When Mark finally went to bed that night, it didn't take him long to nod off, but in the few minutes before falling asleep, he thought about Ian.

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"You're still here?" Darren stepped into Mark's office, looking surprised.

Mark had been so slammed with a new client all week, he barely knew what day it was, let alone the time. After five on a Friday. No wonder the office was so quiet. "The Jarvis account needs a lot of hand-holding."

Darren grinned at him. The asshole. "Driving you nuts?"

"Little bit." Mark leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"Sorry about that, but I knew you'd be the only one with the patience for them."

Darren was probably right, but that didn't mean Mark had to like it.

"You should get outta here. Go home. Or better yet, go get laid." Darren smiled again and turned for the door.

Getting laid was a fantastic idea, but all Mark wanted to do was go home and hold Leo, and maybe talk to Ian for a while before bed.

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Leo was in his bouncy seat when Mark got home. As tempted as he was to pick him up for some cuddles, Mark went to the kitchen instead.

"I hope you're hungry." Ian pulled a roast out of the oven.

“Starving.”

“Good. I was thinking I could use the leftovers for stew meat, but I think there’ll still be a lot.”

Mark washed his hands at the sink behind Ian. “Maybe save some out for sandwiches too?”

“That would work. Maybe an improvised Philly cheesesteak or something.” He looked at the roast again. “Now I wish it was bigger.”

“That’s what she said.”

Ian snorted a laugh. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Sorry, it’s been a long hard one.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Ian practically giggled, but so did Mark.

Leo started to fuss before Mark could say anything else. He stepped over to the bouncy seat and unbuckled the strap. “Did you think I was ignoring you?” Leo settled and smiled for Mark. And that? That was a good reason to come home. “Daddy just needed to clean up first, that’s all.” He kissed both of Leo’s cheeks and then lifted him higher so he could kiss Leo’s tummy too.

When he turned, Mark found Ian leaning against a counter, watching him and Leo. A fond expression played on his features, but all he said was, “Dinner in twenty.”

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When seven rolled around, Mark felt like he was holding his breath. They’d had one night without the colic, but Mark wasn’t convinced it was over. Ian went about his business, washed some laundry, and picked up the living room.

By eight, Mark lifted Leo above his head and then down to his lap again. “Your doc was right, wild man. You’re all done with that BS now, aren’t you?”

Leo straightened his legs against Mark’s and did a little kick before turning his head as if looking for Ian when he spoke.

“He held on a little longer than some kids. I think he really wanted to hit that four-month target before calling it quits.” Ian sat down next to Mark. He had a book of fairy tales in his hand and a bottle ready.

“Maybe that’s a good sign?” Mark liked the idea. “He’s not a quitter.”

“Definitely.”

Mark let Ian read the story that night. He wouldn't admit it, but he secretly liked hearing Ian's voice. Leo seemed to like it too, so that was a good enough excuse, right?

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With the apartment silent and Leo tucked away for the night—or at least for four hours, with any luck—Mark stretched out in bed. Darren's comments earlier in the day about getting laid ran through his head. It had been a while. A very *long* while, truth be told. He hadn't even bothered trying since his last failed attempt. Maybe it was time to give it another shot? Ian had said he'd stay with Leo if Mark wanted to go out, hadn't he?

He pulled up his favorite app on his phone and scrolled through the bios of guys in his area. He wasn't looking for anything serious or long term, just someone who wanted to get together for an evening. Mark flipped past several before he came to a familiar face and froze. Ian. Hmm. He couldn't really name all his feelings in that moment, but surprise and—why, he wasn't sure—even jealousy were among them.

When he'd vetted Ian, the dating profile didn't pop up, just the usual social networking sites. Curiosity got the better of Mark, and he read through Ian's info. He'd only signed up for the app a few weeks earlier, which explained why Mark hadn't run across it before he'd hired him.

Ian was looking for friends (without benefits) and a meaningful long-term relationship. Mark couldn't help his snort of laughter. He wagered Ian didn't get too many hits with that for his opening line. Most guys—Mark included—would swipe him into oblivion with a loud *next!* Despite the adorable profile pic with Ian's smiling face, his hair falling over his forehead.

Mark continued reading and got to Ian's likes and dislikes. They had a lot more in common than he'd realized. Same taste in books and movies, even the same favorite TV shows. Their music only met in the middle, but that was okay. Not that Mark was considering Ian. Darren was right about mixing business with pleasure.

With a frustrated huff, Mark swiped Ian's profile and stuck his phone on the nightstand. He needed sleep more than he needed sex. Probably.

Less than a minute later, before Mark had even gotten comfortable, his phone buzzed with a text. From Ian.

*Did you just send me a flirt on my dating profile??*

Goddamn it. His entire body prickled with unease, anxiety running through his veins like fire ants. This was a whole new level of embarrassment. A level Mark hadn't even known existed until that moment.

*Shit, sorry! That was an accident.*

Ian texted him back quickly.

*LOL. I saw you on there too, but we were clearly not looking for the same thing. :P*

Christ. Lovely. That meant Ian had seen his one line of interest: "Casual sex with a hot bottom who doesn't want me to call him the next day."

Should he try to explain in person? Walk across the hall in his boxers and look Ian in the eye? Hell no.

*Heh. Yeah, sorry about that. I always forget if it's a left or a right swipe. I... Damn, you're not feeling, like, sexually harassed or...?*

He hit send before he could change his mind.

Ian's response almost made him smile. Almost.

*LMAO. Not harassed, but highly amused. G'night, Mark.*

Dandy. Now he looked like an asshole *and* an idiot.

*I'll just crawl into this hole I've dug for myself. Sleep tight.*

He could actually hear Ian laugh from his bedroom.

*It's all good, no worries. ;)*

Right. No worries. He just hit on his nanny over the Internet, but no big deal, right?

He definitely needed sleep more than he needed sex.

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Leo slept for five straight hours. Mark only had to get up with him once during the night. He'd forgotten what it felt like to be well-rested. As he got Leo ready for the day, Mark felt good enough he could almost forget the awkward text exchange from the night before. Well, not really, but he wasn't scowling as he changed Leo's diaper.

"We're gonna have to go shopping this weekend, little dude." He stripped another too-tight pair of pajamas off the baby and tossed it onto a pile of other clothes he'd outgrown. "Sound like a good plan? We can give Ian the day off."

Mark finally found something that fit—a tiny pair of jeans with a T-shirt and a baseball jacket. It was the only outfit Tracy had bought that wasn't completely unisex. She'd reasoned at the time that girls play baseball too, and it would still work if she was wrong and the kiddo turned out to have double X chromosomes.

It hit him suddenly. Leo was wearing the last outfit Tracy had picked for him. He couldn't fit into any of the other little things she'd gotten. This was it. Even the blankets she'd bought would be too small soon.

He looked at Leo for one more long minute, feeling like he could choke on the tears welling behind his eyes. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Maybe we can sneak out before Ian gets up, ya think?" Mark lifted Leo onto his shoulder and ran his fingers through Leo's hair. It was starting to curl at the ends. Tracy would've been so jealous. "Daddy made a fool of himself last night, so maybe we can just avoid him all day, yeah?"

He walked Leo over to the crib where he'd hung a picture of Tracy on the wall. He was about to turn Leo around so he could see her when Ian's voice sounded from the doorway.

"You know the baby monitor is still on, right?" Ian grinned at him and then walked past to the bathroom.

"Christ. I can't catch a break," Mark muttered as he pressed his face against Leo, wishing he could hide.

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Ian was in the shower by the time Mark was ready to leave. He knocked on the bathroom door and then opened it a crack. "Hey, we're gonna take off, just so ya know."

"You want some breakfast before you leave?" Ian asked through the shower curtain, his voice muffled in the steam and running water.

"Nah, it's your day off. I'll grab a bite somewhere while we're out."

Mark tried not to picture Ian in the shower, rinsing his hair, running soapy hands down his body.

"You guys have fun. I'll see ya tonight." Ian cut the water off, and Mark pulled back quickly.

"Sounds good. I'll lock up on my way out." Mark didn't wait for Ian to say anything else before bolting for the door.

When he got his car unlocked, Mark swore colorfully and then said, “You didn’t hear that, Leo.” In his rush, he’d forgotten the car seat. He tossed the diaper bag in the passenger seat and trudged back upstairs only to find Ian halfway down the steps. He held his towel up with one hand and Leo’s seat in the other.

“I think you forgot something.”

Ian’s smile was pretty disarming most of the time, but half-naked Ian with water beading on his smooth chest and his damp hair framing his happy face? Mark nearly tripped on the next step.

“Thanks.” Mark reached for the carrier and tried to look away. “I’m a little spacey this morning, apparently.”

“Probably because you skipped breakfast.” Ian grinned again before turning back up the stairs toward the front door.

“Yeah, that must be it.” Mark rolled his eyes and forced himself to head back down to the car. When he was sure Ian was back in the apartment—well out of earshot—he said, “Daddy’s gonna get himself into some deep shit trouble if he keeps this up, buddy.” He didn’t have much experience with these things, but he was fairly certain lusting after the nanny was a bad idea.

He juggled Leo and the carrier for a minute and finally got everything secure in the backseat before getting into the car. “Let’s get you some new gear and see if I can keep my foot out of my mouth for one day, okay?”

Leo wasn’t much of a conversationalist, but Mark didn’t mind. He popped in one of Tracy’s CDs and said, “This was one of your mommy’s favorite songs.” He told Leo about the time they’d gone to a concert, how much Tracy liked music and dancing. He edited out the part where she got shitfaced and tossed her top on the stage. They were both teenagers at the time and entitled to a little stupidity, but Leo didn’t need all the details.

For the first time since she died, Mark was able to talk about her without getting choked up, without feeling the unbearable weight of grief pressing down on him. He missed her, but missing her didn’t feel like it was going to break him anymore.

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After a torturous trip to the mall and a long walk on the beach, Mark was considering what they could do with the rest of their afternoon. He changed Leo’s diaper on the hood of the car—easier said than done, but mission

accomplished—and had just gotten him back into the car when his phone buzzed at him.

*Think you'll be home in time for dinner?*

Ian, of course.

*Yeah, we're about done with our little outing.*

Ian responded quickly.

*I'll get some dinner going. See you guys soon. :)*

Mark really had been hoping to avoid Ian for the day, but some small part of him missed the guy too.

*It's your day off, remember? I'll cook. Stir fry okay?*

Ian's answer had Mark grinning like an idiot.

*As long as you don't give me food poisoning, it sounds great. Might wanna pick up some bell peppers. The one in the fridge has seen better days. And you're out of beer. :P*

Their exchange felt so... domestic. He had to remind himself that Ian was his roommate and—most importantly—his employee.

*Beer and bell peppers, got it. Any requests?*

He hit send and then got in the car. Leo wasn't fussing yet, but he was probably close.

*German import? Or did you mean in general?*

How messed up was it that he could hear Ian's voice in the text? Probably very. Mark tapped out a response before putting on his seatbelt.

*In general, but noted on the beer.*

Ian's answer was simple, no reason for Mark to smile to himself as he read it.

*Nothing else I can think of.*

Before he pulled out of the parking spot, Mark thought of something and sent a quick text without reading it back to himself first.

*Oh, hey, what kind of meat do you like?*

He cringed when he got Ian's answer, but he laughed too.

*LOL. I'm not sure how to answer that.*

“Smartass.” Mark huffed another laugh before responding.

*Okay, now you're doing it on purpose. Do you prefer chicken or beef? If chicken, white or dark? :P*

Damn, he was really starting to like this. Were they flirting? It felt like flirting. Even Ian's next text made his pulse thrum a little faster for no reason other than who the message was from.

*It's not my fault you make it so easy! But I'm good with whatever. Not tofu, though. Blargh.*

He sent one last text to Ian.

*Tofu isn't food. See you soon. :)*

Mark tucked his phone away and glanced over his shoulder at Leo. He sat quietly, looking out the back window with heavy lids. He was way past nap time. “You wanna get some groceries and head home to see Ian?”

He didn't expect an answer from Leo, but Mark was pretty sure it would've been yes.

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Ian opened the door for Mark before he even got it unlocked. He reached for the bag of groceries in Mark's hand. “There's a bottle ready in the kitchen.”

Mark set the car seat down in the living room—the very clean living room. “You really have a hard time with the concept of taking a day off, don't you?”

He got a shrug and a smile from Ian. “If I lived alone, I would've been cleaning today, so...”

“Fair enough.” Mark unhooked Leo from his carrier and picked him up. “You mind holding him for a minute while I run down and get the rest of the stuff from the car?”

Ian didn't answer Mark, but he reached for Leo. “Your daddy asks the silliest questions. Would I *mind* holding you? Ridiculous.” He kissed the side of Leo's face as Leo let his head drop against Ian's shoulder. “Who would turn down baby cuddles?” His voice went up an octave or two when he talked to Leo. Why was that so endearing?

Mark cleared his throat. “I'll be right back.”

“He's about ready for a nap.”

“We both are.” Mark joked, turning for the door. He paused before going out. “He’s probably hungry if you wanna start him on his bottle. Even though it’s your day off.”

Ian turned to Mark and said in an amused tone, “You can give me a bonus come Christmas if it makes you feel better, okay?”

“Deal,” Mark said before going back downstairs for the rest of the purchases.

When he got back inside, he found Ian sitting on the couch with Leo in his arms.

“Did you have a fun day with your dad?” Ian shifted him a little, holding the bottle for him, and Leo reached his hand up to curl his fingers around Ian’s.

Mark was tempted to grab his phone. He wanted to snap a picture of them, but then he reconsidered. Was that a weird thing? Taking a picture of Leo with his nanny? Probably. “He had a great time. Every sales clerk on the mall told him how cute he is.”

Ian looked up at Mark with another one of his bright smiles. “Well, they’re not wrong.”

Mark dropped the bags on the floor and locked the door. “Right?” Leo may have been the outcome of an anonymous one-off, but whoever Tracy hooked up with that night must have had some decent genes. “I’m probably biased, but he’s the cutest baby *I’ve* ever seen.”

Ian huffed a soft laugh as Mark sat next to him on the couch.

“He’s almost out. You want me to pass him over?”

Mark leaned in and kissed the top of Leo’s head. He realized too late how close he was sitting next to Ian and pulled back. “If you’re happy for now, I’ll go get dinner started.”

A tender expression Mark couldn’t quite read took over Ian’s features. “I’m happy.”

Something about the tone of Ian’s voice had Mark swallowing hard. His own voice was gruff when he said, “Okay, I’ll... leave ya to it, then.”

Halfway through cooking, Ian came into the kitchen. “I tossed some of the new stuff in the washer. Leo’s out like a light.”

“We’ve totally screwed up his sleep schedule, haven’t we?”

Ian nodded, smiling. “Probably, but he’ll readjust.” He opened the cupboard and pulled down two plates. “I can take over tonight when he gets up so you can get some sleep.”

Mark shook his head as he tossed the vegetables around the skillet with the chicken. “It’s the weekend. I’m fine getting up with him.” He never thought he would actually enjoy walking the floor with Leo when he was up in the night, but Mark had at least gotten used to it, if not learned to love it.

“Well, I won’t argue, then.” Ian’s tone was light, almost teasing as he got the flatware from the drawer and started setting the table.

“Good.” Mark was tempted to smack Ian on the ass with his spatula, but he thought better of it.

One meal, three beers, and lots of casual banter later, Mark cleared the table. Ian hopped up to help, and Mark didn’t bother trying to stop him. They cleaned the kitchen together with such ease that it felt natural, as if it was part of their nightly routine.

“Hey,” Ian said as he started the dishwasher. “Mom wanted me to reissue the invite for dinner.” He looked almost bashful and then said, “I told her you probably wouldn’t be able to, but, yeah.”

Maybe it was a bad idea. Maybe Mark should try harder to keep some boundaries in place, but instead of listening to logic, he listened to his gut. “Yeah, that’d be cool. Maybe next weekend?”

Ian beamed at him, bright as the sun. “I’ll let her know.”

“Should we bring anything?” Dinner with the family. Yeah, this was a bad idea.

“I’ll make some desserts—Mom’s a great cook, but she gave up on baking decades ago. I’ll text her later and see if there’s anything else we should bring.”

“Cool.” Mark glanced around the kitchen, feeling awkward and a little off kilter. “I was gonna watch some Netflix for a bit. You wanna join me?”

“Depends on what you’re planning to watch.” Ian’s voice was one-off, part dubious.

“The new season of Ripper Street is finally up. Thought I’d marathon a few episodes.”

Ian’s eyes lit up. “That’s one of my favorites.” Apparently *historical* cop dramas were okay.

“I know. I saw it on your dating profile.” Mark got an unexpected laugh for that. “Grab us a couple beers, and I’ll start it up?”

“I’ll grab *you* a beer. If I have another one, I’ll fall asleep before I finish it.”

Ian had only had one earlier, and he nursed it all through dinner.

“Lightweight,” Mark teased.

“Hey, at least I’m a cheap date.” Ian seemed to realize what he’d said a second too late. His cheeks flushed slightly, and he looked like he was about to say something else.

“You should add *that* to your profile.”

Ian muttered something that sounded a lot like *jackass*, but Mark couldn’t be sure. He laughed instead of asking Ian to speak up. “Meet ya on the couch.”

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They watched three episodes together, chatting here and there. Mark tried not to think about how comfortable he felt in Ian’s company, how normal it seemed to sit with him in the evenings, relaxing together, how easy it was to talk to him.

He knew Leo would be up soon and was debating starting another one when Ian said, “Hey, um... since Leo’s outgrown his newborn clothes... My mom does a lot of quilting and stuff, makes them for charities and baby gifts, whatever. But she could maybe make one for Leo? She’d have to cut all his old pajamas and things into quilt squares, so it would pretty much ruin them but might be a way to keep the stuff his mom got him, ya know?”

Damn. Mark could feel the backs of his eyes burn. How the hell did Ian do that? Mark hadn’t said a word to him about wishing Leo could keep the little things Tracy had gotten him, wanting Leo to be able to wrap himself up in his mother’s love even though she was gone, even though he’d never really know her. He had to take a deep breath before he could answer. “That’d be amazing. If she doesn’t mind, I mean.”

“It was her idea.”

Mark had a feeling that was only half true, but he wasn’t going to argue. “Well, I really appreciate it. Thank you.” Leo saved him from an emotional breakdown with a small cry over the baby monitor.

Ian stood when Mark did. “I’ll go get his new jams from the dryer.”

Mark only nodded in response. He still didn't trust himself to speak more than necessary. Thankfully, Leo wouldn't expect much from him in that regard.

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Mark felt unreasonably nervous as he got ready for dinner on Sunday afternoon. They were supposed to be there at five, along with Ian's brothers and sisters. Thankfully it was a "small" affair and wouldn't include the aunts and uncles and cousins.

Ian had made three desserts and was still in the kitchen packing the cheesecake into a container so it would survive the drive.

"You wanna go meet Ian's family today?" Mark asked Leo as he fixed the snaps on Leo's khakis. He wasn't usually into clothes—especially not baby clothes—but his shopping trip the week before had been fruitful. He'd found a little retro-looking outfit for Leo, complete with an argyle sweater vest and a button-down shirt that was still a tad too big for him.

"Wow, you two look sharp," Ian said from the doorway.

Mark hadn't gotten used to the way Ian seemed to appear from nowhere. "Man, you're stealthy." He picked Leo up and turned to face Ian. "You said your mom insisted on dressing for Sunday dinner."

Ian waved a hand at his own outfit. "I meant slacks instead of jeans, and no T-shirts. You didn't have to break out the Armani."

"It's not *Armani*," Mark countered with a laugh. He checked himself in the mirror and adjusted his tie. Dark purple against a matching shirt. "It's just a suit. Should I lose the jacket and tie?"

"Don't you dare." Ian reached for Leo. "I better take him, though. If he spits up on me, no one will notice."

Mark followed Ian to the living room and watched as he put Leo into his carrier.

"My car or yours?"

"Mine." Mark grabbed the covered dishes from the kitchen counter. "I've already got the base for Leo's seat in there."

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They made a quick stop at the store on the way to dinner. Mark picked up a bottle of wine and, on impulse, grabbed a nice bouquet of flowers. It made the

whole thing seem even more like Meeting The Parents, but Mark was still feeling pretty touched by the offer to make a quilt for Leo. He figured he owed her a few dozen bouquets.

Ian had waited in the car with Leo while Mark ran in, but his cheek dimpled with a grin when Mark tucked the flowers in the backseat with Leo.

“Nice touch,” Ian said as Mark pulled on his seatbelt.

“Well, she’s feeding us, after all.”

Ian tipped his head in agreement. As Mark pulled out onto the road, Ian said, “I feel like I should give you a heads up or two before you meet the entire family.”

Interesting. “What about?”

“Well—turn left at the light. Mom treats everyone like family, so don’t be surprised if you get hugs and if she highjacks Leo all evening.”

Mark got into the left lane and waited for the light to change. “Okay, I think I can handle that.”

“Dad was a Marine for twenty years, so he might give you some shit if the Army stuff comes up, but only if he likes you.”

Glancing at Ian, Mark couldn’t help a grin. “Little backwards, isn’t it?”

“I know, right? But it’s a good sign if he gives you a hard time.”

Mark followed along with the rest of the Sunday traffic and merged when Ian told him to make a right.

“My brother Dave... He’s not exactly neuro-typical, if you get my meaning.”

“Not in the slightest.” Mark put his blinker on and stopped at the next light.

Ian laughed at that, but he said, “It’s like... you can’t tell there’s anything up with him at first, but he has *no* brain-to-mouth filter. Like, *at all*. He just says the first thing that comes into his head and sometimes it can seem blunt or... really tactless, but he doesn’t mean anything by it, ya know?”

“Is he autistic or...?”

“Nah, it’s one of the more mild side effects of FAS, but he doesn’t have many of the other markers for it, and since we don’t know much about his birth-mom’s prenatal care and pregnancy, it’s hard to get an accurate diagnosis.

They thought it was ADHD for a long time, but therapy and socialization did more for him than meds, so..." Ian shifted in his seat and turned toward Mark. "He's gotten a lot better over the years, learned some impulse control, but he still surprises us sometimes with the stuff he says. And at home, he's more comfortable with the family and we're sort of his... external brain, so he's more likely to say something inappropriate."

Mark turned again when Ian gestured at the next light. "Gotcha. So, don't take offense if he asks me if I'm queer—"

"Or where Leo's mom is, or if you ever killed anyone in the Army, or if you're my boyfriend, or how much money you make at your job..."

So, hugs from the mom, shit from the dad, and awkward conversations with the brother. Mark made mental notes before saying, "As families go, that's not too bad." He dropped his speed once he turned onto the smaller residential street. "My sister is allergic to kids, so I probably won't see much of her until Leo is in high school, Mom can't even boil water and sends me presents on Angela's birthday and—I'm assuming—something for Angela on *my* birthday. Dad will talk your ear off about sports scores and the game he just watched, but that's as deep as he gets. And he still thinks I'm straight and the whole homo thing is just a stage I haven't outgrown yet."

"But you love them anyway." Ian hadn't asked a question, he'd stated a simple fact.

Mark nodded in response. "They're a mess, but they're my mess. Wouldn't trade 'em for anything."

"Last house on the left."

Right. They'd had a destination and a point to the whole conversation. Mark pulled into the driveway and let out a deep breath. "Anything else I should know before going in?"

Ian looked thoughtful for a moment. "Sandy is in law school and overly opinionated about everything. Carla will probably ignore you—social anxiety, nothing personal. Jerry is really laid-back and friendly, but he's a total pot head. Steve and his wife Nancy are good people, outdoorsy and into hiking and rock-climbing and stuff. Their four- and five-year-olds are better at fishing than I am." He grinned and added, "But that's not saying much."

"So I shouldn't ask you along on Leo's first camping trip?"

"I camp. As long as there's a bathroom and an air mattress."

Mark laughed as he opened the car door. “That’s not camping.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “So I’ve been told. Repeatedly.”

Before they were both out of the car, the front door to the house swung open. “You’re late!” A very happy looking woman stood in the doorway with her hands on her ample hips and her graying auburn hair pulled back in a loose knot.

“Three minutes, Mom!” Ian called back, waving to her. He reached for Leo’s diaper bag as Mark unlatched Leo’s car seat from the base and pulled him out. “I brought your favorite dessert, so that should even things out.”

She came down the walkway and threw her arms around Ian’s shoulders. “I suppose, but I get extra hugs.”

Ian looked like a ragdoll as his mother squeezed him. He glanced at Mark and said over her shoulder, “You’d think she sees me once a year, not once a week.”

“Seeing you one day a week means I miss you *six* days a week.” She planted a loud kiss on Ian’s cheek and then swiped her thumb over it, wiping away the traces of her lipstick. Ian looked mortified and Mark couldn’t help laughing again.

That was probably a mistake because she pulled back from Ian and came around the car. “You must be Mark.”

He was able to avoid a hug because he had Leo’s carrier in one hand and the flowers in the other. “Yes, good to meet you.” Mark blanked on her name, so his greeting ended abruptly. He could feel his palms start to sweat. This whole thing felt like new—potentially hazardous—territory for some reason he couldn’t name.

“Rachel,” she said with another warm smile. When Mark passed the flowers to her, she beamed at him, looking more like Ian than Mark would’ve thought possible. “These are lovely, thank you.”

Apparently all she needed was for Mark to have one free hand. She folded him in a tight hug and said, “You’ve got a good feeling about you.” Mark was nonplussed over that one, but she turned to look at Ian and asked, “Doesn’t he?”

Ian only nodded, and he didn’t quite meet Mark’s eye when they looked at each other. “So let’s not make him stand around in the driveway all night, Mom.”

“Fine.” Rachel patted Ian’s cheek when he came closer. “I’ll help carry things in.”

Without another word, she reached for Leo. Mark didn’t try to argue. Instead he shot Ian a teasing look.

Ian still seemed mildly embarrassed, but he said to his mother, “So your offer to help carry things was really code for ‘give me that baby’?”

With the flowers in one hand and Leo’s carrier in the other, Rachel chuckled and looked over her shoulder at her son. “Have you met me?” She headed inside, talking to Leo on her way. “Let’s get you out of this seat so I can get a good look at you, okay?”

Ian called after her, “Don’t get any ideas about that baby. He’s spoken for!”

Mark couldn’t help a bark of laughter at the exchange. “Your instincts to warn people are spot on.”

“I know, right? She’s like that with all of us.” Ian handed Mark the diaper bag and then reached inside for the dessert trays. “She’s crazy, but in a good way.”

Mark had to agree. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for the rest of the clan, but he followed Ian inside anyway. If nothing else, they had Leo.

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Rachel stood at the stove with Leo on her hip. “Dinner will be ready in about forty-five minutes.” She smiled at Mark and added, “Leo can help me in here. There are snacks in the family room if you two are hungry.”

Leo seemed happy enough, and Mark noticed that Rachel held him well away from the pots on the stovetop. “If he fusses—”

“I’m sure I can find you.” Rachel hitched Leo a little higher on her side.

Ian tugged at Mark’s elbow. “You’re never going to win this battle, Mark.”

The family room was fairly crowded already. Ian made the first introductions with Nancy and Steve, their two kids Stevie Junior and Mary. Mary barely glanced at Mark, and Junior—as the family called him—looked up at Mark with wide eyes and a shy smile.

The unmistakable scent of pot clung to a guy with shaggy blond hair and bright, glassy green eyes. “You must be Jerry,” Mark said with a soft laugh.

“Whoa, that’s weird. How’d you know?”

Ian nudged Jerry. “Because he can smell dope, dope.”

Jerry didn’t seem put off by the tease. “Oh, right.”

“Where’s Pop?” Ian looked around and then back at Jerry.

“In the garden.”

“Gotcha.” Ian smiled at Mark. “That usually means he wants to be left alone until dinner.”

Mark felt a tug on his jacket and looked down. Mary held a small plate with crackers and cheese and grapes on it over her head. “Um. Excuse me, Mark. Um. Would you like some?”

*Not really.* “I would, thank you.” He took it from her and got a huge grin in return. Mary was the image of her father, dark olive skin, hair so brown it almost looked black, and dark almond-shaped eyes. She did a little twirl that made her yellow dress fluff out and then ran to her mother. “Okay, that was adorable.”

Ian leaned in and whispered, “She’s got the world eating out of the palm of her hand, but she’s one of the sweetest kids on the planet.” He paused and then glanced at Junior. “Her brother is a holy terror once you get to know him. He put a frog in my shoe once.”

When Ian didn’t pull away, Mark fought the urge to slip his arm around Ian’s waist. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He distracted himself by popping a grape into his mouth.

“Are you Mark?”

Mark turned his head and found a tall guy with broad shoulders and an easy smile standing next to him. “Yeah, you must be Dave?”

Dave nodded and shook Mark’s hand. “Excellent deductive reasoning skills.” From anyone else, it might have seemed like a sarcastic jab, but Dave sounded sincere and pleased. “I mean that as a compliment. Some people aren’t so good with that. Of course, some people are idiots.”

Mark tried not to laugh, but, man, the guy had a point.

Ian chimed in, though. “*Dave...*”

“Sorry, that’s not a nice word.” Dave didn’t wait for Mark to respond to that. He looked pointedly at Ian and then Mark and said, “You and Ian stand close together. Are you sleeping with him?”

Choosing that precise moment to eat a cracker had been a huge mistake. Mark inhaled sharply at the question, breathed in one crumb too many, and then started to choke. His eyes watered, his lungs burned, and—for a few seconds—Mark figured he was going to die like that. Four tours in Afghanistan couldn't kill him, but one blunt question combined with a painfully dry cracker would be his undoing. Fantastic.

As Mark coughed and sputtered for air, he could hear Ian—calm and kind as ever—say to Dave, “That was over the line, buddy. If Mark lives, you owe him an apology.”

Jerry appeared with a glass of water for Mark. He took it gladly, cleared his throat with a long sip, and finally inhaled slowly. “I’m fine,” Mark said as he glanced around the room and saw Ian’s family looking at him in alarm. Ian ran his hand in smooth circles over Mark’s shoulders. Pity he’d been too panicked to enjoy the sensation.

“Sorry, Mark,” Dave said in a contrite tone. Mark felt a stab of guilt for some unknown reason. It eased with Dave’s next comment. “There’s nothing wrong with it if you are. I was just curious.”

“That’s not the point, Dave, and you know it.” Ian’s voice was quiet but firm.

Dave looked at his brother. “I know that. I just didn’t want him to think I was a homophobe or something.” He rolled his eyes and then said to Mark, “But I’m sorry for overstepping. You okay?”

“It’s all good.” Mark was torn between laughter—which would have been completely inappropriate, he knew—and wanting to run away and head toward home. Also inappropriate, but whatever.

Dave smiled at him and asked, “Did Ian tell you I don’t have a filter?”

“He mentioned it, yeah. No worries.”

“Cool.” Dave’s smile turned into a grin, and Mark found himself grinning back. “Sometimes I wish I could just wear a sign so people wouldn’t get all butthurt over it when I say something I shouldn’t.”

Mark did laugh then. “People would just find something else to get butthurt over.”

“That’s what *I* always say, but everyone acts like soft-stepping the truth to fit in is better. What’s wrong with being honest?”

Before Mark could respond, Ian looked at him and said, “Don’t undo two decades worth of therapy by agreeing with him, please.”

Maybe Mark did agree with him on some levels, but instead, he raised a hand in surrender. “I’m not saying a word.”

“Ha! You don’t have to,” Dave said loudly. “He totally agrees with me.”

Rachel came in from the kitchen with Leo. “I think he needs a change, dear.”

Thank God, a distraction.

He looked at Ian who nodded his head toward the hall. “I stuck his diaper bag in my old bedroom.”

Ian’s old room looked like a guest room now. Plain walls and plain carpet, mission style furniture, not much personality. Mark wondered what it had been like years earlier when Ian was growing up.

He changed Leo on the bed while Ian sat next to them.

“Sorry about Dave, he—”

“Ian.” Mark looked up at him and smiled. “It’s fine, really. You warned me. He seems really nice.”

A look of relief washed over Ian’s face. “He is. He’d hike barefoot in a snowstorm to rescue a friend. He just needs to work on his impulse control is all.”

Mark wrapped the—thankfully only wet—cloth diaper in a plastic bag and tucked it away. “I know.” He looked into Ian’s eyes. “There’s a lot to be said for always knowing where you stand with someone. Dave couldn’t fake it if he wanted to.”

Ian held Mark’s gaze for a minute and then whispered, “You’re right. That’s not really a bad thing.” He glanced away and added, “I just remember him getting beat up at school because he said the wrong thing to the wrong kid. Being so relieved when he hit a growth spurt and started looking tougher than the other guys in his class. He’s had a hell of a time, and I just want it to be easier for him, ya know?”

Thinking of Leo being bullied or teased made Mark’s jaw clench. “I get it. But I’m not about to... think badly of him or anything, okay?”

“Thanks,” Ian said softly.

Mark looked down at Leo again and—as if he'd been doing it his whole life—Leo stretched his arm over his head, reaching for Ian's hand, and suddenly turned onto his stomach.

“Holy shit, did you see that?”

Ian laughed at Mark's reaction. “He's been trying for a few days now, but that's the first time he managed it.”

“Okay, *that's* the coolest thing that's ever happened.” He'd heard Leo babble, but nothing really sounded like a word yet. He'd watched Leo grow, but he was still a baby. Seeing him turn over like that, reaching for what he wanted, it felt like the most amazing thing in the world. Mark rubbed Leo's back and kissed the top of his head. “You're awesome, little man.”

“Just wait until he starts crawling.”

Mark let out a deep breath as he picked Leo up. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Ian said, his smile lighting Mark up inside.

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Dinner went considerably better than the meet and greet. Rachel held Leo at one end of the long table, and Ian's father Stan sat at the other end.

Stan reminded Mark of a bulldog. He had thick, strong arms and wiry gray hair, eyes the same color as Ian's, but he was an inch or two shorter. He laughed easily and seemed friendly, but Mark could picture him breaking a beer bottle over someone's head if they pissed him off. The air around him seemed to crackle with a quiet warning. *Don't fuck with my family and we'll get along just fine.*

Carla sat next to Jerry and didn't say much to anyone but him. She did give Mark a smile when he caught her eye, but that was about it.

Sandy sat across from Mark. He'd made the mistake of asking her about law school. She was in the middle of a long monologue about the different teaching styles of her various professors and then, before anyone could get a word in, went on to talk about a case she was researching for a paper. Mark didn't mean to tune out in the middle, but he couldn't help it. He could tell she wasn't going to quiz him when she was done, and he only needed to look engaged and nod his head.

When she finally wound down her story, Mark said, “That sounds really interesting.”

Dave, sitting next to Mark, said, “No it doesn’t.”

Mark had to fight a smile. Especially when Dave leaned in and whispered to Mark, “I’m not even apologizing for that because everyone was thinking it.”

Sandy had already taken up a new conversation with Nancy about a salon they were going to the next weekend, but Stan looked pointedly at Dave.

“Sometimes it’s not just about being polite, David.” Stan sliced another bite of ham and stabbed it with his fork. He spoke quietly to Dave, but Mark could hear him. “We’re *family*. Everyone gets to share what’s going on in their life, and it’s never okay to make someone feel bad for it, understand?”

Stan’s words seemed to speak to Dave on a different level, as if something new was registering. “Yes, sir,” Dave said quietly, nodding. “Thanks, Pop.”

Stan grinned at Dave and patted him on the shoulder.

Mark suddenly understood what Ian had meant about being Dave’s external brain.

Ian leaned in from Mark’s other side and asked quietly, “Think you can make it through dessert?”

With a nod and a smile, Mark said, “Wouldn’t wanna miss out on the cheesecake.”

Ian didn’t say anything but he seemed pleased.

Mark felt like crawling under the table a moment later when Stan looked at him and said, “Ian tells us you were in the Army.”

“Yes, sir, ten years.”

Stan held his gaze and nodded thoughtfully. “Couldn’t hack it until retirement?”

Before Mark could say anything, Rachel cut across them from the other end of the table. “Stan. Leave the boy alone.”

Mark couldn’t remember the last time he’d been called a boy, but he appreciated her effort.

“I’m just giving him a hard time.” Stan waved his hand dismissively and then winked at his wife. “I would’ve dropped out of the Army too.” He looked at Mark again. “Should’ve joined the *Marines*.”

Ian looked like he was about to protest, but Mark beamed at Stan. “What can I say? I was young.”

Stan nodded and laughed. “Can’t blame ya for that, can I?”

Mark felt like he’d passed some kind of test as everyone moved on to new subjects.

Over dessert—the cheesecake was fabulous, but so were the strawberry pie and the maple cookies Ian had made—Mark asked Stan, “How did you and Rachel meet?”

Stan pushed his empty dessert plate away. “We had mutual friends, met at a party while I was home on leave and she was still getting her nursing degree.”

Mark thought it was over, but Mary rose up on her knees and said, “Tell the rest, Grandpa.”

Grinning indulgently at his granddaughter, Stan went on. “We exchanged addresses and she wrote me letters and sent care packages, all that stuff. We went on about a year like that. I’d come see her when I was stateside, she sent me pictures. She was my girl.” He cleared his throat and leaned back in his seat, still talking to Mark, but he looked down the table at Rachel. “One night, home on leave again, I kissed her good-night outside her apartment. She looked up at me, moonlight in her hair, smiling at me, and said, ‘You and I both know where this is going to end, Stan. Why don’t you just propose already?’” Stan shook his head. “It was the damndest thing. I’d bought her a ring while I was stationed in Japan, hadn’t told a living soul about it, but it’d been burning a hole in my pocket for over a month.”

Mark thought he knew the answer already, but he asked, “Did you ever ask her how she knew?”

With another nod, Stan said, “She told me it was just a feeling.”

Mark nearly whispered the words along with Stan. He looked at Ian, who had his eyes firmly on his slice of pie. Ian’s cheeks were almost the same color as the strawberries. “That’s a hell of a thing.”

“You get used to it after a few decades.” Stan added with a smile for Rachel. “If she ever tells you not to get on a plane, listen to her.” He sounded like he was joking, but Mark thought if Ian ever gave him that sort of advice, he’d probably take it.

Rachel laughed, lifting Leo higher in her arms when he tried to squirm forward, reaching for a spoon. “I only told you not to fly because I didn’t want you getting drunk and making an ass of yourself at that reunion. Not because your plane was going to crash.”

“Still, better safe than sorry,” Stan teased her again.

Rachel rolled her eyes at him. “The plane *didn’t* crash, did it? You make it sound like I should run a psychic hotline.”

Dave leaned in and whispered to Mark, “I bet he never cheated on her, though.”

Mark tried not to laugh, but Stan must have heard Dave’s comment.

“Damn right I never did. I’ve seen her debone a chicken in four slices. You don’t step out on a woman who knows her way around cutlery.”

Ian’s family was a hodgepodge of crazy, but Mark could feel the love in the room as they teased each other. He looked at Ian, who finally met his eye and shrugged. He didn’t say anything, but the message was clear. *This is me, take it or leave it.*

All Mark wanted to do was reach under the table and find Ian’s hand, give him his own silent answer. But Leo started to fuss and the spell was broken. Mark hopped up from his seat. “He’s probably ready for his bottle.”

Just like that, he remembered all the reasons why Ian was a bad idea. Leo needed him more, and if things went sideways, Leo was the one who would hurt the most for it.

Before Rachel handed Leo over to Mark, she turned him in her arms and looked into Leo’s eyes with a teasing smile. “You need to work on your timing, kiddo.”

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Leo was sound asleep in his carrier by the time they headed to the car. Stan had carried a box of Ian’s books from the garage and put them in the trunk. He said good-bye to Mark with a firm handshake and a slap on the shoulder.

Before Mark could duck into the car, Rachel came to him. Ian was locking Leo’s seat in place and didn’t seem to pay any attention to them.

“Mark,” Rachel said quietly. “Mind if I offer you a bit of advice?”

A nurse who had raised six kids was going to offer him advice? Yes, please. “Sure.”

“Sometimes the most obvious choice is obvious for a reason.”

Oh. “Sometimes it’s more complicated than that.” Why beat around the bush?

Rachel laughed then and shook her head. “No it’s not.”

She didn’t say anything else to Mark, only walked around the car to hug Ian. Mark could hear her say to Ian, “You boys take care of each other.”

“That’s my job,” Ian answered happily.

His mother rolled her eyes at him.

Mark carefully pulled out of the driveway. “So you get that creepy mind reader stuff from your mom?” He was mostly joking. Mostly.

Ian laughed at his side. “It’s not mind reading. And it’s not *creepy*, jackass.” He leaned back in his seat and stretched his legs. “It’s just... sometimes I can read people, that’s all. If something’s a big deal, I can pick up on it. It really is a feeling, nothing more.”

“Is everyone on your mother’s side like that?”

“Here and there,” Ian said absently, glancing over his shoulder at Leo in the backseat. “My great-aunt, now *she* was the creepy one. If she told you to stay out of downtown or avoid a bridge, you *listened* to her. Her brother died when he was sixteen after Aunt Odell told him not to go off with his friends one night. They were mugged and my uncle was stabbed.”

“Shit, that’s messed up.” Mark had heard similar stories before. Nothing that could ever be proven with science, but some weird coincidences if nothing else.

Ian nodded in agreement. “Yeah, really. Before she died, she told me to stay off boats. I’ve never even gotten in an inflatable raft.”

“Seriously? Not even a ferry ride?”

“Nope.” Ian looked at Mark. “Would you have? I mean, it’s not like anyone *needs* a boat ride or a cruise.”

Fair point. “Yeah, probably not.”

Ian was quiet for a moment as Mark drove home from memory. “I think Mom really likes you.” Ian’s voice was soft, barely audible, and Mark wondered if he’d meant to say it at all.

“I’d be worried if she didn’t, given her... ability.”

“*Ability*,” Ian echoed with a snorted laugh. “I’ll have to tell her you said that.”

“She probably already knows.”

Ian laughed again, louder this time. “She does *not*. You just don’t like the idea of someone seeing past your stoic facade.”

That was probably true, much as Mark hated to admit it. “See? You’re just as bad.” Mark nudged him with his elbow so Ian would know he was kidding. When he glanced at Ian, Mark could see his grin.

“Don’t you forget it.”

Mark nearly told Ian how much he liked the family, but then he decided Ian had probably figured that out already.

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Monday morning, Mark sat at his desk. He was between tasks, drumming a pen on the glass top and thinking too much. He’d had a restless night, mostly because he couldn’t get Ian out of his head, couldn’t get rid of Rachel’s voice in his ears. *Sometimes the obvious choice is obvious for a reason*. Did she have a point? Probably. Was it still a bad idea? Maybe.

Even if things didn’t end badly between him and Ian—assuming he was right and Ian was having the same ideas Mark was—how would that even work? Would he keep paying Ian even after they hooked up? That seemed weird. Would he have to find a new nanny to keep him and Ian on even footing? That was out of the question. And, hey, it wasn’t like Ian was his only shot at being with someone, right? It wasn’t even like Mark *needed* to be with anyone seriously. He needed to get laid. He needed a friend he could hang out with when it was convenient, someone who would also enjoy a quick fuck every now and then.

Unfortunately, for the first time in Mark’s life, that didn’t seem like nearly enough. He’d come to enjoy—too much—sitting down to dinner every night with someone he liked, talking about the day, about Leo. He’d started to want... *more*. He’d started to want someone he could spend time with, share jokes with, someone he could trust, someone he could raise Leo with.

When Darren knocked on the doorframe, Mark looked up. “Yeah?”

“You look like you need something to do.”

“Unless you’re happy paying me to sit around on my ass all day.” Mark pushed his chair back and stretched his legs under his desk. “I mean, I’m fine with that, but it seems like a bad idea on your end.”

“I’d be happy to, but we’ve actually got a paying customer in need of your expertise.” Darren sat across from Mark and fiddled with a stray rubber band on

Mark's desk. "Just sent you an email with the details, but they've had Idiots Are Us look at their gear three times now and it's still not working right. Their office is on your way home, so you get the privilege."

"Can do."

Mark pulled the email up on his laptop, but before he could read it, Darren said, "I've got you set to start working from home on Wednesdays. No promises I won't call you in from time to time, but for now, I think we can work it."

Monday or Friday would've been better, but who the hell was Mark to complain. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

"You won't thank me when you start doing all the troubleshooting for people who barely know how to turn on their computers."

They both cringed. Mark knew the remote calls were the drudgework, usually pushed off on the person with the least seniority who still needed to prove they knew what they were doing. Or the person no one liked in the office but that had only happened once and he quit within two weeks.

Darren stood to leave, but Mark stopped him. "Hey, that guy Mariah wants me to meet?"

"Yeah?" Darren looked surprised, but didn't comment.

"Tell her I'll meet him if he's still interested." It's not like Mark believed in The One. Maybe this guy was just door number two and worth investigating.

Darren looked at him for a beat. "You sure? I mean, I've never met the guy. He could be a total dick for all I know. Or as uninterested in a blind date as you are."

"At least we'll have something in common."

"Especially if he's a dick *and* uninterested." Darren grinned broadly before turning toward the door.

"Love you too, buddy." Mark got a loud laugh for that.

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Dinner was on the table when Mark got home. Some Mediterranean dish he'd never tried before. It smelled good, though.

He found Leo on a blanket in the floor with a few toys. Mark scooped him up on the way to the table.

“You look hashed,” Ian pointed out as he set a bottle of beer on the table by Mark’s plate.

“*I feel* hashed.” He sat at his usual spot and took a long sip of his beer. “Picked up a new client today. Some other guys have tried to fix it, and I swear they just made a bigger mess for me to clean up.” Mark turned Leo around to face him. “Did you have a good day?”

Leo babbled at him and reached for Mark’s face.

“He had a great day,” Ian said as he took a seat across from Mark. “He learned a new trick.”

A mix of joy and disappointment spread through Mark. He hated missing out on Leo’s accomplishments.

“I got it on video.” Ian seemed to understand Mark’s mixed emotions, the way Mark wished he could be in two places at once. “He can show off after dinner.”

“Cool.” Mark looked at Ian and felt his smile grow wider. Christ, he needed to stop looking at the guy like that. “I got some good news from Darren.” He paused to take a quick bite of his dinner before going on. “I can work from home on Wednesdays starting next week.”

Ian looked pleased. Delighted, actually. “That’s great. Now we just need to get Leo on board with only doing new stuff on Wednesdays.”

Mark dipped his head and pressed a kiss to Leo’s cheek. “If only the kid were that cooperative.” Leo grabbed Mark’s nose and pulled his face closer. Mark let him, breathing a soft laugh against Leo’s hand.

The three of them were quiet for a moment as they ate, but Mark finally asked, “Would you mind if I’m a little late on Friday night?”

“Of course not.” Ian pinned him with one of his assessing looks. “Hot date?”

He could feel his cheeks flush, and Mark probably told Ian everything he wanted to know simply by avoiding his eye. “Darren and Mariah invited me for drinks after work.” That was completely true, so why did Mark feel like he was lying? Ian waited quietly, like a cop who knows he’ll get a suspect to spill all if he just stares long enough. Mark cleared his throat and looked at Leo. “And Mariah has a guy she wants me to meet, so...”

Mark still couldn’t look at Ian, but he could hear the snort of laughter from his side of the table.

“I don’t mind watching Leo so you can go out, Mark. We agreed to four nights a month when I signed on, remember?” Ian’s tone was easy enough, and he didn’t seem bothered at all.

“Good point. Thanks.” Still, though. Mark tucked into his dinner and tried not to think too much. He felt like he’d just gotten permission to cheat on Ian.

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Working from home went better than Mark had expected. He was on house arrest from nine until five, but otherwise, it was great. He got to see Leo for hours at a time, which was the best part of the deal.

It turned out Leo’s new trick had been sitting up on his own. He needed pillows for extra support because he toppled over without them, but still. It was pretty cool to stretch out on the floor with him and hand him toys, watch him play, see the curiosity in his eyes when Mark would surprise him with something new.

His favorite game was peek-a-boo. He’d watch Mark hide his face behind his own hands and then laugh when Mark would reveal himself. Ian said it was good for Leo, helped him learn that Daddy would always come back. Mark just liked the giggles he got from Leo.

If someone had told him five months ago that the best part of his day would be making the kid smile, Mark would’ve called them crazy. Who knew?

Friday rolled up on him faster than he’d expected. Mark had even forgotten about his plans for the night more than once.

He was on his way out the door Friday afternoon when Darren stopped him. “You wanna follow me over to the bar, or should I give you a lift?”

Right. Damn it. Mark always regretted impulse decisions and this blind date was no exception. “I’ll follow you over. What time are we meeting them?”

Darren scoffed. “Mariah’s on her second cosmopolitan and the guy—*Patrick*, FYI—just got there.”

“See ya there, boss.”

Mark put his hands-free on as soon as he got in the car. Ian had texted him a few times with updates and pictures of Leo, but he wanted to check in anyway. He waited for Darren to pull out so he could follow him before he called home. “How’s it going over there?”

He could picture Ian smiling just by the tone of his voice. “Everything’s fine here. Leo took an early nap, but otherwise it’s all good.”

Mark stayed close to Darren’s car, but his attention was on the conversation more than it probably should have been. Thankfully, Darren had said the place was nearby.

“Is he coming down with something? There’s still time for me to cancel if you’d rather I come home and give you a break,” Mark said hopefully.

He could hear Ian’s lighthearted exasperation over the phone.

“He’s probably getting ready for a growth spurt, or getting used to sleeping through the night. He’s *fine*. I’d tell you I won’t answer any more calls from you, but that’s just a guarantee you’d come straight home.”

If nothing else, Ian knew him well. “All right. If anything changes, don’t hesitate to call.”

“Bye, Mark.” There was a teasing, singsong lilt in Ian’s tone as he hung up.

“Fine,” Mark muttered to himself as he pulled out the earpiece.

Darren wasn’t kidding about the place being close. Mark flipped his turn signal on with a bit more force than he’d intended and pulled into the parking lot of a little Chinese restaurant and lounge. The building looked about eighty years old, but whatever. They had booze, right? And Darren had referred to the Crab Rangoon as a foodgasm, so at least there was that.

He parked next to Darren, and they walked in together. It wasn’t quite five yet, so the lounge was fairly empty. Mark spotted Mariah and then looked at the man sitting with her. Short brown hair, inviting expression on his admittedly handsome face, nice build... A year ago, Mark would’ve nodded him away from the table and exchanged blowjobs before the appetizers had arrived.

Darren whispered, “You know I prefer innies over outties, but, damn.” He laughed when Mark did and then added, “My wife’s got good taste.”

“How’d she end up with you, then?” Mark teased, laughing harder when Darren elbowed him in the ribs as they got to the table.

Introductions were quick and friendly. Patrick stood up and shook Mark’s hand and then said, “We went ahead and ordered some drinks for you guys. Mariah claimed she knew what you’d like.” He flashed Mariah a winning smile as they took their seats.

“Club soda with a twist for Darren, and Bowmore on the rocks for Mark,” she said, looking pleased.

Mark took his whiskey neat, but letting the ice water his drinks down was probably a good idea since he’d be driving home later. Maybe he should’ve taken Darren up on the offer for a ride.

Patrick took a sip from what looked like an amaretto sour and then said to Darren, “Mariah said you’re okay with...” He didn’t finish his sentence, but everyone at the table knew what he was talking about.

Darren said easily, “Just because I’m allergic to the stuff doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it.” He shrugged and added, “I’m an asshole when I drink. Sober, I’m—”

“Slightly less of an asshole.” Mark shot Darren a teasing look, and Darren tipped his head in agreement.

“Yeah, that.” Darren nodded in thanks when the waitress dropped off their order with another round for Mariah and Patrick.

Going out for drinks with a recovering alcoholic used to seem rude to Mark, but Darren insisted it didn’t bother him. He provided plenty of liquor for the office Christmas parties and took his employees out for a shot on their birthdays. He once told Mark that his white-knuckle days were behind him for the most part, but he still went to meetings every Sunday. Mariah called AA his church, and Darren thought it was pretty fitting.

After a minute of chatting, Patrick said to Mark, “Mariah tells me you have a son.”

Without thinking first, Mark pulled out his phone. “Yeah, name’s Leo.” He opened the picture file and showed Patrick a snapshot of Leo sitting up, grinning. He scrolled to the next one, a shot Ian had sent him the day before. Ian held Leo in his arms, their faces close together. They looked incredibly happy.

Patrick laughed and joked, “Cute couple.”

That got Darren’s attention. He leaned over Mark’s shoulder and looked at the picture. “You’ve got pictures of your nanny?” Darren didn’t add anything to that, but he shot a sympathetic look toward Patrick, as if the guy had just been told to hit the road.

“I’ve got pictures of *Leo*. Ian just happened to be holding him.” Mark rolled his eyes at Darren and tucked his phone away.

Patrick had fished his own out and pulled up a few thousand pictures of his daughter. “This is Cassidy.”

Mark looked at the photo from what was probably her birthday party. The pile of presents was taller than her. “She’s adorable.” She even wore a little princess crown with pink jewels in it.

“Thanks,” Patrick put his phone away and leaned back in his chair. “I’m probably spoiling her rotten, but it’s hard to resist. Girl stuff is so cute.”

“It’s not much easier with boys. Leo can’t even crawl yet, but he’s got a tiny pair of Converse.” Mark laughed and added, “Ian won’t let him wear them for more than an hour, though. Something about his bare feet forming better.”

Darren didn’t say anything, but Mark noticed him check his watch, as if he were clocking how long it had taken him to mention Ian. Mark tried to ignore him.

“I’ve heard that too.” Patrick didn’t seem to notice Darren. “Cassidy still had six pairs, though.”

Mark nodded his head in understanding. Baby stuff was an easy topic, and they found a lot of common ground. By the time the appetizers were on the table, though, Mariah said, “Mark, did you know Patrick does a lot of volunteer work with homeless youth? He’s also working on a community garden in his neighborhood.”

How was he supposed to know that? Mark didn’t ask, but he tried to sound interested when he said, “How does the community garden work?”

Patrick was happy to tell him and, in truth, it sounded kind of cool. Maybe not Mark’s thing, but nice for people who liked getting to know their neighbors by digging in the dirt with them. All Mark wanted from his neighbors was to be left alone, but that wasn’t really the point.

“Do you do any kind of community service or volunteer work?”

Patrick’s question was polite enough, but Mark suddenly felt like he’d been put on the spot.

“Does recycling count?” He didn’t appreciate Darren’s snort of laughter.

“It’s a start,” Patrick said with a friendly smile. Still, if Mark hadn’t been sure already, that was the moment that guaranteed they wouldn’t be bothering with a second date. He’d already decided he wouldn’t bother with a second drink.

Darren had been right about the Crab Rangoon. It practically melted in Mark's mouth. And in Mariah's defense, Patrick was a catch. He was hot, well educated, and seemed to have a good heart. None of that mattered much, though. By the time Darren was paying the bill, Mark knew the most he'd want from Patrick was a quick fuck, and the guy was clearly looking for more than that. Mark was pretty sure he'd find it, too. Just not tonight, and not with him.

Mariah seemed slightly disappointed that the evening was over so quickly, but she gave Mark a tipsy, sloppy kiss on his cheek anyway. "It was good to see you again."

It registered suddenly that the last time he'd seen her was at Tracy's memorial service. Mark had been a mess, and Leo had been bawling in his arms for most of it. Damn. He gave her a quick, tight hug and smiled at her when she pulled back.

Patrick shook Mark's hand again, said how nice it was to meet him. Neither of them asked to exchange numbers and relief washed through Mark. Mutual disinterest was so much easier to deal with.

"I'm driving," Darren said with a laugh. "Go get the car unlocked." He fished his keys out and passed them to Mariah. "We'll come back for yours tomorrow."

She wobbled on her high heels and didn't disagree. Patrick offered her his arm and they walked out together.

"I guess that could've gone worse," Darren commented, laughing.

"Much, yeah. He seems nice, but..."

Darren shrugged and looked at Mark like he'd thought it was a long shot to begin with. "Well, at least the wife will lay off me about it now."

"Hopefully she won't meet any more single gay men for a while," Mark joked as they headed for the exit.

"Safe bet." Darren shot him a teasing look. "Guys like that don't grow on trees, ya know."

"That'd be a hell of a tree."

"This just got weird. I'll see ya Monday."

Mark laughed and gave Darren a little push before heading to his car. He thought about calling to check on Leo, but he knew Ian would've texted him if

there was a problem. Instead he took the long way home, hoping the sunset over the lake would clear his head.

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“How’d the date go?” Ian asked as soon as Mark walked in. His smile seemed a little tight and it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“It’s not quite eight. That’s how it went.”

Ian seemed to relax then and stood up, joking, “That good?” He started to turn for the kitchen, talking over his shoulder. “I just got Leo to bed, but—”

Mark stopped Ian with a hand on his arm. He hoped to God his gut was right, otherwise he was headed for some serious trouble.

For a few short seconds it felt like they were both suspended in time. Ian’s eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t say anything, only waited.

When Mark slipped his free hand around Ian’s waist and pulled him close, Ian parted his lips for a breath. Mark dipped his head and slowly edged closer, waiting for more of an invitation. Or, at the very least, permission. He wasn’t that lucky, though, so he had to take the chance. He covered Ian’s mouth with his own, touched their lips together in a hesitant, tender motion.

As Ian gasped against the kiss and wrapped his arms around Mark’s shoulders, everything in Mark’s world was suddenly right. He pressed their bodies tighter together and pushed his tongue into Ian’s mouth with a soft groan. Ian didn’t resist, instead he met Mark move for move. He ran his hands up Mark’s neck and into his hair, ground his hips against Mark’s.

When they broke apart for a breath, Ian held Mark’s gaze and whispered, “I didn’t see that coming.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “I find that hard to believe.”

Ian’s expression gave him away, but he whispered, “I was afraid it was wishful thinking.”

“Definitely not wishful thinking.” Mark kissed him again, harder this time, letting his want register with every touch. He slid his hand down Ian’s back and over his ass as he pulled Ian with him toward the hall in a few clumsy steps.

Their trek to the bedroom was almost comical. Mark nearly tripped over his own feet, but he still held Ian close. His head swam with all the ways this could go wrong, with the complications of Ian working for him, of them already living together. So many bad ways to start a relationship. And that’s what Mark

wanted this to be. He didn't just want to get off with Ian and move on. "How is this going to work, exactly?"

"Well, Mark," Ian pulled back with a teasing look in his eye, his hand on Mark's chest pushing him slowly toward the bedroom as he tugged Mark's shirt up with his other hand. "When two boys like each other very *very* much..."

Mark huffed a laugh, even as Ian trailed his hand lower over Mark's stomach, warm and tender. "That's not what I mea—" He couldn't think anymore, couldn't do anything but groan softly as Ian dipped his fingers into the top edge of Mark's jeans. "Jesus."

"We'll figure it out." Ian popped the top button of Mark's jeans open and slid his hand lower. "Later."

"Later." Mark nodded stupidly and took a few more steps into the hall, pulling Ian with him. He pushed his bedroom door open with his back as he kissed Ian again.

They fell onto the bed together and started pulling at clothes. Mark needed to feel Ian's skin, wanted to see all of him, not just the teasing glimpses he'd gotten over the last few months. They were nearly silent as they stripped each other, tossed shirts and jeans, socks onto the floor.

Mark pinned Ian to the bed, their erections slick and hard between them. He'd wanted this for so long—wanted *Ian* so long—he thought he could get off with nothing more than a few quick thrusts against him.

"Wait," Ian whispered, his voice rough and breathy against Mark's lips. Mark eased his grip and pulled back. Maybe Ian was having second thoughts. He must have seen the stress on Mark's face because he smiled tenderly. "Baby monitor? Just in case."

Right. Damn. Father of the Year had forgotten his son was sleeping across the hall. Apparently Ian was *his* external brain too.

Mark nearly made a joke about needing to give Ian a raise, but it seemed even more inappropriate than what they were about to do. "Yeah, good call." He shifted and stretched until he could reach the monitor and flipped the dial all the way up to full volume. Nothing but soft white noise came from the speaker. Thank God.

Ian took advantage of Mark's position and squirmed out from under him. He crawled higher on the bed and flopped back against the pillows. "And condoms."

Also a good call. Mark dug in his nightstand until he found condoms and a bottle of lube, but he froze when he turned to face Ian again. He was slowly stroking himself as he watched Mark.

“You should probably hurry unless you want this to be a one man show.” Despite the words, Ian didn’t sound like he was joking.

Mark leaned in and kissed him again, a broken laugh hidden under a breath. “Tell me what you want,” he whispered, not pulling back, instead resting his forehead against Ian’s.

“For some reason I thought you’d be more assertive than this.” Ian pulled Mark over him, wrapped his legs around Mark’s hips. “Can you guess, or do you need an engraved invitation?”

“You want assertive?” Mark asked playfully, slapping as close to Ian’s ass as he could get. He snatched the bottle of lube from where he’d dropped it on the bed. “I’ll give you assertive.”

They didn’t talk much after that. The only sound at first was a breathy laugh from Ian until Mark started to prep him, then it was only tender groans and small gasps. By the time Mark had the condom rolled down his cock, Ian looked like he was on the verge of begging. He leaned in and trailed hot kisses over Ian’s neck before whispering in his ear, “You look like you’re about to fly apart.” He teased the head of his cock against Ian’s entrance, but didn’t push in. When he pulled back to see Ian’s face, the look he got was pure want, so intense Mark felt it deep inside.

Ian didn’t give him an answer, didn’t laugh or grin at him, instead he shifted his hips and spread his legs wider, asking without saying a word.

Suddenly it was Mark who was going to fly apart. He pressed closer and pushed slowly into Ian with a soft moan, every muscle in his body tense, thrumming with the desire for more, the desire to slam into Ian, make them both cry out.

It took a painfully long moment, but finally, he was deep inside, gasping Ian’s name around a sharp curse against his neck.

Any playfulness—teasing, laughter—burned away as they moved together. Ian muttered something Mark didn’t catch, but the look on his face told Mark everything he needed to know. This was good. It was right. It was exactly how it should be.

And it didn’t last nearly long enough.

With a few sharp thrusts and one long grind of Mark's hips, Ian came between them, hot and wet. Mark kissed him hard, catching whatever sounds Ian would've made, until he shuddered through his own release.

Ian clung to him as they gasped for breath, their bodies fitting together as if they were meant to be joined. Mark wanted to say something, but he couldn't get a word out. Instead he held on tight, ran his fingers through Ian's hair.

They stayed like that for too long, probably, but Mark didn't want to let go.

After a few long moments, he pulled back and got rid of the condom. Ian shifted closer when Mark collapsed next to him.

"We should sleep," Ian murmured on a sigh as Mark wrapped his arms around him, rearranging them both until Ian's head was on Mark's chest.

"We should probably talk too." Mark didn't want to, but there were so many things they still had to work out, so many details to cover.

Ian ran his fingertips over Mark's collarbone, and Mark thought he could feel Ian's lips curve into a smile against his skin. "Everything's fine, Mark. It'll all work out." Ian sounded like he was already on the verge of sleep when he yawned softly.

"Things rarely just *work out* on their own."

"And sometimes they do."

Mark was going to have to get some tips from Stan on how to deal with those simple statements that defied logic but were somehow impossible to argue with.

Before Mark could say anything else, Ian whispered, "We're fine, Mark. Better than fine, and that's not going to change."

"One of your feelings?"

"More than that."

Ian stilled against him and Mark knew he'd drifted off.

In the quiet that followed, Mark couldn't help smiling. Maybe they didn't have that much to work out after all. Maybe it had all fallen into place when Mark hadn't been paying attention.

As Mark hovered on the edge of sleep, his mind wandered to Tracy. Would she have approved? Yeah, she would've. She would've given him a world of shit for it, but she would've loved Ian too.

Love? Well, damn.

Too soon to tell?

No.

Mark had a feeling of his own.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*J.H. Knight has been writing love stories since the second grade. When she's not catering to the whims of her imaginary friends (whom she sometimes refers to as "characters"), she's usually found driving her four children all over the planet, working on a school project, or saying things like "Not until your homework is done!"*

*A Pacific Northwest native, she loves the outdoors in every season whether she's in the city, the mountains, or building sloppy sandcastles with her kids on the beach. On her best days, she's cuddled up with a good book, and on her worst days she's tearing her hair out as she tries to decide if her sentence needs a comma or a semicolon. She gratefully bows down in awe of editors, since she usually gets it wrong.*

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