



Ask, Answer Look, Kiss

A friend claims he has the formula for making people fall in love, but is it worth risking Travis and Benny's friendship for a chance at more?

Livia Frost

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ASK, ANSWER, LOOK, KISS

By Livia Frost

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.

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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.

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Photo Description

Two unclothed men stand side-by-side at the railing to a ship, their backs to us, facing the ocean. The man on the left has his arm around the waist of the other and their heads are tipped together affectionately. Both men are similar looking: wide shoulders, shaved heads, shapely butts, and golden skin. The one major difference is their tattoos. The man on the left has two tribal bands across his right bicep and shoulder. The other man has a swirling tribal design that covers most of his back, with smaller designs on his lower back and upper right thigh.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been friends forever. Best friends in school. Roommates and best friends in college. Partners and best friends in business. He was the first person I told when I realized I was gay. He just said, "Me, too." Yet somehow, in all those years, through all the ups and downs, we never even thought of being lovers. We were always best friends.

Then one day, something changed. What happened? How did we end up here?

Please, no BDSM

Thank you,

Kiracee

Story Info

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ASK, ANSWER, LOOK, KISS

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Chapter One

Travis Reed bounced on his feet as he hummed along to the softly playing soundtrack from South Pacific. He took one last gulp of coffee from his mug on the counter, then plunged both of his hands into the oversized mixing bowl filled with ground meat and sprinkled with his own spicy mixture of fresh and dried spices. Mixing meat by hand wasn't exactly his favorite part of being a chef, primarily because it prevented him from taking any more sips of coffee for a short while, but nothing could impact his good mood at this time of morning.

Morning in the kitchen was perfection. It was quiet, for one thing, except for the low music mixed with the chipper bird noises coming from the yard, typical during a warm Florida spring. It was still relatively cool during March for Florida, so Travis tried to leave the windows open during the morning unless he was baking and needed the air conditioning to counteract the heat of the oven. He'd already had one full cup of coffee, so waiting on drinking another wasn't the torture it would have been when he first got up. Most importantly, Travis was doing what he loved the most—cooking.

This time he was making a spicy, Indian-inspired menu for a local young couple's engagement barbecue. He was only preparing the hors d'oeuvre portion of the meal, as the bride-to-be's father was planning on doing a traditional American hamburgers-on-the-grill thing for the main course. The couple had requested Indian food, but the father, a typical guy, had insisted on doing burgers himself.

Men and their grills, Travis thought, rolling his eyes. Then he chuckled, admitting to himself that the father's stubbornness was kind of heartwarming. After all, the man only wanted to do something nice for his daughter and future son-in-law. Travis couldn't fault that, even if burgers didn't go with Indian food. Travis planned on giving the man a simple spice mixture to sprinkle on the burgers so the two parts of the meal made more sense together. Actually, he should probably let Benny handle making that suggestion. Benny was the one who was good with the clients, and Travis was pretty sure he'd do a much more positive job in suggesting the spice mix to the stubborn father than he would.

Travis was finishing up the mixing when a heavy hand suddenly landed on his shoulder, making him flinch in surprise before it hit his brain that Benny was up. The man always *was* good at sneaking up on him.

“That smells great!” Benny practically shouted in his ear.

Travis shook his head and tried to calm the adrenaline rush. “I don’t know how you can act so damn peppy in the morning, not a drop of coffee in you.”

“It’s the new house,” Benny said, his hand still resting on Travis’s shoulder. “I’m sleeping better than I ever slept in that apartment complex.”

Travis agreed—the new house was awesome. He absolutely appreciated the increased space, both for living quarters *and* for their business, Best Bites Catering. There was a lot to appreciate, including a newly renovated commercial-grade kitchen, the quiet backyard with huge shade trees, and lots of bedrooms and office space. Scoring an old Victorian in the historic area of Dunedin, close enough to the water that they could smell the breeze from the Gulf, was a great move for them both.

Regardless of all the good points about the house, Travis still felt like he was... adjusting. They’d been living in the new house for four weeks now, but Travis was still learning to live with Benny again.

It wasn’t that Benny was a bad housemate. Benny was a good guy and it made sense that he lived here with Travis, especially considering how much room the house had. Not only was Benny the best friend Travis had ever had, going on eighteen years now, but they were business partners, too. Through childhood, college, and beyond, their lives had been intertwined for as long as both of them could remember, and that was a darn good thing.

But something felt different lately.

Travis hadn’t actually lived in the same place as Benny since college graduation, which was five years earlier. And even back in college, being roommates had been completely different. For one thing, Travis had rarely been in his dorm room. He’d spent most of his time in college either attending classes, doing some exhausting late-night internships cooking at local restaurants, or going out for beers occasionally with Benny and various other friends in the culinary program. Benny’s college life was similar, though Travis had to admit that his friend had spent a much larger amount of time sowing his oats. That’s what it seemed like to Travis, given the knowing looks that Benny used to get from a slew of hot guys when they went out drinking.

Travis pulled his hands out of the mixing bowl and pulled away from Benny’s hand, which had still been resting on his shoulder. He went to the sink to wash up. As Travis glanced up, Benny took a seat at the island with his own

cup of coffee. It was a familiar sight, which only reminded Travis that if he was at all unsettled, he was acting like an idiot. He'd done so much with Benny, shared so many experiences. They were as close as any friends he knew of. There should be absolutely no reason for Travis to feel funny living with Benny again.

“So, what’s the menu again?” Benny asked.

Travis turned around, leaning back against the counter by the sink. “Sausage rolls, vegan samosas, tandoori chicken skewers, and spicy cheese straws,” he said, taking in the sight of a shirtless Benny leaning back in the barstool, all broad, golden shoulders and shaved head.

Maybe that was it, Travis reflected. Something about living with someone felt... close. More intimate. Even if Travis saw Benny every day, working closely with him, it was different when he saw him come out of the shower in the morning with a small towel wrapped around his waist. Or when he sat around in pajamas sharing the paper with Benny on Sunday mornings. Or when Travis saw Benny shirtless, as he was now, with a light dusting of stubble on his face as he drank his coffee across the kitchen.

Even though he and Benny had never been anything more than friends, even back when they were roommates in college, living with him again pushed them closer together than he had ever felt before. And that made everything feel... strange.

“God, that sounds delicious,” Benny said. His voice was deep and he bit his lower lip. Then he raised one of his brows, pinning Travis with his crystal blue eyes. “Do I get to try anything this time?”

Travis smirked before nodding slowly and moving to pull out a small frying pan to cook a few sausage patties for them both.

Typical Benny, to want to eat a little of everything he made. Even *before* college, Travis had always been the chef, while he'd jokingly called Benny *The Eater*. It was something that Travis still called him occasionally, though Benny never took offense. It was actually what made Best Bites Catering so successful. While Travis had concentrated on his cooking skills all through college, Benny had majored in Food Service Management and Business. By the end of college, when Travis had finally made the decision to use his grandmother's inheritance as seed money to start a catering business, they had both realized how much their interests complemented each other. So Travis stuck to making the food, while Benny did all the management and schmoozing

of the customers, pinch-hitting in the kitchen only occasionally. If anyone could sell a new menu to a customer, Benny could. They were perfect together.

Perfect *friends*, Travis reminded himself again as the sight of Benny's perfectly defined chest came into focus. Even though they were both gay, that didn't mean they would suddenly be getting busy after eighteen years of platonic friendship. But it also didn't stop Travis from appreciating Benny's assets from afar, something he couldn't help when they were on display right in front of him.

A few minutes later, Travis placed two plates on the island, a pair of lightly browned sausage patties on each.

"Smells even better cooked," Benny said, digging in with a fork.

"I should hope so. Doing a tartare with pork would be dangerous."

Benny grunted in agreement with his mouth full.

By the time both men had finished their last bite of the sausage patties, Benny launched into yet another familiar topic. *Annoyingly* familiar. "You coming out tonight after we drop off the food?" Benny asked, a little too innocently.

"Not sure." Travis hoped that keeping his answers brief would put an end to the conversation.

"I'm going out with Jacob and Pete. Why don't you come along?" Benny asked, leaning forward in his seat and pinning Travis with those clear blue eyes.

Travis sighed. "Because I don't know if I'll feel like going out. But I'll think about it." He knew he sounded irritated, but he couldn't stop it considering how Benny had bugged him about this issue in the past.

"You've got to get out, Trav." Benny's tone was serious, and it was enough to get on Travis's last nerve.

"I might be getting together with Meg." Even though Travis only planned on seeing her for a late lunch, he hoped that the excuse would give him an out if he felt like staying in that evening.

It wasn't that he didn't want to hang out with Benny. They had a lot of fun together, something that had been proven many times over the years. From working together to shopping to going to the beach, Travis enjoyed himself no matter what they were doing. But in the month since they'd moved in together, watching Benny make the moves on various men when they went out at night had been starting to feel uncomfortable.

Benny had been getting more aggressive with his moves lately. He had always seemed relaxed about heading home with a guy in the past, at least from Travis's limited perspective. Now, it was almost like Benny *had* to take someone home every time they went out. There was an air of desperation about it, although Benny was hot enough that there was no doubt that the answer from his objects of affection was always a yes. The desperation, though, was more about Benny needing to go home with *anyone* rather than any difficulty he might have finding *someone*.

And watching Benny was getting on Travis's nerves. Before, watching him casually head out of a bar with another guy was something Travis could simply put out of his mind. Not his business, after all. But now, watching Benny spend the greater part of an evening putting the moves on yet another guy wasn't something Travis felt like being a witness to. And if he went out tonight, that's exactly what he'd be watching Benny do all over again.

The thought made him grind his teeth. Which was crazy.

Travis acknowledged that his own reaction was strange. They were *friends*. Even though they were both gay, each had followed their own separate paths when it came to romantic entanglements. Hell, he'd seen Benny leaving clubs and bars with other men for the last ten years, soon after the day that Travis had voiced the fact that he was gay aloud. Benny had admitted his own sexuality that same day, which was a few days before they left for college. Surprisingly, it had been no big deal for Travis to watch Benny go off with other men all those years, knowing he was most definitely going somewhere to fuck. Admittedly, Travis had had some of his own flings over the years, though probably not as many as Benny had, given Travis's naturally shy personality.

So Travis stuck with his excuse.

"I've got some menu ideas to talk through with Meg. Maybe I'll come out with you next time," Travis said, trying to make his voice sound normal, even though there was a tension in his jaw that made the words want to come out like a bark. It wasn't exactly a lie, since he and Meg usually did talk food. Meg was a fellow chef and worked at one of the downtown Dunedin restaurants. Travis's explanation wasn't the whole truth, though, which made him feel guilty. But if Travis himself couldn't fully understand what bothered him about Benny lately, he certainly wasn't going to walk into the minefield of trying to explain it to Benny.

"You look tense, dude," Benny remarked, frowning. "Is Meg getting on your nerves or something?"

“No,” Travis said, shaking his head.

“You need some help cooking today?” Benny asked. “I could make the sauces, if you need the help.”

Benny was perceptive of his feelings. Maybe too perceptive. But even though Travis knew Benny could do a great job making the chutneys, that wasn't going to take away his tension.

Benny stood and walked behind Travis's chair, grasping his shoulders and starting to massage. “It's that high counter. You should have been mixing the meat on the low table. You're going to hurt your shoulders.”

Travis's eyes involuntarily rolled back in his head as the pleasure of Benny's deep massage of his trapezius warmed him all the way down to his gut. Damn. With his strong hands, the man could pull the kinks right out. Travis closed his eyes and enjoyed the pleasure for a minute, letting it wash away some of the tension. But as Benny worked his thumbs up the back of his neck, Travis quickly became aware of how his skin became raised and prickly along his arms at the same time his cock began to harden.

What the hell?

“Oh wow. It's getting late,” Benny said, looking at the kitchen clock. “Gotta get my run in.”

Travis's eyes snapped open at the same time as Benny dropped his hands from his neck. He was never more thankful that he sat with his chair pushed close to the counter, his lap hidden.

Benny was almost out of the room before Travis saw him turn back.

“I almost forgot, Trav. I put your laundry in the dryer last night.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Didn't want you to forget and have it go moldy.” A small smile hit Benny's face before he turned and walked out, most likely to change for his morning run.

It was several minutes later when Travis realized he still sat at the kitchen island, looking toward the empty doorway, the pull of a dopey smile on his cheeks. Travis shook his head at his own idiocy, before mumbling to himself in the quiet kitchen. “What am I doing?”

Thinking about how sweet Benny was, that's what he had been doing. God only knew what the hell happened to his head.

Then Travis got his ass up and started to make the dough for the cheese straws.

Chapter Two

After a few minutes of stretching in the grass, Benny headed through the gate in their back fence onto the Pinellas Trail, starting with a gentle jog.

The Pinellas Trail was a long trail that cut right through the downtown area of Dunedin. It went north and south for miles, winding through the entire county. Though it crossed busy streets every so often, the trail itself wasn't open to traffic. It was a paved, multiuse trail used by walkers, runners, parents with strollers, and bicyclists. And Benny and Travis were lucky enough to have found a house that backed right up to it.

As Benny increased his pace a bit, he thought, not for the first time, that this part of the trail was the best in the county. Here, the trail was bordered by a combination of privacy fences and tall, overhanging trees from the yards of well-established homes. The trees did an effective job of shading the trail for those that were exercising in the typically hot Florida weather. The beauty of the trees was part of what Benny liked most about living in Florida. Huge southern oaks, branches spread high and wide, were hung with long strands of Spanish moss. It gave the trail, which was quiet on an early weekday morning, a secluded and magical feel.

As Benny got into a rhythm and let his mind wander, he kept coming back to Travis and his recently strange behavior. He'd been pretty tense this morning, and it hadn't been the first time he'd noticed it. That was not typical behavior for Travis, who was normally a relaxed person. Even when they were overscheduled with catering jobs and Travis got behind in the food preparation, he didn't usually show the stress. From all the way back in their college days, Benny had watched Travis cook in some high-pressure situations. It was a beautiful sight. He'd get this look of intense concentration on his face and had the ability to block out every other kind of stimuli. There had been a few times when Benny had seen that intense concentration and been almost jealous, wondering what it would be like if Travis had turned that intense concentration onto him.

Benny shook his head at his own foolishness. The idea of being jealous of the fucking food! It wasn't like Travis ignored him or anything. He was a good friend. A great friend, actually.

No one had ever concentrated on Benny to that degree before. All those men he'd gone home with over the years? He'd never felt any of them look at

him like he was the center of their universe. If you went out in search of a fuck, that was exactly what you got—a lesson he probably should have learned much earlier. That kind of limited relationship—if you could call it that when it lasted all of an hour or two—had been okay for a while. But now? He wasn't sure. No guy had ever looked at him with so much attention, that nothing outside could have drawn his focus. Benny hadn't realized until now that he'd even *wanted* that.

What would it feel like to have someone's total attention? To have someone focus on his feelings, his pleasure, to the exclusion of anything and anyone else? Benny had no idea. Yet the idea of it sounded utterly arousing. It wasn't only sexual, either. Yes, the sex part sounded hot as hell, but what was running through his head was more about having someone entirely focused on him. Not only during sex, but during the rest of life, too. The word *love* ran through his thoughts. And *devotion*.

The cell in Benny's back pocket began ringing. It was good timing, since he'd cut over to Edgewater drive when he'd hit the Sunset Point cross street on the trail. There was a park bench facing the water coming up on the path. Benny pulled his phone out as he slid onto the bench, trying to catch his breath in the warm breeze off the gulf. He noticed the call was from Jacob before he swiped to answer.

"Hey, Jake." Benny sat back, looking across the water toward Caladesi Island. He already felt the heat of the sun making his back hot, despite the early hour.

"Benny. Just wanted to check in and confirm the delivery time for the food on Tuesday night."

"Six PM, right?" Benny asked, mentally running through the schedule.

"Yup. No later."

There was plenty of noise in the background of Jacob's call, so Benny guessed he was in his office early, probably dealing with last-minute details for the event he was planning as Executive Director of Tampa Gay Social. As a non-profit dedicated to helping gay, lesbian, and transgender people create healthy relationships and supportive communities, they were having their quarterly dating mixer on Tuesday night in a bar along Clearwater Beach. Benny and Travis were donating the hors d'oeuvres at cost, something they were both proud to do. And Benny, for one, looked forward to watching an entertaining event, if this mixer was anything like they usually were.

“Don’t worry,” Benny said, “we’ll aim for five thirty.”

“I know you will, man. I’m just calling around and confirming everything. It makes me feel better,” Jacob explained. “You know how I get before these big events.”

“We still going out tonight?” Benny asked.

“Of course,” Jacob said. “Will I be seeing Travis, too?”

Benny blew out a puff of breath. “I don’t know. He’s being... weird.”

“Are you two lovebirds fighting already?” Jacob asked, then chuckled. “I knew this living together thing would bring out the lunatic in you both.”

“What are you talking about?” Benny asked, feeling exasperated. All he’d said was that Travis was weird. How had *he* suddenly been pulled into that description?

There was a few seconds pause before Jacob replied.

“Listen,” Jacob said, “I need a favor from you and Travis on Tuesday night.”

Nice change of subject. “I thought we were already doing you a favor,” Benny said, though his voice held no irritation. Jacob was a good friend of Benny and Travis both, so doing him a favor had never been a difficulty.

“I need one more,” Jacob said, speaking hesitantly. “It’s not about food. I just...”

“What is it?” Benny asked, his curiosity piqued.

Jacob was quiet for a minute, then he spoke quickly. “I can’t get into it now. I have to make lots of calls still. But be ready to help out as soon as the food is delivered on Tuesday. And tell Travis he’s got to be ready, too. Okay?”

“Alright, dude, but if it involves mud wrestling, then you’re out of luck.” Not that Benny expected that, but he had a funny feeling that whatever Jacob was up to would be uncomfortable.

“Oh, stop worrying,” Jacob said. “I gotta go. Just remind Travis, and tell him I’ll see him Tuesday. And I’ll see you for beers tonight around eight thirty, okay?”

“Yeah, Jake. Bye.”

Benny hung up the phone, feeling unsure of what Jacob would be getting him into. Whatever it was, though, it was a good cause. Benny might not be

able to sort out his own love life, but he was happy to help other people find a way to make theirs work. And if he couldn't get his own life sorted, at least he could try to figure out what the hell was going on with Travis. Figuring that the solution might come to him while he ran, he took off running north on Edgewater, circling back toward home.

Chapter Three

“Remind me again how it is possible that you and Benny never got together?” Meg asked as the waiter left with Travis and Meg’s lunch order.

Travis shook his head and rolled his eyes, then rested his chin on a hand as he turned in his seat to face Main Street. They were sitting at a table in the outdoor seating area in front of their favorite lunch restaurant, a place that had delicious barbecue. Dunedin foot traffic in March was a combination of about half residents and half clueless tourists. And another half were dogs. There was a reason that the town liked to proudly call itself “Dogedin”. If you were a resident and didn’t own at least one rescued dog, you could easily be treated like a pariah in certain circumstances, though Travis and Benny had somehow managed to avoid it so far.

“I mean, seriously,” Meg went on, as if Travis weren’t attempting to ignore her. “You are both smoking-hot gay men, you grew up together...” She ticked them off on her fingers as she went along. “You’re best friends, you work together, and now you freakin’ live together.” She leaned in, as if she were telling him a secret. “You do know that you sleep only about twenty feet from each other, right? Again, what the hell is wrong with you two?”

Travis turned back to his friend, narrowing his eyes. “I’m well aware of the location of our beds. And there’s nothing wrong with us.”

“And yet, you are sitting here telling me some suspicious sounding symptoms.”

“Symptoms of what?” Travis spat out.

“You’re sullen. You’re stressed out. Which, I should point out, is totally unlike you. And you admitted that you are suddenly feeling weird around Benny and his man-whoring ways. It’s obvious.” Her mischievous smile was more than enough to make him lose his temper.

“*What* is obvious?” He probably sounded frustrated, and he was, but not for the reason that Meg most likely thought he was. He wasn’t actually frustrated with Meg. He was frustrated with the fact that he couldn’t figure out his own damn feelings.

Meg leaned toward him across the table. “You want him.”

Travis groaned, looking away again.

“What?” Meg asked, her voice indicating disbelief. “Are you actually going to tell me that you don’t?”

Travis was silent for a while. As close as he was to Meg, it had never been easy to talk about his feelings. Actually, it had never been easy to understand his feelings in the first place, much less talk about them.

What *did* he want?

But as he sat staring out at the bustle on the sidewalk, the thought that shot into his mind was the sight of Benny the last time he’d seen him coming out of the bathroom after a shower. A sight that had, at the moment it happened, caused his cock to swell in the soft cotton pajama bottoms he’d been wearing at the time. The sun-bronzed, muscular back, the tribally-inspired tattoos that circled his biceps—tattoos that were similar in style to the tattoos that covered Travis’s own back—and Benny’s perfectly rounded ass, tightly encased in a white towel which had done nothing to curb his imagination. At the time, he’d had to turn away and walk back to his room in order to avoid exposing his own bodily reaction to the sight of the man. Now? He couldn’t *stop* thinking about it.

Meg chuckled. “Your face is red.”

“Shut up.”

“Why?” she asked, sounding legitimately curious. “Why not pursue it?”

Travis shook his head, feeling agitated. “It wouldn’t work.”

“Why the hell not?” Now it was Meg’s turn to roll her eyes.

Travis thought for a minute. Then he looked her straight in the eye, forcing himself to take the chance at leveling with her.

“There was this one time, in college—”

“I knew it!” She sat up straight, her face breaking into smile.

“No.” He cut her off firmly. “Nothing like that. Just listen.” Travis let his eyes wander while he thought back to what had happened, trying to remember the details. “We were in college, in our first year, at a party. Neither of us had been out for long, but we were out. We were standing next to each other and this other gay guy came over and said something. He made an assumption that Benny and I were a couple.”

“What? Did Benny freak or something?”

“Not freak, exactly. But he looked at me with a funny look for a few seconds. Then his face changed and he told the guy that we’d never be together because we were such good friends.”

“What was that? Ten years ago?” Meg asked. “One minute at a party that long ago and you thought it was a life decision?”

“He was firm, Meg. Absolutely confident about the decision. And he’s never diverged from that.”

“And you never *asked* him to diverge? Never questioned him on it?”

Travis thought about that. He hadn’t ever talked to Benny about it, but thinking back, he wasn’t sure why. There had been a brief time period after that night when he’d felt disappointed about not having an opportunity to be with Benny, but eventually those feelings had faded. Travis had been busy with classes and internships, and eventually he’d even had a few of his own sexual encounters with other people, though they were short-lived. Since then, he’d always maintained that he didn’t *want* anything more than friendship with Benny. Now that he thought about it, he began to realize that the truth lay closer to him not *letting* himself want anything more.

“Hey,” Meg said, patting Travis on the shoulder. “He can change,” she said, nodding. “You’ve changed. You both can change your mind on that if you want to.”

Travis grunted. “I don’t know if I want to. It might not be a good idea. Benny might have been right about that.”

Meg laughed. “Oh, you want to, if the look you had on your face earlier is any indication. And why wouldn’t you? You guys would be great together.”

Would they? Travis wasn’t convinced. But he realized, now that he was being honest with himself, that he’d spent a lot of time during the last ten years consciously putting those kinds of thoughts out of his mind, setting aside the thoughts about how fucking awesome Benny was. And hot. And how—*shit*—jealous he felt every time he watched Benny go home for the night with some other guy. He’d been burying those thoughts deeply for a long time, and now it felt completely crazy to be thinking about them finally, in the forefront of his mind. Still, nothing would happen unless it was something that Benny wanted, too, and Travis doubted that would ever happen. And if it did, well... Travis worried they’d both be looking at a disaster.

On the other hand, walking around the house feeling stressed out, popping inopportune woodies, and feeling angry about watching Benny fuck his way through the rest of the Tampa Bay was probably not something he wanted to continue. Travis wasn't sure what direction he wanted to go. Should he find a way to bury all those feelings again? Or should he take a chance, however scary, and try to move the relationship in a new direction? Either way, he had a decision to make.

Chapter Four

Benny quickly knotted the blue necktie around his neck as he looked into the bathroom mirror. Even though the dating mixer would take place at a pretty casual tourist dive on Clearwater Beach, he had to dress up more than most of the people going tonight. Best Bites Catering's donation of food put him and Travis in the spotlight a bit, so there would always be the chance they might get some business out of the event. And with Florida recently legalizing gay marriage, the possibility of doing some wedding catering in the future was a good opportunity for the business. With that thought in mind, he tucked a few extra business cards in his pocket.

"You almost ready?" Benny called in the general direction of the hallway.

"Almost," Travis called from what sounded like his bedroom.

Once Benny had his tie finished, he headed down the hall and stopped in the bedroom doorway, taking in a sight he hadn't seen in a while—Travis, all dressed up, in the sexiest cream-colored shirt and green tie. The color of the tie made Travis's eyes jump out in their tree-colored glory.

"Do I look bad?" Travis asked him, though the words had taken a few seconds to penetrate. And from his friend's frown, Benny realized that he must have been staring.

"You look great. I haven't seen you like this in a long time."

When he and Travis attended catering events, Benny was the one in the dressy clothes dealing with the clients, while Travis wore a chef's jacket. So this was a change. And he had to admit the way the shirt draped across Travis's shoulders looked good.

Seeing Travis in more formal clothes reminded Benny that they were built similarly. If they were both standing on a beach in swim trunks, viewed from behind they could be brothers, something that various people had mentioned before. They were close in height, with Benny only an inch taller than Travis. Their builds were almost identical, both having broad shoulders, well-muscled backs and biceps, *and* asses to die for. They each had well-tanned skin from all the time spent on the beach in the Florida sun, something they both enjoyed. And with both of them currently sporting shaved heads, their actual hair colors didn't give away their differing genetics.

In college the difference would have been more obvious, with Benny's blue-eyed, black-haired Scottish looks contrasting with Travis's green eyes and light brown hair. Now, the major difference in their looks was in their tattoos. Travis had a huge tribal tattoo that covered his back, with a matching pattern covering the outside of his right thigh. It was a look that Benny had always thought was sexy on Travis. It made him look both interesting and like a bad boy at the same time, something that contrasted with Travis's shy persona. Benny's tattoos, also tribal, were limited to a few small motifs on each of his upper arms.

Travis had turned back to the mirror and was fussing with the knot on his tie. "If Jacob needs our help, I figured I should look reasonably nice."

Unable to watch Travis mangle his tie any further, Benny entered the bedroom and stood next to Travis. "Let me do that," he said, grasping Travis by the shoulders and turning him to face him.

It wasn't a bad knot that Travis had made, but Benny could see he'd wrinkled it up by fiddling with it. So he loosened it before smoothing out the fabric and then tightening it again. Some men had trouble tying someone else's tie unless they were standing behind them and looking in a mirror, but Benny had what sometimes felt like a million siblings in his big Catholic family, so he'd grown used to fixing his brothers' ties long ago.

What he hadn't expected was to look up from the tie and see that Travis was looking slightly upward, into his eyes, with an expression that he couldn't figure out. It was something like his intense concentration, but it was the intensity itself that was throwing him off. Benny took a breath to steady himself, but that was when the fresh scent of Travis's citrus bodywash hit him, and he had to take a step back.

"There," Benny said, forcing his voice steady, but feeling anything but. "You look good. I mean, the tie is good." He fumbled that a bit, feeling strangely conspicuous admiring his friend's looks yet again. But Travis did look awfully nice. So, whatever.

Travis grabbed his wallet and keys from the top of his dresser. "So, you honestly don't have any idea what Jacob is going to have us doing tonight?"

"No clue," Benny replied. That was the truth. When they'd gone out for drinks, Jacob had refused to tell him much. "All I know is that they're doing some kind of special dating event tonight. Like speed dating, or something like that."

“What’s new, right? He’s always got a gimmick at these social events,” Travis said. “Should we be scared?”

“All he would tell me is that they have couples being matched who are going to use some kind of iPad app to ask each other questions. Maybe it’s a high-tech version of speed dating?”

“Well, at least it isn’t mud wrestling,” Travis said.

“It’s on the beach, so at worst, it’d be sand wrestling”

“I’m not doing any wrestling in *this* outfit.”

“Don’t worry, Trav. If anyone tries to pin you, I’ll be sure to jump in.”

Benny would, too. In fact something about that idea, of jumping into a melee to save a pinned Travis, was a little too appealing.

Chapter Five

Travis had only been working in the kitchen for about a half hour, unpacking food and directing the staff, when he was able to escape the kitchen and join the rest of the people attending Tampa Gay Social's dating mixer. He had only needed to throw on an apron over his clothes, as The Sand Trap had kitchen staff and waiters to handle setting up the buffet of food that Travis and Benny had provided for the evening's events. Comparatively speaking, this event had been a piece of cake.

Travis was immediately overwhelmed by the noise level and activity when he entered the main room of the bar. The noise alone made him retreat toward a wall. Mobbed tourist bars weren't usually his scene. This event had attracted mobs of gay, bi, and trans people from all over the Tampa Bay area, along with supporters. The bar itself was dive-like with a comical ocean theme going on, yet it was filled with a vast array of people... from men and women that looked like your typical regular hetero, if he had to take a guess, through to men that definitely pinged his gaydar. From Travis's vantage point, he could see one man at the bar with a feather boa around his neck, while further down there was another decked out in leather. The good thing about the events that Jacob's organization hosted was that they attracted a wide array of people, and didn't discriminate.

When Travis spotted Meg and Jacob chatting near the front door, he headed toward them, weaving his way through the crowd. He sidled up to Meg, thinking he'd join whatever conversation they were having, but they stopped talking abruptly when they noticed him. Jacob shot a look at Meg that suddenly made Travis suspicious.

"Are you talking about me?" Travis asked, not willing to let them get away with whatever they were hiding.

Meg and Jacob knew each other well, as there had been plenty of times over the years that Travis had hung out with them both. Jacob and his longtime partner Pete had gone barhopping with Travis and Benny frequently, though Benny went out far more frequently than Travis. Meg often joined them when Travis was there, bringing along whatever boyfriend she was currently dating. Plus, Jacob had used the restaurant where Meg worked for several events over the last few years, so they also had a working relationship. Considering all that,

it wasn't a surprise to see Jacob and Meg gossiping in a corner. Still, that didn't explain their sudden silence around Travis.

"Just getting ready to start the event," Jacob replied, clearly covering. Travis rolled his eyes. He'd find out about whatever they were hiding eventually.

"So, what am I helping with tonight?" Travis asked, eager to get whatever task he had to do under way so he could grab a beer.

"Actually..." Jacob started speaking, but Pete arrived, stepping into the circle and hooking Jacob around the waist.

"You didn't tell him yet?" Pete asked, looking nervous.

"I was getting to that," Jacob replied, shooting a look at Pete. He turned back to Travis. "We needed a few more active participants for this evening, so I signed you up for 'intimacy dating.'"

Travis was so focused on the weirdly uncomfortable look on Jacob's face that his actual words didn't penetrate at first.

"Wait. What?" Travis asked. "I thought you were doing some kind of speed dating. What the heck is *intimacy dating*?" He asked.

Meg was unsuccessfully trying to hold in a laugh when Jacob started explaining in a completely serious voice.

"A psychological researcher did a study where they tried to make strangers fall in love by making them ask each other a series of questions in a laboratory."

Travis frowned. "What kind of questions? Like, trivia questions?"

"No..." Jacob said, hedging. "More personal questions."

"Such as?" Travis asked, started to get a nervous feeling in his stomach.

Pete interjected. "Like memories from your past or embarrassing moments. Situations like that."

"Like that would work," Travis scoffed. He couldn't imagine that hearing a stranger tell boring stories from his childhood would make him fall in love.

"Actually," Meg chimed in, in an annoyingly chirpy voice, "one of the couples in the study actually ended up getting married."

"Isn't that awesome?" Pete said with wide eyes, clapping his hands together.

“We’ve put together our own set of questions, fashioned from the same concepts as in the original study, but tailored to our demographic,” Jacob explained.

“Jacob...” Travis said with a warning tone in his voice. “You’re going to try to make me fall in love tonight? With a *stranger*?”

“I need you to do the intimacy dating tonight,” Jacob said levelly. It didn’t escape the attention of Travis that he hadn’t answered his question.

Travis shook his head, looking at the floor. “Oh my G—”

“Actually,” Pete interrupted, “it won’t be a stranger.”

Once *that* penetrated, Travis’s head snapped back up as he focused on Pete. “What? Who are you setting me up with?” he asked, doing a quick assessment of the room to see if he recognized anyone.

There was silence all around while Pete, Jacob, and Meg all looked at each other. Meg finally broke the silence by turning to meet Travis’s stare.

“It’s Benny,” she said.

Travis frowned. “What’s Benny?” he asked, confused by the apparent change in topic.

“No,” Meg corrected. “Your *date* is Benny.”

“What?” Travis could feel his eyes bugging out of his head. His friends looked nervous all around.

“Look,” said Jacob. “It’s no big deal. We needed one more couple, so we plugged you and Benny into the spot. For some reason, people were hesitant about trying intimacy dating this time around.”

“I wonder why,” Travis grumbled.

“But we’re pretty convinced,” Jacob continued. “If it goes well tonight, it’s going to be in high demand next time. And you and Benny know each other well, so it should be easy.”

“Stop.” Travis put his hand up to pause Jacob’s rambling. “Does Benny know about this?” That was the important thing. Travis knew he could manage whatever this variant of speed dating entailed. What he wondered about was Benny and if *he* would have agreed to it.

“That’s funny,” Meg said. “Benny said the exact same thing when we told him.”

It wasn't only Meg that seemed to find this entertaining, as all three of them had similarly irritating smirks on their faces.

Then Meg leaned toward Travis with a look that was both serious and knowing. She put her hand on his arm. "Maybe this will be good for you two." Her raised brow made it perfectly clear what she was talking about, and the conversation they'd had at lunch a few days earlier came into focus in his mind. Travis closed his eyes, thinking.

To start with, Travis wasn't sure what intimacy dating entailed, but if it wasn't mud wrestling, how bad could it be? What he wondered, however, was whether this would feel like an actual date. *With Benny*. He had to make a quick decision about how he would handle this. Should he play along, but treat it like a sham, or should he play it straight and treat this like a real date? The question at the forefront of Travis's mind was whether Benny would *want* to treat it like a date. Back in college, when they'd had that conversation about dating, Benny's feelings on the matter had seemed clear. But now, regardless of their past, Travis began to think about doing something to change everything. This could be the perfect opportunity to try a new direction, but he wasn't sure if he had the guts.

Travis opened his eyes. "If I do this, do I get to have a beer?" he asked, addressing the group.

"Actually," Pete replied, pulling away from Jacob to drag Travis to the bar, "I think it's encouraged."

At least *that* was some good news. Because if tonight was the night when, after eighteen years, he would finally discover what it was like to date Benny, he figured he might need a beer or two.

Chapter Six

Benny sat at a small table on the covered outside patio, which was right on the beach. The sun was going down, so the light was perfect. He nursed a pint of a delicious craft beer, feeling a warm breeze brush his skin. He even heard the soft sound of the waves, though Clearwater Beach had a wide stretch of sand, so the water was some distance away. All of that was definitely positive. But none of it could make the knot of tension in his stomach dissipate. Because he knew that in a few minutes, he'd been doing some kind of crazily intimate version of speed dating. With Travis.

Shit.

This was Travis, so Benny reminded himself that he had nothing to worry about. He'd already been in so many different places and situations with the man, who was his best friend. On the other hand, this was going to be an experience with Travis unlike any he had had before. It was true that Travis already knew a lot of personal information about Benny. More than anyone. Still, the whole idea of this intimacy dating thing freaked Benny out.

The way Jacob explained it, each table would be given an iPad. Once the event was under way, the participants could scroll through a series of questions in an app. The dating partners had to take turns answering the questions aloud for each other. What was nerve-racking for Benny was that Jacob had explained that the questions were ordered in increasing levels of intimacy. The questions would get more and more personal and were designed to break down emotional barriers and increase connection with your partner. Benny had no idea what the questions were, but the whole idea of baring his soul while sitting in a public bar was certainly enough to make him nervous. That was the kind of thing that usually happened with a buddy when you were drunk off your ass and sitting in the dark. He felt like he was part of an experiment, one that made him uncomfortably nervous. That explained why Jacob had needed him and Travis to fill some empty seats.

As Benny reached the bottom of his beer, couples started to stream out onto the patio, sitting down at the small, candlelit tables. Thankfully, the beer had done its job of relaxing him enough that he was able to enjoy the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico, which gave a golden glow to everything around him.

He saw Pete walking toward his table, carrying a full pint glass and pulling Travis along behind him. When the pair arrived at the table, Pete put the beer in front of Benny and picked up his empty one.

“There you go, honey,” Pete said, while Travis sat across from him with his own beer. “Good luck, you two. And have fun.” Pete trotted off and then Benny was alone with Travis.

“Well,” Travis said, looking ill at ease, “this is something different.”

“Oh, come on,” Benny said, hoping to put them both at ease. “We’ve been out drinking a million times. And we talk every day. So, drinking and talking. What’s the difference, right?” Not that he believed that, but at least he could convince Travis.

Travis gave a small laugh. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Jacob stood at the front of the room, getting everyone’s attention by talking into a microphone. “Attention potential life-partners. We’re doing a special kind of dating tonight. Following in the footsteps of a psychologist that attempted to make couples fall in love by having them answer a series of increasingly intimate questions with each other, Tampa Gay Social has designed our *own* set of questions especially for those participating tonight.”

As Jacob talked, Benny looked around. He was glad to see that he wasn’t the only person in the room that looked nervous. He could only guess how nervous he would have been if Jacob had paired him with a stranger. He looked across the table at Travis, who had his eyes on Jacob, and was thankful that it was his best friend that sat across from him.

Jacob continued, “So here are the rules tonight. When the bell rings, turn on the iPad at your table. Open the dating app and start answering questions in the order they are listed. Both partners should answer each question. We have 3 sets of questions, and each set lasts 15 minutes, even if you don’t get to answer all of the questions. We’ll have short breaks between each section. And then,” he paused dramatically, “we will have one more special task for you to do at the end.”

Benny could only wonder what that “special task” would be, and hope that it wouldn’t be too terrible. Then the bell rang and Travis looked at him across the table, like a deer in the headlights. Someone had to start, so Benny picked up the iPad, slid his fingers across the screen, and pressed start when the dating app opened.

Chapter Seven

Travis took a deep breath, waiting for Benny to read the question.

“Okay. First Question,” Benny read. “*If you were famous, what would you be famous for?*” Well, this is easy, in your case. It’d be something to do with cooking. Or maybe your own restaurant.”

“I don’t know,” Travis said, shaking his head. “I haven’t thought about having an actual restaurant for a long time. Not sure I’d want that anymore.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right. We have things good with Best Bites. A restaurant would mean long hours and a lot of irritation.”

Travis grunted. “Yeah. And fewer days at the beach.”

“Or sitting around in our jammies on Sunday mornings,” Benny added. “There’s no way I’d want to miss my jammies-with-Trav time.”

“Awww. You’re so sweet,” Travis said, feigning an obnoxious tone. In reality, he *did* think it was sweet that Benny liked spending that relaxing time with him, sprawled on the couch in their sleepwear, newspaper spread all over the place. It was one of Travis’s favorite activities. “What about you? What would *you* be famous for?” he asked Benny.

“Me?” Benny replied, his eyes widening. “I have no idea. There’s nothing that I do that could make someone famous.”

“Are you kidding? You’d be famous for doing something nice for someone.” It sounded simple, but Travis was completely serious.

Benny frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’re always doing good deeds for people. You offer to donate food to half the charities in the Tampa Bay. You’d probably save someone’s life. Leap in front of a bus to save an old lady or something.”

Benny laughed. “I think you have a bit of an inflated view of me.”

“Well, you’re always doing nice things for me,” Travis said.

“Like what?” Benny asked, chuckling.

“You really don’t know, do you?” Travis shook his head. “You do a million things for me. You get me coffee, help in the kitchen, let me bitch about annoying clients. Hell, you do my freakin’ laundry.”

“It’s coffee and laundry, Trav. They don’t give out Nobel Peace Prizes for that.”

“They should. Anyway, let me read the next question.” Travis reached over the table and grabbed the iPad from Benny’s hand. “Name three things you seem to have in common with the person across from you.”

“I feel like we’re cheating since we already know each other,” Benny said. “Think of those other poor people, scrambling to come up with something right now,” he said, looking around.

“Considering how long it’s been since I’ve been on a date, I can’t even remember what that feels like. You’re probably more familiar with that torture than I am.” That was probably Travis’s least favorite part of dating—the getting-to-know-you phase. His shyness made it even more difficult.

Benny shrugged. “Not really. I don’t think you could call what I’ve been doing dating. I have to admit this intimacy dating thing has me nervous.”

Travis was still nervous as hell, but that had more to do with the weird feelings he’d been having about Benny. He’d never have guessed that Benny felt nervous, too. He was always so outgoing and confident that the idea didn’t fit.

“You’re nervous with me?” Travis asked.

Benny tipped his head to the side and didn’t respond right away. Travis’s stomach knotted as he wondered what Benny was going to say, almost wishing he hadn’t asked.

“Well,” Benny said, speaking slowly, “we haven’t ever been in a situation like this before.” He took a small sip of his beer, his eyes wandering as he seemed to be thinking. “It’s kind of funny.”

“Funny?” Travis asked softly.

Benny hesitated a moment, then looked Travis right in the eye. Benny’s eyes shone in a way that Travis was unfamiliar with. Then he leaned over the table slightly before he spoke, and with the energy that crackled through the air, Travis couldn’t look away. “Don’t you think it’s funny that after all these years, growing up together, living together, working together, that we’ve never been on a date?”

Travis couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t look away from the depths of Benny’s blue eyes, either. It was like time stood still, with that question in the air. He didn’t know how to respond.

While everything was frozen on the outside, Travis's insides were twisting all over, like a snake eating its prey. Should he bring up that party in college, when his future friendship with Benny seemed crystal clear in its inability to move toward anything more? Should he admit all the times in the last few weeks when he'd seen Benny's beautiful body and wished he could reach out and touch it, only to be afraid to make that move? Should he mention the times when Benny had done something sweet for him, like taking care of him when he was sick, and wished that he could have the kind of relationship with someone—but most of all, with Benny—that would guarantee a kind of forever that seemed completely out of reach?

Shit.

There was no way Travis could voice any of these thoughts. The fear of rejection, of ruining everything, was too great. So Travis directed them back to the questions.

“Considering how much we have in common, we should list things we *don't* have in common,” Travis suggested, forcing his mouth into a playful smirk. “I can name at least one. Music.”

“That's for sure.” Benny laughed, though it looked like he wasn't ready to move on from their discussion. He went along with it, though. “If I have to listen to you sing ‘I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair’ one more time...”

Travis snorted. “You love it when I sing. Remember when you did that awful imitation of Gene Kelly's dance from ‘Singin' in the Rain’?”

“Hey! I think I actually improved the dance,” Benny said in jest.

Travis's mouth fell open. “You knocked over a lamp in my living room trying to tap your heels in the air.”

Benny shrugged. “I needed more room.”

“And then you pulled a muscle in your back and couldn't get off the floor.”

“I was just winded. Dancing is a very athletic activity, you know.”

Travis and Benny looked at each other in silence until a twitch in Benny's lip broke the tension and they both erupted in loud guffaws. It took a minute for them both to settle down enough to continue, but by then Travis realized he was enjoying himself. This was what made Benny so much fun to spend time with.

“Next question,” Benny finally said, taking the iPad back from Travis. “*What would happen on your perfect date?*” Then his eyes met Travis’s as he sat silently.

For Travis, this question felt almost as loaded as Benny’s question about why they hadn’t dated. But maybe it shouldn’t. Benny wasn’t a mind reader, so he probably had no clue about the thoughts Travis had been thinking about him lately. He should probably answer it naturally and not make it so personal.

“Something on the beach,” Travis said, mulling it over in his mind. “I love the beach.”

“We both do.” Benny nodded to himself, looking off toward the darkening beach beyond the bar’s patio. “At sunset.”

“And with a barbeque. A hibachi grill,” Travis added. Then he looked at Benny. “My mom used to have one in the backyard when I was a kid, since we couldn’t afford a real gas grill. We should get one of those.”

“Yeah,” Benny said softly. “We should.”

Travis was even more unsettled now. Was Benny only agreeing to the hibachi, or was he agreeing to go on this fantasy date? Going into this, Travis would have sworn that Benny had been acting the same as he always had—like a best friend. But now that they were answering all these questions, Benny gave off all kinds of vibes that he couldn’t figure out. Travis wondered if it was possible that Benny might be thinking along the same lines as Travis. Maybe he would be open to considering a different path for the future of their relationship. Then again, maybe he wouldn’t and the signs were all in Travis’s head. It was impossible for Travis to separate the truth from the fiction.

A loud bell rang, grabbing the attention of everyone in the room.

Jacob spoke into the mic. “I hope y’all are having a great time tonight. We’re out of time for the first set of questions. Do we have any engagements yet?” There were some light chuckles in the crowd. “Y’all have five minutes before we start on the second set, so we’re sending waitresses around for more drink orders. I bet everyone will appreciate *that*.” Jacob looked like he planned to put down the mic, but then he lifted it to speak again. “Oh, and fair warning... the second set is a doozy!”

Chapter Eight

Considering Jacob's ominous warning about the next set of questions, Benny waved one of the waitresses over as soon as she was available. He ordered a shot of premium tequila with a lime on the side, hoping the quick jolt of alcohol would calm some of the churning in his stomach. Judging by the fact that Travis followed suit, Benny guessed his friend had some of the same thoughts.

It wasn't only Benny's stress over the questions themselves that worried him. It was that he saw something he had never seen before, not only in Travis, but in himself, too. Benny hadn't intended to say some of things he had in the last fifteen minutes, but somehow it came out of him. Everything snowballed, from the thoughts he'd been having about Travis when he'd taken that run a few days ago, to his reaction to Travis's stare when he'd been tying his tie—it was like something inside of him was begging to come out.

And the words that were coming out of his mouth? Benny couldn't explain it. All he could come up with was that these were questions that he should have been asking a long time ago. The way Trav had looked at him when he'd asked him about why they hadn't dated... It made him wonder if Travis had been holding back something from him. He wasn't sure if that possibility made him excited or if it scared him shitless. Maybe it was a little of both.

Only minutes later, the waitress dropped off their shots with a smile.

Benny lifted his in the air. "Shall we toast?"

"Sure," Travis replied, lifting his own drink. "What should we toast to?"

Suddenly Benny felt like kicking himself and he realized he had no idea what to toast to. Several options shot through Benny's brain. There were the usual salutes he'd say to a group of casual friends, or to a man in a bar that he might want to take home and fuck. None of those felt right, however. Not with Travis, a man that was, at the very least, the closest friend he had. And with the nature of the questions they'd been answering, he didn't feel right cheapening the evening by toasting to something totally casual and irrelevant. So he made the decision to take a risk, forcing himself not to think too hard and instead go with his intuition.

"To us," Benny said. Then he swallowed before adding, "and our future."

Travis didn't say anything, but he sucked his shot down alongside him. Then they both finished it off by sucking on a salted lime wedge, a sight that, after so many years of knowing each other, Benny allowed himself to enjoy in a way that went well beyond friendship. He watched the way Travis's lips caressed the lime, puckering slightly at the sour taste. Travis was both beautiful and sexy with his soft lips and clear green eyes. Why hadn't he allowed himself to notice that?

When the bell rang to signal the start of the second set of questions and Travis reached for the iPad, Benny felt surprisingly relaxed. While he knew that part of it was the tequila, there was another part that came from tension dissolving. Benny hadn't realized until now that keeping Trav in the friend zone had caused him stress that he'd always refused to acknowledge, even to himself. Allowing himself the freedom to move past that arbitrary limit felt unexpectedly liberating.

“*Name one positive and one painful memory from your childhood,*” Travis read from the iPad. He chuckled. “*Cue the depressing soul-baring.*”

“I'm sure you know most of my stories,” Benny pointed out. “One of the worst was coming out to my brothers. I'm sure you remember that. I wasn't exactly a child by then, but it's still my worst.”

Travis frowned, and Benny knew he remembered all the hell he'd put Travis through during that time period. Only hours after Benny had come out to his three brothers, he'd returned to their college campus. It hadn't gone well at home and he'd needed to come back to the safety of school and his life with Travis. Only one out of the three brothers had been immediately okay with learning that he was gay, while the other two had fallen back on their Catholic upbringing and been angry and judgmental. Given how close Benny was to his brothers, their rejection had been incredibly painful. Benny's whole family had eventually come to accept him, despite their continued participation in church, but Benny's emotions had been riotous that first weekend.

Thinking back, Benny was thankful he'd had Travis to help him through it. He'd listened to Benny ramble on and on, flashing back and forth between anger and grief in that tiny dorm room, not judging him at all. Travis had put his arm around Benny's shoulders and he'd felt a lot less like some kind of outcast. Later that night they'd gone bowling, which had seemed like an odd choice at the time. He realized now that Travis had done the perfect thing. If he'd taken him drinking, it would have most likely turned into some kind of terrible drunken depression. Instead, taking Benny bowling had distracted him,

enabled him to take his anger out on a ball and a bunch of pins, and been a lot of fun.

“You know I couldn’t have survived it without you, right?” Benny asked.

“You could have,” Travis said. “I may have helped, but you were always strong.”

Maybe so, but Benny would always be thankful for what Travis did. His friend might underestimate his role in helping him through it, but Benny wouldn’t.

“What about you?” Benny asked.

“My worst? That time period when I was ten or eleven and mom lost her job.”

“Shit. Yeah,” Benny said. “We became friends pretty soon after that happened, right?”

“I think I felt stress every day of that year.”

Benny knew it was true, too. He’d brought meals over to Travis’s house, or fed him at his own house, almost half the days in a week during that period. Benny’s mom had been instrumental in helping Benny to support his new friend. In fact, if Benny’s family hadn’t helped, Travis and his mom probably wouldn’t have eaten.

“What about your best memory?” Benny asked.

“Hmmm...” Travis looked out at the beach, then turned back toward Benny. “Probably that first weekend we were at college.”

“Oh, God yes. It felt so good to be there. We were following our dreams, getting out of Tampa for a while, and you were right there with me.” Benny smiled, thinking of those early days when he and Travis had gone off to school in Miami.

“It was good,” Travis said, looking out onto the now-darkened beach. “It was a lot of work at school, but it was good.”

“Not better than now, though.” Benny raised a brow, catching Travis’s eye. “What we have now is great.”

And it *was* great. Two weeks ago, Benny might have claimed that what they had was perfect—successful careers, a growing business, and a beautiful home and life that he shared with his best friend. Only now, there was a voice inside

whispering to him that it could be better. A voice that, minute by minute, got louder.

“Okay. Next question,” Travis said. “*What is one sexual...* Oh my God.” Travis’s eyes were wide and his face heated.

“What does it say?” Benny was almost afraid to ask.

Travis cleared his throat and switched into a more impersonal reading of the question. “*What is one sexual activity that you haven’t yet done, but hope to do someday, with the right partner?*”

“Oh my God is right,” Benny mumbled. He glanced around and noticed that quite a few of the tables of couples looked like they were having a case of the giggles. “Isn’t this a little TMI for dating?”

“Well,” Travis said, “we don’t have to tell each other what we’ve *done*. The question only involves admitting something we *haven’t* done.”

“That’s well and good for the virgins, but if we say anything too weird everyone is going to know we are sluts that have run out of regular stuff to mention.”

“Well, we *are* gay,” Travis laughed. “And I doubt any of the virgins decided to participate in this kind of event,” Travis said. “Anyway, I already know you’re a slut, so you might as well hit me with something interesting.”

Benny took no offense to being called a slut. For one thing, Travis was only joking. For another, it was the truth. Benny had probably done more sexual acts than he’d care to list. Nothing he’d done had been done with a partner he cared about, though, so it made his sexual history easily forgettable. There was one thing he hadn’t done, though.

Benny took a deep breath, then spoke the words quickly, “I’ve never had sex in missionary position. You know, looking into a person’s eyes.” When Benny finally had the guts to assess Travis’s reaction, he saw that his friend looked surprised. “Oh, stop,” Benny said. “It’s not weird or anything.”

“I’m surprised that you haven’t done that yet,” Travis replied.

“It just never happened. The guys I meet... it’s not like I have relationships with them. Not that I wasn’t open to it. It just never went there.” He’d had more one-night stands than he cared to remember and he couldn’t remember a single time when he’d had the opportunity to look someone in the eye in the throes of an orgasm. Not unless you counted a quick glance up during a blowjob. He

hadn't needed to experience that in the past, but someday... "Well? What about you?"

Benny had to admit that he was curious about what Travis would say. As close as they were, Benny didn't know all that much about Travis's sex life. He didn't even know how many partners he'd had. It wasn't something that they talked about, so he could only guess from the signs he'd seen, like Travis leaving somewhere with a guy or coming home late. And from what he'd observed, he'd have to guess that Travis hadn't spent nearly the amount of time fucking around as Benny had.

Travis was quiet for a minute. Since the sun had recently set, it was hard to tell from the waning light on the patio, but Benny thought he looked flushed. And from the way Travis shifted in his seat, he'd wager that the question made him nervous.

After a minute, during which time Benny's imagination ran wild over all the options for sex acts Travis might want to do, the man took a deep breath and finally blurted out, "Rimming."

Benny didn't know what he'd expected him to say, but it was a surprise nevertheless. It hadn't been one of the activities running through his head as he'd waited for the answer. He was also surprised by the way, once Travis had managed to answer, that he'd met Benny's gaze with a stubbornly honest set to his eyes. Travis was not letting embarrassment take over, that was for sure, and it was appealing how he owned his own needs and fantasies.

The biggest surprise, however, was how Benny's mind immediately pictured what giving Travis that gift would be like. How he'd have Travis kneeling on the bed, his head and shoulders pressed to the mattress, open to whatever Benny chose to give him. And he imagined the noises he could force out of Travis as his tongue wickedly stroked him, how he could make Travis fall apart under his control.

When Benny realized that his cock was getting hard and that he'd been unconsciously licking his lips, he looked Travis in the eye and saw something that made him shiver. Travis's pupils were blown wide and he had the kind of flushed color on his neck and face that doesn't come from embarrassment. It was the kind of flush that comes from arousal. He couldn't look away.

It was then that Benny was absolutely sure that the feelings he imagined between him and Travis weren't his alone. It was something that was happening to both of them.

“Fuck,” Benny whispered, as he considered the implications. As he imagined how everything he’d assumed about him and Travis could potentially change in the blink of an eye if only both of them gave it a chance.

Dimly, the sound of the bell cut through Benny’s thoughts. Then Jacob, Meg and Pete were standing at their table while Benny sat there, shell-shocked. Benny was forced to fumble for control, to conceal the emotions that felt much too raw to share. The degree to which he felt exposed was incredibly disconcerting.

Meg was squeezing Travis’s shoulder and speaking, though Travis still looked as dazed as Benny felt inside.

“How is it going?” Meg asked as she gave Travis’s shoulder a shake. “Are you having fun?”

Benny wasn’t sure how Travis managed to answer her questions. He shifted his own attention to Jacob and Pete, who both had distinctly mischievous looks on their faces.

“I think you two are enjoying this a little too much,” Benny said, leaning back on his chair, though not enough to expose his gradually softening erection.

“Hey! Pete and I went through and answered all the questions ourselves last week, so it’s not like we don’t know how much fun you guys are having,” Jacob said.

Pete leaned into his lover. “And *some* of those questions were hot. H-O-T. We had loads of fun, right honey?”

Benny could guess what kind of fun they had had. “Well, *we* have to answer them in public.”

“Delayed gratification, hun,” Pete declared, shrugging his shoulders and tipping his head like the flirt he was. “I can loan you a bedroom later, if you need.”

“Oh, stop,” Jacob chastised Pete affectionately. “They have their own bedrooms.”

Meg had finished talking to Travis and now leaned across the table. “You guys want me to bring you one more drink before the last part happens?”

Benny ignored the drink offer and focused on Jacob. “What exactly happens in the last part?”

“I’m not saying,” Jacob said, shaking his head.

Benny shook his head, trying not to worry about whatever Jacob had planned.

A few minutes later, once everyone had left their table and the bell had rung, Benny and Travis got back to answering questions. Some answers came easily to them both, while others were more challenging. There were questions about the qualities you value in a lover and in a friend, what you would want to accomplish if you were told you were going to die, and another that asked you to give your partner three compliments.

Even though Benny knew so much about Travis already, he still learned a lot. He learned that Travis had pretty much identical ideals as he did when it came to relationships, both friendship and romantic. It was kind of surprising that they were so similar in this area, since neither of them had ever had a long-term romantic relationship. Maybe that was the reason they had stayed such good friends for so long—they had similar goals. But now Benny had to consider whether their identical romantic ideals—friendship, love, and honesty—could also mean they would make good lovers.

Benny had also been flattered by how Travis had chosen to compliment him. He'd called Benny smart, dependable, and sexy. *Sexy*. That one had smacked him on the side of the head. Travis had said the words without hesitation, which meant that at some point Travis had already decided that Benny was sexy. How was it possible that he'd been hanging out with his friend all this time and Travis had secretly been thinking he was sexy?

But then, after all those questions, Benny almost had a heart attack when he read the next one. “*After having sex with someone you care about, what is the one thing you would want them to say to you?*”

Travis laughed, saying, “Your cock is *huge!*”

Benny deadpanned, “My cock *is* huge.”

Travis raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t know,” Travis said. “You did say you value honesty.”

“Maybe it’s something you have to see to believe.” Benny had no idea how he let those words come out of his mouth, but the flirt inside of him was coming out, prompted by Travis. And yes, he would freakin’ love it if Travis wanted to get the full experience of seeing his cock, huge or not.

Travis folded his arms, and Benny wondered if he would continue the sexy banter. Hopefully Benny's cock would still play a starring role. But then Travis changed the subject once again. Always a surprise.

"So what would *you* want a lover you cared about to say after sex?" Travis asked.

Benny thought about saying something else in the flirtation realm. Something outlandish and sexy. But that phrase, *someone you care about*, stuck in his head somewhere and he couldn't seem to voice any of the naughty thoughts he'd initially had. Now, when he pictured fucking someone that he cared about, the only possible option for a partner was Travis. Travis was the person he most cared about in his life, and of all the people he cared about, Travis was the only one he thought of as sexy. Incredibly sexy, if the activity going on in his pants tonight was any indication. And there was only one thing he could imagine hoping that Travis would say to him if they ever slept together.

"I love you," Benny said softly.

Across from him, Travis froze, his lips dropping open a bit, his eyes widening.

Benny felt frozen, too. After all, those words weren't something that he'd ever said to anyone except his mother or father when he was a child. Before he'd spoken them across the tiny table here on the patio, he'd thought of them as something that might be said to a lover in the future. But the funny thing was, as he'd spoken the words and looked into Travis's eyes, he'd felt those words move through him, feeling their truth. They became words that he was saying *to* Travis, whether his friend realized it or not.

Before either Benny or Travis could say anything more, Jacob and Pete were up at the mic, ringing the bell and announcing that the questions were finished. Benny let out a breath that he hadn't even realized he was holding. But then Jacob announced the final activity of the evening.

"The final activity in intimacy dating is simple, actually." When the crowd started to laugh, Jacob reassured them. "Seriously. It's not nearly as difficult as the questions. All you have to do is look into each other's eyes for four minutes. Four straight minutes, no talking, and no looking away."

The crowd seemed relieved, if the smiles were any indication. Benny himself was relieved. He wasn't sure he had it left in him to answer any more difficult questions, at least for now. After he finished the four minutes of

looking into Travis's eyes, at least he could get up and relax. He needed to decompress, or distract himself with a game of darts.

But after dropping the bomb Benny had dropped a minute earlier, he wasn't exactly feeling positive about looking Travis in the eye. Part of him wanted to run away right now, jog down the beach and jump into the waves. At least this part would be over quick.

Jacob directed all the couples to move their chairs close to each other. After a few minutes of noise, everyone sat looking expectantly up at the podium. Since Benny had moved their chairs, he was now close enough to Travis that their knees were touching, though they could both rest one of their elbows on the tiny table next to them.

The bell rang once more and Travis and Benny both turned toward each other.

Chapter Nine

Travis:

Shit. Fuck. How can I look at Benny's eyes when he just said that to me? I mean... holy crap. Well, maybe I'm making more out of it than it is. He was answering a question. He wasn't saying that to me. He couldn't be.

Benny:

God, his eyes are pretty. People claim they have green eyes, but usually they mean hazel. Travis's eyes are something else. They're actually green, like leaves, or grass in the shadows of a lawn. He's looking at me strangely, though. Damn! I should have thought about it a little more before I blurted out what I did. But God, it felt good to say it. How can that be, though? He's sitting here, still looking me in the eye, all pretty eyes and soft lips, and I probably shocked the hell out of him by saying it. Or maybe he didn't think I meant it. Maybe I didn't mean... no. I did mean it. I fucking meant it. Fuck.

Travis:

His eyes are really blue, aren't they? Like the ocean on a clear day. Like they're reflecting the sky. He's beautiful. I've always thought so. Maybe not when we were little, but once he was older. Once we were both older. I knew he was beautiful, and not only the outside either. Wonder what he's thinking right now. What does he think when he looks into my eyes? Fuck. Maybe he's thinking about what he said. Oh, I'm such a drama queen. He's probably thinking about what he's going to cook for dinner tomorrow.

Benny:

What was that smirk he just made? Does he think I'm funny? Maybe I am. Maybe this whole night is one big crazy event that we're all going to forget about tomorrow. Ugh. There's no way I'm going to forget. I might have to ignore it, though. Pretend none of this ever happened. Maybe he'll want me to. How could I, though? Looking into his eyes, seeing his inner beauty. How can I forget what I've seen tonight?

Travis:

I knew his eyes were beautiful, but how long have I looked at them before this? A few seconds? Looking into them now, I feel like I'm sinking into Benny's soul. His eyes are so expressive, too. His whole face is. That little smile

that keeps popping up, it affects his whole face. It's like all of that kindness I see in Benny all the time is in his eyes. I think he has the kindest eyes of anyone.

Benny:

It's hard to stare into someone's eyes, someone's face, for more than a few seconds. I keep wanting to shift my eyes away, to hide myself. To hide what I'm feeling for him, what I know he can see in my eyes. But with Travis looking right back at me, I can't look away. It's like the power of each of our gazes forces the other to keep looking. All this time I've been hiding—hiding from Travis and hiding from myself. If I can let Travis see the whole me, right now, I might be brave enough to do it again.

Travis:

I've never looked at another person this way. Even after sex, no one has ever looked at me this way. I've gotten a few sleepy smiles from a partner before, but then it's usually lights out. Or more likely, throw on my clothes and go home. This is intense. Benny is looking at me like... I don't know. Like he wants to consume me. He's like every fantasy I've ever had. If this is what it's like to look into his eyes in some restaurant, I wonder what it would be like to see those eyes looking at me while he pushes himself inside me. And if that never happens... I don't know. What if that never happens?

Benny:

That way he bites his lower lip. I'd swear he's thinking about fucking me. There's some hesitation there, too. If I think about my favorite fantasy, he'll be able to see it in my eyes. We could have a whole conversation just by looking. I'll think about... about that fantasy he mentioned earlier. But first I'd lay him on his back, so I could watch his face. Run my hands down the ridges of his abs. I won't touch his cock, though. Not yet. I'll make him wait, tease him. I'll trail my fingers down the crease where his thigh meets his body, my fingertips just brushing the side of his sac. Shit. He's biting his lip again. I swear he can tell what I'm thinking.

Travis:

Oh God. He is so fucking hot. His pupils are blown wide and I can see his chest moving faster out of the corner of my eye. If we didn't have clothes on, I'd swear I was watching him fuck me. Is it crazy to be thinking like this? Still, I can see it. I can practically feel it. It's only the sides of his knees that are touching me, but every surface of my body feels like it's being touched. It's like

his eyes are showing me everything he wants to do with me. Fuck—I think I'm pitching a tent.

Benny:

No more thinking of sex. Not right now, at least. I'm in public, for cripes' sake. Though, now I'm starting to worry. What's going to happen after this? Or at breakfast tomorrow morning. I look at his perfect, beautiful eyes, and all I can think of is that I want to see them crinkling up when he smiles at me over coffee tomorrow. I don't want what we've said tonight to change any of the best parts of my friendship with him. What if I lost him? I can't lose Trav. I—

Ding, ding, ding, ding.

Chapter Ten

With the sound of the bell still fading in the air, Travis was out of his seat, praying his body was in a state that could be legally seen in public. He blurted something to Benny about finding Meg and headed inside in the direction of the bar.

It took a few minutes to find Meg in the thick crowd, but Travis finally found her standing with a drink at one end of the bar. He had to walk carefully to weave his way over to her through people that seemed pretty smashed, so he didn't rush it. His heart still beat fast, and he didn't want to end up knocking over someone's drink.

"Meg," Travis called, getting her attention over the din. "I want to get home."

Meg's forehead wrinkled. "Are you alright?"

He presumed he looked as unsettled on the outside as he felt on the inside. All the more reason to get home. "Just tired. Are you ready to go?"

"Sure. I can drive your car back. I've only been drinking soda," she explained.

Travis nodded. He wasn't drunk, but with all the thoughts occupying his mind, he was happy to leave the driving to someone else.

"Do you want to see if Benny is ready?" Meg asked.

Benny walked up as she finished speaking. He rested a hand on Travis' arm. "Hey, man. You ran off quick."

Benny looked worried. It almost made Travis feel guilty for making such a quick exit, but he didn't have enough energy to spend much time on guilt. He felt like he'd been through an emotional wringer, and he seriously needed to decompress. There'd be time to talk to Benny, but right now he had to take care of himself.

When Travis forgot to answer Benny, Meg stepped in, speaking to Benny this time. "I was just saying that I can drive you both home, if you like."

Benny frowned and dropped his hand from Travis's arm to focus on Meg. Travis immediately missed the contact.

“Yeah. That’d be good,” Benny said. “Actually, you could drop me in town. I thought I’d grab a drink somewhere. I’m not ready to go home yet.”

With those words, Travis knew he had good reason to escape. Hearing Benny say he was going out was all too familiar. Travis guessed that someone would be getting laid tonight, and it wouldn’t be him. He’d let himself have all sorts of fantasies about being with Benny, but now he got the feeling he knew exactly how this would pan out at breakfast tomorrow morning.

Not wanting to talk about it any further, Travis turned and walked toward the door, hoping Meg and Benny would eventually follow.

A few minutes later, Benny and Meg eventually made it outside to where Travis sat in the front passenger seat of his car. It was an old four-door sedan that he kept so that he didn’t have to drive the delivery van when he went out socially. Meg climbed into the driver’s seat and Travis handed her the keys as he heard Benny climbing into the back.

Conversation was limited on the way home. It mostly consisted of Meg making small talk. Travis could see her occasionally looking at him while she drove, and he guessed she’d be ready to bug the hell out of him once they were alone. The drive went quickly, though. It was still relatively early in the evening, so traffic was light coming back over the causeway. Once they were on Edgewater Drive and were approaching Dunedin’s downtown, the road became more congested. The tourists kept the bars busy even on weeknights in March, as the weather was perfect for being out and about.

Benny asked to be dropped at the traffic light on Bayshore and Main, right in the center of town. He hopped out without another word when they stopped at the red traffic light, and soon he’d disappeared into the crowd. Travis refused to watch and see where he went, though part of him wanted to follow him and see if he was actually going to go get laid after all they’d been through that evening. The thought made Travis feel desperate and needy, so he tried to force it out of his mind. It wasn’t until the light turned and Meg made the turn to go north on Bayshore that the silence was broken.

“You are both so stubborn,” she said, her frustrated voice cutting the quiet enough to rattle the air.

Travis sighed.

“Are we going to your house?” she asked. She sounded pissed, but what did she have to be pissed about? It wasn’t *her* that had to live with the confusion Travis felt.

“Yup,” he said.

“Are you going to at least feed me?”

“If you want.”

“Oh, I want. If I’m going to be friends with a chef, at least I should reap the benefits,” she declared.

Travis barked out a laugh. “You’re a chef, too! Why don’t you cook for *me*?”

“I’ll cook for you, but not tonight.”

“And why the hell is that?”

“Because you need it, that’s why,” Meg said. She sounded like such a know-it-all sometimes. “Cooking improves your mood.”

Travis thought about that for a minute. Know-it-all or not, she was right, he supposed. When he was in the cooking zone, it generally did help his mood. It was almost never the actual act of cooking that stressed him out. People were the problem.

But he wasn’t going to admit she was right. She had a big enough attitude already. So he stayed quiet until they’d entered the house. Inside his entry hall, he threw his keys in the bowl on the small table. Then he headed upstairs, mumbling in Meg’s general direction that he was going to get changed.

Upstairs in his bedroom, Travis loosened the knot on his tie and pulled the thing over his head. He looped it over the doorknob to his closet before he unbuttoned and peeled off his shirt. His jeans came off next. The entire process of undressing felt strange. Only a few hours ago, he remembered standing in this exact spot, Benny fixing his tie for him. There had been a sense of anticipation about the night, a feeling of change hovering over them, and an electricity in the air bouncing between him and Benny. Now? Benny was off at some bar, probably picking up another hot piece of ass, like always. How could his life feel so changed and yet the same, both at the same time?

Standing there in only his boxer briefs, Travis wadded up the dirty clothes and threw the pile into the wash basket in the back of his closet. After throwing on some black athletic shorts and a pilly old white T-shirt, he headed downstairs to the kitchen. Meg sat at the center island, texting someone on her phone with a serious look on her face. Travis ignored it and walked right through the kitchen, grabbing a pair of scissors from a drawer before unlocking

the back door and heading outside. He took an immediate right after going down the stoop, following the path over to the herb garden.

One aspect of living in Florida that Travis most appreciated was the long growing season. He was able to grow a nice large herb garden that lasted through about nine months of the year. Even annuals, like parsley, often managed to come back after the brief cold weather of winter in Tampa Bay, especially in years that experienced no frost. This garden was new, since Benny and Travis had only moved in a month ago, but he'd managed to dig up some of the bigger perennial herbs from his old house, like rosemary and sage, and move them here. Then he'd planted some additional plants as soon as they moved in. Dunedin's warm March weather meant everything was growing well.

Being outside in the night garden calmed Travis's nerves. It always did, though he didn't love the mosquitoes. Breathing deeply, he squatted on the ground in front of the raised bed. There was enough moonlight that he could see well enough to identify the tarragon and chives. They'd be much larger plants in another month, but for now he could harvest a little for the meal he was making for himself and Meg. He snipped off a bit of each, gently cradling the sprigs in his hand, before he stood. Then he turned and looked through the branches of the huge southern live oak tree, with its spreading branches dominating most of the yard, to see the half-moon peeking through the leaves. It was a perfect night—cool and hardly humid at all. After he had his fill of the night air, and before the mosquitoes managed to find him, he headed back up the path and back inside.

"I wondered if you were planning on coming back," Meg said, placing her cell on the counter. "And I had some fear you went off to murder people in the night with those scissors."

Travis grunted before heading to the stove. He wasn't ready to do much talking yet, though he knew he might as well get ready for the inevitable grilling that he expected from Meg. Still, better to put it off as long as possible. After placing his handful of herbs on a cutting board, he pulled out a skillet and placed it on one of the front burners. Then he turned it on to a low heat before heading to the fridge. He pulled out eggs and cream, placing them by the cutting board. Then he got to work making a quick tarragon-chive omelet. It wasn't a gourmet meal, but he loved the scent of chopped tarragon, and tarragon with eggs was delish.

Meg made no comment about his choice of food, but as he poured the eggs into the pan, the questions started. He'd been hoping to put it off a little longer, but no such luck.

“So, tell me how the intimacy dating went.” Her no-nonsense tone made it clear she wasn’t planning on pussy-footing around the issues. Travis was glad that meant that they at least weren’t going to be playing games.

“Who were you texting just now?” he shot back.

“Pete,” she said matter-of-factly. “Is there a reason that you and Benny didn’t seem to be talking when we left the bar?”

“You don’t beat around the bush, do you?” Travis said.

“And you don’t answer my questions, do you, Trav?”

Besides Benny, she was the only other person that ever shortened his name to Trav. The difference was that Benny did it affectionately, while Meg did it when she lectured him.

“I’m not obligated to.”

Meg sighed. “Look, Travis. You seem upset and I thought you might like to talk.”

Travis let that comment sit for a bit as he fiddled with eggs in the skillet. He actually did need to talk, though he wasn’t sure Meg would be able to help. But as much as she sometimes got on his nerves, she was a good friend and she usually had good advice.

“Ben said some things tonight that made me think that he’d been thinking of changing our relationship.”

“Really?” Her excited voice had him turning to look at her. She smiled almost maniacally. “Like what?”

“You are such a freakin’ matchmaker,” he said, shaking his head at her.

“Yeah, well... so what? I want to see you and Benny happy. Is that a crime?” she asked. “What did he say?”

“He asked me if I thought it was weird that we hadn’t gotten together after so many years,” Travis said, recounting what he remembered of the conversation with Benny.

Meg laughed. “Of course it’s weird. You’d be perfect together.”

“I don’t know if he meant anything by it, Meg. That’s the thing. He was flirting, but he always flirts. You know what I mean. When he flirts, he’s a champion at it.” Travis finished cooking the eggs, plating half the omelet on each of the two plates. He turned to face Meg, leaning back on the counter.

“He doesn’t flirt with *you*,” Meg pointed out.

“That’s just it, Meg. Tonight was like some kind of altered universe. We were roped into the event at the last minute, and the whole thing was fake, right? I had all these... *thoughts* inside, but none of it was real.”

“Were *you* being fake, or were you honest?” she asked.

“Honest,” Travis said, letting out a defeated breath. “Of course I was honest. I could never lie to Benny. But the thoughts that were going through my head were fantasy.”

“Do you think Benny lied to you?” she asked. And damn, there was no escaping her questioning. She should get a job interrogating terrorists.

“No. No,” Travis said, shaking his head. “I don’t think Benny lied. But he was flirting and he... he said some things that I wanted to hear. That I wanted to make into more. And now he’s out drinking at some bar and probably going home with some other guy.”

When Travis finally picked his head up enough from his pity party to look at Meg, her drill-sergeant face had morphed into one of concern coupled with understanding.

She nodded. “You’re hurt. And you’re afraid he doesn’t want what you want.”

Travis looked away, unable to verbalize everything he felt. He didn’t want to think about it. It was painful, and blocking it out would be so much easier, if only he could manage to do it.

“Look, Travis,” Meg said, speaking kindly. “I can’t be sure what’s inside Benny’s head, but I can tell you what I think the signs are saying.”

Travis gritted his teeth before meeting her eyes. “What are they saying? That I’m stupid and needy and fucked up?”

“That he cares about you a lot more than you think he does, for one thing. And maybe—” Meg’s cell phone beeped. She looked down at the phone and smirked before looking up. “Are you sober?”

“Now I am.”

“Good. Because Benny’s down on the pier by the park on Bayshore. You have to go pick him up after you drop me at home. He was going to walk home, but I think he’s too drunk. You can eat the eggs later.”

“Meg, I—”

“This will give you both a chance to talk,” she said firmly before standing to grab her purse and type a quick text, presumably back to Benny. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Chapter Eleven

After dropping Meg off at her small duplex, Travis headed to the public park on Bayshore Boulevard where Benny was waiting. He pulled into the small, dark lot and parked the car. Once he'd turned the car lights off, he looked toward the end of the long pier and picked out a small shape that he hoped was Benny. Pocketing his cell, he got out of the car and headed toward the entrance to the pier.

The pier was made of wood and was long. It headed out into the wide channel that separated the mainland from Caladesi Island. Most of the time it was a popular place for tourists, and for locals to fish from. Depending on the wind, the water here could range from choppy to smooth as glass, and it was fairly common to spot the dorsal fin of a dolphin pop out of the water in the deeper parts of the channel, fifty feet or more from the end of the pier. As he walked, Travis noted that the pier was empty this late on a Tuesday night.

After a few minutes of walking the length of the pier, Travis was able to clearly see the end, where it widened to a larger square area that contained several wooden benches. It looked like Benny was indeed sitting on a bench, still in the shirt and tie that he'd worn earlier. He looked back as Travis approached.

"Thought Meg was comin'," Benny said, slurring his words enough that Travis guessed he'd continued to drink after they'd parted ways.

"She sent me."

"Coulda walked."

"Sounds like not that well." Travis chuckled. He hadn't seen Benny drunk that many times, but from what he remembered, he was a funny drunk. Though, he thought, looking back at where his car was parked, it was a long way to walk when you were drunk.

"Prolly right," Benny said, weaving slightly in his seat as he turned back to look at the water.

"You want to sit for awhile, get sober, before we head back to the car?"

"Mmm. Good idea," Benny said, looking out toward the dark water. "So, where'd you go with Meg? She take you out to get some hot guys?" Benny asked.

Travis laughed. “Ben,” he said, raising a brow.

“You callin’ me Ben now? You only do that when you’re seer-us.” Benny shook his head. “See-ree-us,” he corrected himself, speaking the word slowly.

“Ben,” Travis started again, “I didn’t go out with Meg. I just made her some eggs at home. I *told* you I was going home.”

“Oh,” Benny said.

Travis didn’t want to think about where Benny had gone, though at least it looked like he hadn’t gone home with anyone. It didn’t mean that he hadn’t groped someone in a bathroom, though. Cringing, Travis shut down that train of thought.

They both quieted as Travis took a seat to Benny’s left on the bench. It was a damn near perfect night. It had been nice earlier in the evening, in the garden, but this was even better. With the breeze off the water, Travis was cool in the shorts and T-shirt he’d changed into. The breeze kept the mosquitoes away, which was a bonus. The moon was big enough behind them that its light glinted in the dark waves, but not so big that it lit up their faces. It occurred to Travis that, considering Benny’s drunken state, he should be happy the pier was stationary rather than floating. He wouldn’t have wanted to deal with vomiting.

After a few minutes, Benny surprised him by getting up from the bench and lying flat on his back on the wooden slats of the pier.

“You’re not going to pass out, are you?” Travis asked, wondering if he should get him in the car before he did.

“Nope. Just lookin’ at the stars,” Benny said. Then he made a wild gesture with his hand. “Come ’ere. Lie down with me.”

Travis stood. “Okay, but there better not be any fish guts laying around down there.” There was a table on one side of the dock for cleaning fish, but fishermen weren’t always religious about using it.

“It’s fine. Don’t smell anything,” Benny assured him.

“Like you would notice.” Travis spread himself out next to Benny. There wasn’t much room between the bench and the railing, so he ended up close enough to Benny that the side of his arm and leg was touching Benny’s.

Again they were quiet for a while. Travis could hear the waves gently splashing against the pilings, echoing underneath the pier’s platform. And the stars were fantastic.

“Orion’s Belt,” Travis said, pointing out the constellation.

“The stars are moving,” Benny replied.

“I bet they are,” Travis said, remembering what it was like to look at stars when you were drunk.

“That’s the only one you know, anyway.”

“I know the Big Dipper, too.”

“That one doesn’t count. Everyone knows the Big Dipper.”

“We should get a telescope and I could learn more of them.” It was a topic that Travis had wanted to learn more about, but never got around to pursuing. And the stars in Pinellas County were a lot better than they had been growing up in Tampa, especially if you looked toward the darkness in the Gulf.

“After we get the hibachi,” Benny said.

That reminded Travis once again of all that had happened over the course of the night. Thinking of the idea for their “fantasy date” should have been a positive thought, but now it felt like a sore spot inside Travis.

“Why’re you so quiet?” Benny asked.

“I’m always quiet.”

“Yeah,” Benny said. “You are quiet. You never say what you’re feeling.”

“And *you* do?” Travis asked incredulously.

Benny grunted in a tone that sounded noncommittal. He didn’t speak for another minute before he said softly, “There was *one* time I didn’t say what I felt.”

Travis wasn’t sure what Benny meant by that and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Still, as the quiet went on, he was curious enough that he figured he could ask an inebriated Benny what he meant and he wouldn’t remember in the morning.

“Like when?” Travis asked softly.

Benny was so still, at first Travis didn’t know if he would answer. He had visions of having to haul Benny out in a fireman’s carry, which would seriously test whether his workouts and bike rides were actually benefitting his health. But before he could make a move to rouse Benny, the man began talking.

“When we came out to each other. ’Member that?” Benny asked, his soft voice rising above the noise of the lapping waves.

Travis froze. “Are you going to tell me you’re not gay now?” he asked, though he didn’t believe it was possible.

“No! No,” Benny said. “Are you crazy? Cock is *way* better than... the alternative. Not that I’d know, but you know what I mean.”

“Thank God,” Travis said, chuckling. Now that he was laughing, it didn’t seem as scary to delve into what Benny had brought up. “Are you going to tell me about our coming out story, then?”

“Yeah,” Benny said. “So, you remember when you first told me you were gay? Before we left for college?”

“You mean the day I almost shit a brick?” Travis joked.

Travis would never be able to forget the fear he’d had when he’d come out to Benny. Not that he’d actually believed that Benny would reject him. They were best friends, and he’d been suspecting that Benny might be gay anyway. Still, saying those words aloud to *anyone* for the first time would make a person nervous. The words made it official, kind of firmed it up for the universe. But as much as Travis had been filled with nerves about saying it, he knew he didn’t want to go off to college with it left unsaid. He was determined to be officially out in college, free to pursue a boyfriend if the opportunity arose, but more importantly, free to be himself. So he’d pushed through the fear and blurted the truth out to Benny one day when they’d been hanging out and packing a few days before leaving.

“You remember how I responded when you told me?” Benny asked.

Travis thought back. It was hard to remember at this point. It felt like so long ago. And at the time, he’d been more focused on his own emotions than on Benny.

“Not exactly. Did you smile? I think I remember a smirk.”

“I don’t remember if I smiled, but I was happy,” Benny said.

“Yeah. Because it meant you could admit you were gay, too,” Travis said teasingly. “You were just glad that I said it first.”

“That wasn’t why I was happy,” Benny said, although Travis almost didn’t hear him.

“What do you mean?” Travis asked. He turned his head to face Benny, trying to figure out what his friend was getting at.

“I was happy because it meant I could finally kiss you,” Benny said, still looking straight up at the sky.

Travis’s mouth dropped open. He had no idea what to say. Part of him wondered if this was only the rambling of a drunk person. He’d had no indication that Benny had interest in kissing him around that time. Or for that matter, any other time during their childhood or young-adult years. They just hadn’t gone there.

“But at that party a few weeks later,” Travis said, “when you told that guy that we’d never be more than friends.” Then something clicked into place and he sat up, still looking at Benny’s face. “So you wanted to kiss me before we left home, and weeks later you decided we’d only be friends? What—did your sampling of college guys convince you that there were better fish in the sea?”

Travis didn’t want to sound as hurt and bitter as he did, but he couldn’t help it. He stood up and walked over to the railing, needing to put some space between him and Benny.

It was quiet for a bit, but a minute or so later Travis felt Benny standing next to him.

“That’s not what I mean, Trav.” Benny turned slightly and saw Travis rubbing his head. “This night has been insane.”

Travis turned his body sideways, facing a Benny who seemed steadier on his feet than Travis had expected him to be, though he knew he still wasn’t sober. “Let’s get home, okay? It’s late, and I think we both need some sleep.”

It looked like Benny would object at first, but then he nodded and turned to walk back down the pier. Travis puffed out the breath he was holding and followed, watching to make sure Benny didn’t fall. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the rest of the night picking splinters out of Benny’s face.

It ended up that Benny was still drunk and needed a little support, but at least he wasn’t stumbling. Back at the house, the most difficult part was helping Benny up the stairs. Walking on flat ground seemed to be no problem, but working against gravity on the front porch steps, and again on the long flight to the second floor, was too much for Benny to handle alone. Travis almost regretted not turning on any of the lights, but he didn’t want to let go of Benny to reach one of the light switches.

When they got to Benny’s room, he at first fell face-first into his bed. Travis stood in the doorway and realized that Benny intended to fall asleep like that,

clothes and all. That was when the guilt kicked in. No way could Travis let Benny sleep in a tie, jeans, and shoes. He briefly slipped out of the room to switch on a dim night-light in the hall before he returned to help Benny out of his clothes. It wasn't much light, but it was enough that he'd be able to see what he was doing.

Travis started by untying and slipping off Benny's shoes. When he pulled off the first sock, Benny grunted. Travis was glad he hadn't passed out yet because it would make removing his pants a lot easier. Next came the pants, which was difficult both because Benny lay on his stomach, and because the pants were tight on his ass. That thought reminded Travis of the incredibly arousing position Benny was in, one that Travis would have been in a better position to appreciate if Benny had been sober. And, he firmly repeated inside his head, if Benny actually wanted him. Which he didn't. That thought was depressing enough that Travis once again forced himself to ignore the emotion and move on.

When Travis rolled Benny over and went to unbutton his jeans, Benny's eyes shot open.

"Takin' my pants off, sexy?" Benny slurred, part drunk and part sleepy.

"Stop flirting. I'm helping you get ready for bed."

It was a bit of a struggle to peel off the jeans, but Travis managed it. He even managed to totally ignore his proximity to Benny's boxer briefs. Benny's eyes had dropped closed again, which he was glad for. His face was as cute as it always was, though. That was something that Travis didn't stop himself from admiring.

Last came the tie, as Travis figured Benny could live with sleeping in his button-down shirt, which was pretty loose. Travis climbed up beside him and knelt by his head, leaning over to loosen the knot in the tie.

"Trav."

"Yeah, Ben."

"Even when I told that guy at the party that we'd only be friends, I still wanted to kiss you."

Travis didn't reply. Benny's explanation was hard to believe, and he honestly didn't know how to take it. The entire night had been incredibly confusing to Travis, with all the conflicting messages in Benny's words. Travis pulled the tie from around Benny's collar and tried to pull it off his head, but

the slight stubble on Benny's shaved head made the tie stick. Travis leaned down to lift his head a little to pull the tie from underneath. It was then that Benny spoke.

"Trav," Benny said, his face close enough to Travis's that Travis could feel a puff of his breath on his cheek.

"What?" Travis asked, pulling the tie loose and tossing it on the chair next to the bed. He started to get up, but that was when Benny suddenly wrapped one of his hands around Travis's neck, preventing him from pulling away.

"I still want to kiss you."

They both froze, looking at each other in the darkness.

"Benny, I—"

"Shut up," Benny said, and suddenly he pulled down hard on Travis's neck, enough that Travis suddenly found his lips pressed against Benny's.

Oh, God. His lips were pressed against *Benny's*.

Benny's lips started to move and Travis couldn't stop himself from responding. Benny kissed him and, without a rational thought in his brain, Travis kissed Benny back. And God, it felt good.

And so freakin' out of control.

Both of their lips moved hard against the other's. Travis felt the desperation, like they were both fighting to get closer to the other's mouth. Travis pressed and slid against lips that were equally strong and determined to get what they wanted. Benny's hand still had him trapped, but that wasn't actually what held Travis exactly where he was. It was the feel of Benny's lips, along with the sounds of both of their gasps in the air that made the kiss something that Travis had no intention of escaping.

Then Benny's lips parted, the tip of his tongue darting out. But just as Travis felt his insides flip with excitement, he smelled the scent of alcohol on Benny's breath. It was a cold reminder that Benny had been drinking. As the reality of the situation hit him, Travis felt his state of arousal wane. He pulled his neck from Benny's grasp, since he had no intention of moving any further with a drunk Benny.

"What?" Benny sounded confused, but also tired and more than a little drunk. That made Travis all the more sure he was doing the right thing. He sat back on his heels on the bed.

“You need sleep,” Travis said as firmly as he could manage.

“Trav—”

“No. It’s been a long day. Go to sleep.”

Benny looked like he was going to say something, but then he let out a quiet breath, breaking the tension in the air. His eyelids were already drooping, so Travis figured it was a good time to leave the room. He stood and walked to the door, turning to glance over his shoulder as he hit the hall.

Benny’s eyes were already closed and Travis could hear soft breathing. Seeing Benny’s softening features in the dim light coming from the hall, Travis felt like something was squeezing his chest too tightly. Benny was a strong man, a good friend and a dependable business partner. Seeing him like this, though, Travis could see what was soft and beautiful about him, too. It almost brought tears to his eyes when he considered that he may have had both his first and last kiss with Benny McKenna. He had wondered what it would be like to kiss Benny, but now he wondered how he’d survive if he never kissed him again.

Chapter Twelve

The first thing Benny registered when he opened his eyes was the painful brightness of the sunlight angling into his bedroom window. Next was the dull throb of his skull. He closed his eyes, taking stock of the rest of his body before opening them again. Hangover-wise, he could be a lot worse off. Then, as the memory of the night before flooded his brain, his body suddenly ran cold. Memories of everything that had happened, from the dating event all the way through to kissing Travis, bombarded his thoughts.

It wasn't the memories of Travis that made him feel cold, though. Everything having to do with Travis made him feel warm. The coldness was more about what happened after Travis and Meg dropped him in town. At the moment he'd jumped out of Travis's car in town, he was embarrassed to admit he'd been thinking of finding someone to fuck. Between those four minutes of staring into Travis's eyes until the time he'd been dropped off in town, his emotions had made a complete one-eighty. One minute he'd been thinking about the insane feelings he was having for Travis along with his fantasies about taking the man to bed, while a few minutes later he had been forcing all of those feelings aside in favor of having a one-night stand with a stranger. It wasn't something that made him feel at all proud. The way he remembered himself acting sickened him.

After Meg had dropped him off, he'd gone to one of the local brew-pubs, hoping to see some friends and possibly get laid. Anything to avoid thinking about Travis. In the end, his efforts at the pub hadn't been successful. Not that he hadn't had the opportunity to go home with someone; he'd picked out a likely possibility within moments of ordering a drink. The problem was, after striking up a conversation with the man who had sidled up to him at the bar, thoughts of Travis dominated his head. Benny had actually had trouble following even the most superficial of conversation points. In the end, when the man invited Benny to accompany him home, the feeling in his gut forced him back. Instead of leaving with the man, he'd made an excuse and ordered one more drink. Then he'd texted Meg to ask for a ride home.

Benny began to see a pattern. The repetitive plot of how he'd been dealing with his love life for the last *ten* years. It became more and more clear why he had been having these meaningless fucks even though they didn't make him happy. It had all started at that party in college, when he'd made the decision

not to become romantically or physically involved with Travis. Now, *ten* years down the line, he wasn't entirely sure why he'd made that decision. The only thing he could remember for sure from that night was the raw emotion of fear. Fear that somehow he'd lose Travis as a friend if he went down that road. Looking at himself with wide open eyes for what felt like the first time in his life, he realized that he'd purposely buried his feelings for Travis every time he'd come even close to feeling them.

Even if he could believe that the fear of losing Travis's friendship was a legitimate one, that wasn't an excuse that seemed logical now. After so many long years of friendship with Travis, he had to believe that even if a romantic relationship didn't work out, he wouldn't lose Trav as a friend. They were too close for that to happen. Benny had to believe that if he was capable of valuing their friendship to the degree he did, that Travis would value it, too. Denying his feelings because of fear wasn't working and it had to stop.

Lying there on his bed, he let himself remember the kiss that he and Travis had shared the night before. He might have been sloshed, but he hadn't been so out of it that he didn't remember what Travis's lips had felt like. He remembered them feeling firm and perfect, and thinking about it made his dick tent the covers. This was the first time he'd given himself the freedom to just feel what it was like to want Travis, no holding back.

It was an incredibly heady sensation to want the man, and it almost made him dizzy as a feeling of intense longing swept over his body. This wasn't a sensation that was anything like what he'd felt with the men he'd fucked in the past. Those connections were about transient physical feelings that he'd had to satisfy so he could move on. So he could continue to ignore what he truly wanted. They centered on his dick and nothing more of him. The feelings he had for Travis, on the other hand, were totally different. It was like all the feelings he had inside—the physical ones, the ones in his brain, and those of his heart—had coalesced into something huge and overwhelming. Put together, it wasn't the kind of want and need that could be satisfied by a physical act. It wasn't just a physical need. It was... more.

So much more.

It was the need to yank Travis's body toward him until it was flush with his own, to fuck him raw and hard. It was the urge to hear what Travis sounded like when he screamed Benny's name. Those cravings were all there. But it was also the intense longing he had to wake in his own bed, open his eyes and see Travis lying next to him. It was the fantasy he had of being able to roll over in

bed in the middle of the night and reach out for Travis's hand. And it was the ache he got in his chest when he thought about how it would feel to fully embrace his friend—not a gentle hug of friendship, but the kind of all-encompassing, melding hug you gave a lover. The kind where you couldn't tell where one person ended and the other began. None of these scenarios were ones that Benny had ever experienced before, but this was the first time he'd been able to picture himself being a part of something more.

But what was *Travis* thinking? Benny wondered if he had experienced the kiss they'd shared in the same way Benny had. Just as his feelings for Travis were expanding inside his soul, the thought of Travis's feelings—what they might be and what they might *not* be—caused fear to expand in his gut. The thought of how Travis might greet him when they saw each other made Benny want to stay in bed forever.

Then he realized what day it was and he suddenly found himself sitting straight up in bed. *Shit!* There was a catering event tonight, and from the angle of the sun, he was late getting his ass out of bed.

Benny threw the blankets off his body and shot out of bed. Noting his distinct lack of pants from the night before, he pulled on a pair of sweatpants first. He shed his shirt from the night before, tossing it in the hamper before throwing on a soft T-shirt. He did his best to ignore the pain in his head as he opened his door and went down the hall to find an aspirin. His nose registered that Travis was already up cooking. At least one of the owners of Best Bites was doing his job, but Benny felt guilty that he wasn't helping. So he popped a few pills, washed them down with a handful of water scooped from the faucet in the bathroom, and headed downstairs.

At the doorway to the kitchen, Benny paused to take stock. Travis stood at the stove in a situation that was utterly familiar after having seen him work all these years. An outsider might see it as chaos—the stove with multiple steaming pots, the counters covered in a wide variety of foods, and several cutting boards with chopped food scattered around the kitchen—but in reality, Benny knew that Travis had it all organized and under control. It was what made him such a good chef, and what clearly separated his skills from Benny's. Benny might have gone to cooking school along with Travis, but he was no chef. Benny could cook some decent food, but Travis had the skills, taste, and organization to run a kitchen, no doubt about it.

Travis finally noticed Benny standing there when he turned from the stove toward the center island of the kitchen. Benny saw a quick look of surprise and

the beginnings of a smile before the look on his face turned tentative. The hesitance wasn't surprising after the kiss the night before, but Benny still wasn't happy to notice it.

"Hey, man." Travis turned back to one of the pots on the stove, sprinkling what looked like chopped herbs into the pot and stirring.

Benny hadn't been at all sure how he would address the elephant in the room, but after the realizations he'd had in bed only minutes earlier, there was no way in hell he would treat this like every other morning he'd had with his friend. His feelings were different now. He had to find out if they'd changed for Travis, too.

Benny walked over to where Travis stirred a pot at the stove and stood next to him, resting his hand on Travis's shoulder. "Smells good."

Travis didn't pull away, which was good news, but he kept his eyes on what he stirred. "We've got the Baker job tonight at seven."

Benny leaned his head over sideways, resting it on Travis's shoulder. He was testing the waters, and it scared the shit out of him. It wasn't going to stop him, though.

"Trav—"

"I've got most of the cooking handled, but I need you to make sure Mateo is coming in," Travis said. He hadn't moved, but he was all business. "I've got sushi on the menu, and there are a lot of guests, so I just want to double check." Travis placed the spoon he'd been using onto the spoon rest and walked over to a cutting board that overflowed with sliced vegetables, effectively separating Benny's hand and head from contact with Travis's body.

Benny quietly sighed. This wasn't the time to be dealing with their interpersonal issues. They did legitimately have a big event that evening, and he needed to step up and take care of his end of the business. Plus, he probably should have known better than to interrupt Travis when he was doing his chef thing.

Turning to face Travis, Benny refocused on business, though he was determined to find the time to talk to Travis eventually. "I'll grab a coffee and make phone calls, and then I'll be in to help you cook, okay?"

"Sure," Travis replied, sending Benny a small smile over his shoulder. It was a familiar smile, and one that reminded Benny how incredibly cute he was.

The sight made something tumble in his belly. “You can grill the vegetables if you want,” Travis continued after he’d turned back to his cutting board. “I have them all sliced.”

Benny grunted. “Of course you give me the hottest job in this weather.” He nodded his head toward the backyard. Heat already radiated through the windows, and it was likely heading toward eighty degrees, a harbinger of the hot weather, which crept into a Floridian spring.

“It would have been cooler if you’d gotten up earlier.”

“So this is punishment for last night?”

Travis was silent for a few seconds. “I wouldn’t punish you for last night. It’s just work. You know that.”

Benny would take those words as a good sign, though he wasn’t about to push his luck. He grabbed his coffee and headed to the room at the back of the house that he used as an office for Best Bites. He had a checklist that he used for every event they catered, and he went through it diligently. That included calling Mateo, who would be preparing sushi for the event, along with the other servers that they’d be using for the cocktail party that evening. While he did his work, he was aware that he was biding his time. He wasn’t going to let himself ignore his feelings for Travis any longer.

Chapter Thirteen

It was only six forty-five and Travis was clenching his hands. He'd had just about enough of both Mateo and Benny, and the cocktail party hadn't even started yet. He stood at the counter and looked up at the ceiling in the large kitchen where he did prep work, letting out a long breath. He had no patience for the crap that was going on behind him.

Travis glanced back once again, watching Benny and Mateo engage in what seemed to be a contest of wills. Actually, it was more like some bizarre sexual dominance competition. Like something you'd see happening between male birds competing for a mate in a nature documentary. It certainly answered the question that had been on his mind all day about how Benny's kiss would affect their life.

The behavior was no surprise with regards to Mateo. Mateo Tabana was Travis's part-time sous-chef, excellent overall cook, and expert at sushi. His family was from Cuba and he cooked some delicious Cuban food, but before working at Best Bites, he'd had a job at an authentic sushi bar in Tampa where he'd learned from the best. While Travis could do sushi moderately well if he had to, Mateo was capable of churning out luscious concoctions of fish, seaweed and rice at speeds that made most people's eyes widen.

Any time Travis had sushi on the menu for an event, he made sure to call in Mateo to make it fresh and on-the-spot. Considering how popular sushi was, that made Mateo a highly valuable employee. But if Mateo was a great sous-chef and a masterful sushi-chef, his main title on the street would probably be "flirt". He was flamboyantly gay and there were few asses he wouldn't be happy to slide his hand across.

Mateo's flirting, on-the-job or not, had never bothered Travis before. Mateo may have flirted, but he also made damn good food and got his work done at the same time. Travis had always taken the flirting as he assumed Mateo had intended—just for fun. Travis didn't let it distract him from doing his own job and he didn't take it seriously. Benny hadn't ever taken it seriously, either, at least until now.

From the moment they'd arrived at the house in Palm Harbor for the cocktail party, Mateo and Benny had been getting in each other's faces. Mateo had been acting like his normal self; referring to Travis as "sexy", squeezing his

shoulders every so often, giving him playful hip checks—when they weren't holding knives, of course—or jokingly bantering about sex. It was raunchy kitchen humor with a gay twist, and not uncommon in the restaurant world.

The difference this time was that Benny responded in a way that no one would mistake as innocent. When he'd normally be spending most of his time either schmoozing with the clients or directing the waitstaff, this time Benny spent an inordinate amount of time squeezing his way between Mateo and himself at the work counter. Mateo responded back, too, by increasing the level and pace of his flirtatious jokes to a point that would not be good for business if it were overheard. Travis had given him a sharp elbow to the ribs on more than one instance, something he'd never felt the need to do before.

And Benny? On the one hand, Benny was great. The way he had searched through their bins of supplies to find Travis's favorite chef's knife, and then presented it to him like it was a treasure, had been both helpful and heartwarming. And the way Benny had stood on one side of him, placing a hand on the small of his back while he complimented Travis's fried rice cakes? Travis wasn't immune to compliments, nor was he immune to Benny's touch, that was for sure. On the other hand, when Benny began bickering with Mateo like a twelve-year-old know-it-all, it made Travis want to kill him. Travis was getting angry enough that he couldn't maintain his normal level of happy concentration while cooking, a situation that only underscored how fucked up the situation was getting.

As if on cue, Mateo and Benny both sidled up to him, one on each side, as he finished plating tiny roasted-vegetable and goat cheese sandwiches onto trays, ready to be handed off to the servers.

Mateo squeezed his bicep on his right side. "Can I get you a drink, honey? It's kind of hot in here."

Benny chimed in from the other side. "I can get you some bottled water from the fridge."

"Orange juice is a better idea," Mateo replied, sliding his hand down Travis's back. "The sugar will give you energy."

"He doesn't drink orange juice."

"He can have pineapple instead," Mateo replied in a lilting voice. He leaned closer to Travis. "You know what they say about pineapple juice. Right, Travis?"

“He drinks water,” Benny said, enunciating each word in a staccato rhythm. “He always drinks water.”

“Enough! I don’t want *anything* to drink,” Travis said, clenching his hands into fists. Normally he was happy to cook and leave the bossing to Benny, but it looked like tonight he’d have to take over both. “Benny, I want you to go out on the terrace and do your thing with the Bakers. Make sure the chairs are all in the right place and that the servers are keeping up with the guests. Service should start in,” he paused to check the clock, “five minutes. Come back in fifteen to give me a status report.” Travis turned to Mateo, pointing a finger at his chest. “And you. Go to the other counter and finish plating the sushi. And no more talking until it’s done.”

After both men had gone to do the tasks he’d assigned them, thankfully without comment, Travis stretched his arms above his head for a minute before he refocused on the leftover tasks. He was still stressed out by Mateo and Benny’s behavior, but he knew he couldn’t stop to talk to either of them until the night was over. He didn’t actually think he’d need to talk to Mateo at all, since his behavior had been more about countering Benny’s temporary insanity. It was Benny who he needed to talk to. But he still had to sear the sea scallops on the portable grill he’d brought, portion them out as trios on tiny plates smeared with parsley sauce, and garnish them with slivers of fresh mint.

After setting the temperature on the grill, Travis pulled leaves off the freshly washed mint stems. Once he had a good amount of leaves stacked in a pile, he grabbed his Santoku knife to make a chiffonade. He was making the first slice across the rolled up leaves when Mateo spoke.

“So, when did you and Benny start fucking?” Mateo asked, his voice amused.

That sentence hit Travis’s head like a tire iron. Then he looked down and saw blood. He realized that, despite all his training and experience in knife skills, he’d royally fucked up. Either the knife had slipped, or he’d failed to adequately tuck his fingers. Either way, there was blood all over the cutting board, though it strangely didn’t hurt much more than a slight burning sensation in his thumb.

“Oh my God,” Travis heard Mateo say from over his shoulder.

Travis dropped the knife. “Fuck!” Cradling his left hand to avoid blood dripping on the floor, he walked quickly to the sink and turned the cold water on. Holding his breath, he thrust his entire left hand under the running water.

That was when the real pain started, and when he saw how bad the cut was. Blood was pouring out, but he could easily see the wound was deep and close to three-quarters of an inch long across the last section of his thumb. He swallowed, feeling unsteady looking at it.

While Travis forced himself to let the water run, he heard Mateo opening and closing drawers. He finally appeared at Travis's side with a stack of clean towels, one of which he held over the sink.

"Give me your hand," Mateo ordered. He didn't look thrilled, but Travis was thankful he took charge, as Travis's heart was racing. So he turned off the water and placed his hand in the towel. Mateo wrapped it firmly and put pressure on the wound.

"What's going on?" Benny stalked across the floor, taking in the scene. At the sink, he looked down at Travis's hand, cradled in Mateo's and completely wrapped. He addressed Mateo. "Where is it?"

"His thumb," Mateo answered steadily, to Travis's surprise. Travis felt anything but steady himself. "Could be worse. It's not great, though."

"Shit," Benny replied. Then he walked out into the main house. At first Travis wondered if Benny was afraid of the blood, but then Benny came back with a chair, which he placed next to the sink. "Sit."

Once Travis sat, Benny grabbed Travis's wrapped hand and raised it above his head, supporting the elbow.

Travis was starting to come to his senses now that the initial shock was over. As Benny and Mateo looked down at him, he realized that they all had to get moving in order to get the catering job done.

"We need to get the food out," Travis said.

"We've gotta get you to the hospital," Benny countered.

Travis shook his head at turned to Mateo. "Do we have any duct tape in any of the bins?"

"What?" Benny spat out.

"No, hun." Mateo shook his head. "It's too deep. Duct tape isn't going to do it."

"I can tape it and put on a rubber glove. I know we have those," Travis said. He remembered one of the student chefs at college doing that once when she sliced her finger in the middle of a busy service.

“No way,” Mateo said. “You’ve gotta put pressure on it for at least fifteen minutes, and then we’d have to wrap it at the bare minimum.” Mateo squeezed his shoulder, prompting Benny to growl. But Mateo ignored him, concentrating on Travis. “I’ve seen a lot of cuts in the kitchen. I think this one’s too deep. Why don’t I drive you to the hospital and we can let Benny finish up here.”

“What the hell,” Benny shot out. “I’ll bring him to the hospital. You can finish up here.”

Mateo smirked at Benny before speaking sweetly. “Whatever you want, honey.” Then he directed his gaze to Travis. “That okay with you?”

Travis sighed, wondering if he’d need stitches, and kicking himself for letting his attention wander. “I guess. Do you think you can handle getting the rest of the food out?”

“Of course,” Mateo said, looking incensed that Travis had even asked. “I only have to grill and plate the scallops. After that I’ll take over directing the waitstaff. If I have to, I’ll call Steve in to help,” he said, referring to one of the other chefs they frequently used.

“Let me see if the bleeding is letting up.” Benny frowned, lowering Travis’s arm and carefully opening the towel. Travis didn’t want to look at his own hand, but from the fierce grimace that suddenly contorted Benny’s face, Travis guessed it was bad. “I think it needs stitches. How the hell did you manage this?”

“Hey,” Mateo piped in from across the room, where he cleaned up the blood with some bleach. “Leave him alone. Every chef cuts himself. It’s a badge of honor.”

Benny rolled his eyes. Then he looked at Travis and tipped his head toward the doorway. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

As they left, Mateo called out that he would reassure the Bakers about what had happened. Mateo might be a flirt, but Travis knew he could trust him to take care of the business.

The car ride was silent except for a few ramblings from Benny, questioning whether or not Travis would need stitches and how he’d recover. Travis’s hand began to throb, so he tried to concentrate on the view out the window, ignoring thoughts of his injured finger. It honestly wasn’t a sight he wanted to see again.

The emergency room was quiet, so they only had to wait for about forty-five minutes. Travis sat next to Benny on the hard chairs. The thought of both

of them having to leave a catering event bugged Travis, despite Mateo's competency.

"We should call Mateo and check how the event is going," Travis said, rolling his head to the right to look at Benny. He still cradled his throbbing hand, wrapped in the towel, in his lap. The pain sucked, but he was beginning to calm down. "You can go back," he told Benny, nodding reassuringly.

Benny shook his head before he'd even finished speaking. "No way. You might have cut a nerve or tendon or something. I should be there to hear what the doctor says. Besides," he said, raising a brow, "I should find out how you're supposed to take care of your finger after this. If I know you, you'll ignore the instructions."

Travis rolled his eyes and let his head tip back against the wall behind his seat. Given the hard tone of Benny's voice, he knew from past experience that it was futile to object. The man was stubborn as hell sometimes, and when he got it in his head to take care of someone, family or friend, nothing got in his way. The truth was, Travis valued that aspect of Benny's personality.

When Travis's name was called, Benny stood alongside him, linking arms with Travis and walking into the exam room at his side. Once they were in the tiny room, he almost told Benny that he could go back out into the waiting room, but the worried look on Benny's face stopped him. Benny was probably correct when he'd said he should be there to hear what the doctor had to say, so Travis didn't say anything when Benny sat down in the extra chair.

The difficult part came when the doctor, a young blond woman with a no-nonsense voice, removed the towel on Travis's hand and started poking around with her rubber gloves. The stinging was bad, and even though he had his head turned away, the visualizations that came to mind when the doctor described the wound were nauseating. He surmised that his disgust was obvious on his face because Benny reached over and grasped his other hand firmly, intertwining their fingers.

At the feel of his touch, Travis turned and concentrated on Benny's face instead of whatever was happening with his injured hand. It felt almost too intimate at first, especially given the totally unresolved issues between himself and Benny, coupled with the memory of what they'd been doing last time they stared into each other's eyes. But when the doctor started doing something painful, he focused on Benny's blue eyes once again.

It was partially a repeat of what had happened at the singles event, but instead of Travis feeling the riotous feelings of lust and excitement that he felt

the prior time, this time Benny's eyes were a source of comfort. He let himself sink into the oceanic depths of them, and for a moment he wasn't aware of the pain.

"Ben," Travis said quietly. "Thanks." Benny only smiled a reply.

Sometime later the screeching sound of a metal chair across the floor snapped his attention away from Benny. The doctor got up, rambling about care instructions and antibiotics. His thumb was, thankfully, neatly wrapped, so he didn't have to look at it again. Travis mostly tuned the doctor out, knowing Benny would take care of it all. Indeed, Benny was soon huddled with the doctor by the door, pointing at what Travis assumed were discharge papers. And before he knew it, Benny summoned him to get up.

"Time to go." Benny nodded with his head toward the exit.

Travis looked down at his hand, which was wrapped in several layers of gauze. "Did she give me stitches?"

"Yeah. Only three," Benny replied. "She wasn't going to, but when she found out you were a chef, she figured she'd rather be safe than have you reopen the wound when you get cooking again."

"So, can I use my hand?" Travis asked, worrying yet again about the business.

"The doctor said you should use rubber gloves and to keep the dressings dry. But otherwise, yes."

"Thank God."

"Come on. Let's get home," Benny said, grabbing Travis's hand once again and pulling him toward the door.

This hand-holding was something new.

It also underscored how he and Benny needed to talk.

Soon.

Chapter Fourteen

“Yes, Mrs. Reed. Travis is feeling much better today.”

Sitting on the couch, Travis rolled his eyes for what felt like the one hundredth time that day. Benny talked on the phone, this time with Travis’s mother. Earlier it had been with Benny’s mother. And before that it had been with Meg, Jacob, and Benny’s brother Louis, all in succession.

“I just fed him, Mrs. Reed,” Benny said as he paced the room.

Travis growled from his seat on the couch. “Give me the phone, Ben.” He held his hand in the air.

“He’s pretty cranky, actually.” Benny spoke into the phone, ignoring Travis. “He’s calling me Ben again.”

“Ben!”

“All right, Mrs. Reed, I’m going to hand the phone to Travis now,” Benny said in a cautioning voice before placing the cell into Travis’s hand.

Travis frowned. “You know this is *my* phone, right?”

Benny shrugged and walked off in the direction of the kitchen.

Travis had a quick conversation with his mom assuring her of his continuing good health, despite the finger wound, and got off the phone. For some crazy reason, Benny had called what felt like everyone they knew to let them know about his accident. Travis had no idea what had gotten into Benny. It was a cut finger, not Ebola.

Benny came back into the room and placed a glass of water and a pill on the table. “That’s your antibiotic, and you can have another pain pill in two hours.”

“I’m perfectly capable of getting my own pills.”

Benny continued as if he hadn’t heard Travis. “And we should change the dressing before bed.”

“Again, *Benedict*, I can change my own dressing.”

“Using my full name isn’t going to stop me from taking care of you.”

Travis groaned and rubbed his head. His stubbled head. He couldn’t wait to shower tonight, though he’d have to wear a rubber glove over his hand. “Did you call Mateo?”

“Yup. He said he’d be happy to work more hours until you’re back up to speed.”

That was a relief. It wasn’t as if they didn’t have good employees, but Travis was still the head chef. It wasn’t in his nature to delegate his responsibilities to others, and it bugged him. He’d be cooking in a day or two, but he’d probably be slower than normal at some tasks until his thumb healed. But at least with Mateo to rely on and Benny doing more of the cooking than usual, he wouldn’t have to worry.

Benny started to walk out of the room again.

“Benny,” Travis called.

“I’ve got to make some phone calls in the office,” Benny replied. “Then I’ve got to do some laundry and run out to the grocery store.”

“Ben,” Travis called again.

“I’ve also gotta double-check that we have enough bandages in the house for tonight.”

“Do I have to call you Benedict again in order for you to listen to me?”

“What?” Benny asked.

“Sit down with me for a minute.”

Benny huffed, but finally came and sat at the other end of the couch.

Travis clenched his one working hand, at first unable to decide what to say. “We need to talk.”

“About the business?” Benny asked. “I just have to call the table and chair people and make sure they’ve got the numbers right for the Sanders job. And recount our wine glasses—”

“No. That’s not it.” Travis sighed. “We need to talk about us.”

Travis couldn’t stand the elephant in the room any longer. It was the uncertainty that bugged him. Benny was giving him an incredible number of mixed signals, and it drove him crazy. After he’d held Travis’s hand at the hospital, he hadn’t physically touched Travis once in the almost twenty-four hours that they’d been home. Add that to all the signals he’d gotten at the singles event and at the cocktail party before he cut his hand and Travis felt completely unsettled.

“You want to change the bandages now?” Benny asked.

Travis rolled his eyes. Then he pinned him with a look right in the eyes. He spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable. "I want to talk about us."

"What about?" Benny asked, his eyes darting away nervously.

Travis wasn't going to be deterred. He was done with not knowing. When he was a kid, he'd grown up not knowing a heck of a lot of things. He'd spent time wondering when his mother would come home from work, whether there'd be enough money for groceries, or even whether there'd be any food to cook for dinner. Despite his current business success, he still didn't have a lot of tolerance for uncertainty. And of all the *people* he preferred not to feel uncertain about, Benny was at the top of the list.

Travis jumped up, deciding to be honest. "I can't take the uncertainty anymore. The not knowing." He started to pace.

Benny, still sitting on the end of the couch, turned toward Travis as he paced. "What do you want to know?"

"A hundred things," Travis said, slapping his hand against the wall near the windows.

"How 'bout you start with one."

But which question should he start with?

Travis spun around. "Why have you been touching me so much in the last couple of days? And why did you kiss me the other night?"

"That's two."

"Fuck," Travis said under his breath. Then he stalked over to Benny. "I don't care if it's two. I want to know." He stood right in front of where Benny still sat on the couch. Travis could feel himself breathing quickly, but he was helpless to stop it. This was important, and he was scared as hell.

Benny stood up slowly until they both stood face-to-face, Benny only a little bit taller than Travis. "Which time are you talking about?" he asked quietly.

"You touched me at the stove the other morning. Your head was on my shoulder." Listening to himself say the words, it almost sounded like the incident was nothing important, but at the time, Travis remembered Benny's touch feeling anything but innocent.

"You were cute. I couldn't help it," Benny explained sweetly. "And your shoulder is the perfect height for my head."

His earnest tone was starting to weaken Travis's frustration.

“And at the Bakers?” Travis folded his arms across his chest.

“Did I touch you there?” Benny asked, mock-innocently. “Oh yes. I held your hand up so you wouldn’t bleed out.”

“Before that?” Travis asked, feeling his lips start to turn up despite wanting to interrogate Benny sternly. “You touched my back.”

“Did I?” Benny asked. Travis felt him move marginally closer. Close enough that he felt Benny’s breath along his cheek when he spoke. “You have a beautiful back.” And with the naughty smirk on his face, Travis had the feeling he meant more than just his torso.

“And at the hospital. You held my hand.”

Benny’s face turned serious. “You needed me.”

“Yes,” Travis whispered, “I did.”

“Anything else, then?”

Travis wasn’t going to stop now, despite the fact that his body hummed, almost like it was electrified by the sheer proximity of Benny’s strong body. “The kiss.”

“I told you already. I’ve wanted to kiss you since before you came out.”

Was that all there was, then? Benny had wanted to kiss him and now they had. But he hadn’t said he wanted to do it again, had he? Travis spun away, intending to leave, but Benny grabbed his arm and spun him back around.

“Ask me another,” Benny said, his voice more an order than a request. “I know you have more.”

Travis hesitated. He could ask, but did he need the answer in black and white? Did he want to risk hearing that Benny’s only interest was that of satisfying a passing urge to kiss him? It might be better to walk away and let it all be.

“Ask me,” Benny repeated quietly, his eyes boring into Travis’s, daring him to ask what he needed to know.

Travis took a deep breath, pushing himself not to chicken out. “If you wanted to kiss me back then, why did you decide that we’d only be friends?” It was a question that had to do with history, but it also had relevancy regarding what had been going on between Travis and Benny the prior week. Hopefully it would give Travis the insight to know where to go from here.

Benny was silent for a minute, though his face was thoughtful as his eyes traced the features on Travis's face. Benny reached a hand up and brushed the back of his fingers against Travis's cheek. Finally he spoke.

"I was afraid."

For a minute they looked at each other. Travis couldn't tell what Benny thought, but it seemed like they were both holding their breath.

"Are you still afraid?" Travis asked.

Benny tipped his head to the side, as if considering. "Not enough to let it stop me anymore."

Well then, if Benny had the guts, so could Travis.

"Do you still want to kiss me?" Travis asked, beginning to feel hopeful.

Benny didn't answer with words. He leaned in and pressed his lips against Travis's mouth.

Chapter Fifteen

If Benny's memory of kissing Travis the other night was amazing, despite his intoxication, this kiss was phenomenal. Travis's lips were silky soft on the outside, but pressed back at him in that firm, assertive way that made his stomach somersault. While Benny may have been the one to initiate the kiss, it was Travis who was in control of where it was going, and it was a complete turn on.

Benny felt Travis grasp his shoulders, pulling him close enough that he felt the man from chest to hip. Benny let himself sink into the sensations, feeling Travis swipe his lower lip with his tongue. Travis had taken charge by asking him those questions a moment earlier, and now he owned this kiss with every sweep of his lips. It made Benny breathless. And hard. From the way Travis pressed his pelvis against Benny's cock, it was evident that he felt it, too.

Just when Travis had managed to wipe every single rational thought from his brain with his kisses, Benny felt Travis's hand push against his chest. Benny's calves hit the edge of the couch and Travis gave him enough of a shove that they both fell together. Before they hit the cushions, Benny remembered about Travis's injured finger and caught him by the shoulders, catching his weight so that Travis didn't further hurt his hand.

"Your finger," Benny said. His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears.

Travis chuckled. "What finger?" Then he pressed his body down against Benny's, forcing Benny to withdraw the hand that had been pressing against Travis's chest. Travis kissed him again while his hand, the one with the damaged thumb, snaked up and cradled Benny's head.

God. All Benny wanted was to feel Travis. And those hips, bearing down and pressing against his cock, were so... right. But in the back of his mind, he worried about Travis—whether he was in pain, or whether he would damage his hand any further.

Benny ripped his mouth free. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Travis's eyes widened and his lips pressed together, forming a thin line. He pushed himself up, sitting on the edge of the cushion next to Benny's hips. "What the hell are you doing, Benny?"

Benny's heart sank at the accusatory sound of Travis's voice. "I was just worried."

Travis stood, pacing yet again. Benny watched Travis's jerky movements, trying to figure out if he was more upset or pissed. Either one wasn't good.

"I can't take this anymore, Ben." Travis stood his ground, placing his hands on his hips as Benny sat up and perched on the edge of a couch cushion. "I can't take all these ups and downs. Not with you. One minute you're touching me and the next day you're ignoring me. I need to know right now. What do you want from me?"

What *did* he want? *Shit*. How could he explain in words all that he wanted?

"No," Travis corrected. "Scratch that. I want to know why, if you say you wanted me all along, that you never pursued anything but friendship all these years. You said you were scared. I want to know why, Benny. I want to know everything."

And Benny wanted to tell him. He did. He hadn't realized until recently how the combination of want and fear had eaten at him over time. He wanted—no, he *needed*—to get it off his chest. To level with the friend he had... loved—yes, loved—for so long. Saying those words in his mind felt both new and unfamiliar, though that didn't make them any less true. He'd never attached words to the feelings until now, but it *was* love that had held him captive right alongside the fear of loss.

Benny cleared his throat, praying for the ability to speak the truth in a way that Travis would understand.

"I was afraid of losing you, Trav," he said, looking up into the green eyes he knew so well. "I was afraid that if we got together, somewhere down the line it would end. Not only the relationship, but the friendship, too." Benny stood, walking over to Travis and resting a hand on his chest. "Your friendship is the most important thing in my life. Always was, still is."

Travis blew out a long breath before he reached up to wrap his fingers around Benny's wrist. "Do you actually think, after eighteen years of friendship, that you could lose me?" He sounded incredulous, and honestly, hearing the words spoken aloud made Benny realize how ridiculous he had been, considering the strength of their friendship.

"No," Benny said, shaking his head. "I thought about it yesterday morning, actually. About how, when I made the decision to only be friends, I hadn't trusted your friendship. I hadn't trusted that you'd stick with me." Benny grimaced. "God, it kills me to admit that."

“So, all this time...”

“I was pretending,” Benny said, cutting off Travis. “Maybe not pretending, but ignoring. Ignoring what I’d been feeling. I didn’t want to admit it, even to myself.”

Travis stood there looking at Benny with a funny look on his face. Benny wasn’t sure what to make out of it. And if Benny had thought the fear of losing Travis’s friendship back in college was bad, the thoughts that were running through his head as he waited for Travis to say something were even worse.

“I just... I wish you’d told me,” Travis finally said. His voice was soft, and he looked sad as he spoke the words.

That was a feeling Benny could relate to as he faced the fact that he and Travis had missed out on many years when they could have been together.

“What would you have said if I had?” Benny asked.

Before either of them could say anything else, Benny’s phone started loudly chiming in his pocket, startling them both.

“Shit,” Benny said, dropping the hand from Travis’s chest to pull out his phone and turn off the alarm. “It’s a reminder for my meeting in town. I’m getting together with Mateo and two of the servers to hash out this month’s schedule.”

Travis nodded, though Benny still couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Do you want me to cancel?” Benny asked. He sighed. “We should talk more...”

Travis shook his head. “Go. It’ll make me feel better that you’re taking care of the business. I’m still worried about not being able to cook quickly for the next few weeks.”

And as quickly as the heart-to-heart had begun, they were back to business. Benny couldn’t help the feeling of disappointment in his gut.

“We’ll be fine,” Benny said, shooting him what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He was referring to Best Bites, but he hoped Travis realized he was also talking about a lot more. “Why don’t you relax and we’ll talk when I get home. I shouldn’t be too long.”

Benny was about to walk away when Travis pulled him in and placed a quick peck on his lips. It wasn’t a sexual kiss, but it still made Benny’s belly

flutter. But the best part was that it gave him hope. Hope that Travis wasn't mad about what Benny had done and that he intended to give them both a chance.

It was twilight by the time Benny made it back from town. He'd tried to hurry along the meeting, but Mateo's boisterous flirting posed a distraction from getting the schedule done. On top of that, one of their servers was late arriving to the meeting. By the time they'd finished mapping out a reasonable, though slightly expanded schedule, one which required Benny and Mateo to do more cooking than either of them usually did, it was starting to get dark and Benny was getting antsy. He hadn't been kidding when he'd nagged Travis about the need to change his bandages, and he wasn't sure Travis would be able to handle it himself.

When he arrived home, the house was dark. He walked in quietly, taking off his shoes in the foyer and emptying his pockets into the bowl on the kitchen counter. Once he'd made his way upstairs, through the gathering dark of the house, he paused at Travis's open bedroom door.

The man was curled up on the bed, shirtless and under a thin sheet that was gathered around his waist. Benny's eyes followed the contours of his body, which faced away from Benny—the roundness of the shaved head resting on the pillow, the muscled curves of his shoulder and arm, the jut of hip covered in the softly draped sheet. Travis's left arm, with the bandaged finger, was stuck straight out and hanging off the side of the bed, obviously out of the way of being hurt. As Benny stood silently, he could hear the even, quiet breathing that told him that Travis was asleep.

Benny stood up from where he leaned against the doorframe and almost decided to walk down the hall to his own room, but something stopped him. He was drawn to Travis. There wasn't anywhere else that he'd rather be than here in this room. And he didn't want to bury that feeling a single time more. And part of him had to hope that Travis had left his door open for a reason.

He went in and sat down on the edge of the large bed. In the moonlight he noticed that it looked like Travis had managed to rebandage his finger, albeit messily. The man was beautiful and he wanted so much to reach out and run his hand down the muscled arm that rested only a foot away. At the same time that thought passed through him, Travis sighed and rolled toward Benny, onto his back. Benny saw his eyes blink open.

“Benny?” Travis’s voice was hoarse from sleep.

“Yeah,” Benny said, reaching out to squeeze his bicep. They were both quiet, facing each other in the moonlight, though neither of them could see the other’s eyes well. It was a minute before Benny found the guts to ask, “Can I stay?”

Even though it probably wasn’t much time at all, those seconds of waiting for Travis to respond felt like the longest in his life. His body froze, his breathing seized, and his heart was lodged in his throat.

Travis snaked a hand out along the sheets to rest his fingers lightly along the side of Benny’s thigh. “Yes. Stay.”

Without hesitating, Benny moved to lie down, but Travis stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Get undressed,” Travis said softly in the darkness.

A shiver ran through Benny at those words. He stood and shed his clothes, all but his boxer briefs. Travis rolled back into his previous position, facing the window on his side. He reached back to pull back the covers for Benny. Benny took a deep breath before sinking into the bed, sliding up behind Travis and pulling the sheet over the both of them. Travis reached back and grasped Benny’s hip, pulling Benny in close enough to spoon around Travis’s ass.

It was closer than he’d ever been to Travis before. He laid his head on the pillow behind Travis’s head, allowing his nose to burrow into the back of his friend’s neck. He took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar spicy scent mixed with the fresh scent of bodywash, taking it inside of him where it could settle deep. Then he snaked a leg between Travis’s legs, letting himself feel what it was to sleep—literally—with his friend for the first time.

Benny let out a long breath and sank totally into Travis’s warmth. He smiled and spoke softly in Travis’s ear. “This is what I wanted. What I want.”

There was no hesitation when Travis replied.

“Me, too.”

Chapter Sixteen

The faint morning light filtering through his eyelids was the first thing that registered in Benny's consciousness the next morning. He realized immediately that the light probably wasn't what had woken him. It was the feel of a hand sliding up and down his side, from the edge of his boxer briefs up to the side of his pectoral muscle. Goose bumps sprang up on the skin of his arms and neck before he snapped open his eyes.

Travis lay on his side, awake. Unlike the night before, he now faced Benny, skimming a hand—the one with the bandaged thumb—over Benny's body. Travis's face was relaxed, his mouth lax and eyes following the movement of his own hand along Benny's body.

Benny swallowed, moistening his tongue. "Hey." How did you greet your friend-turned-what? Almost-lover? "How long have you been awake?"

Travis's eyes met his. "Awhile."

Benny didn't know what to say. A week ago, he would have never imagined that he'd be here in this bed with Travis.

"I've been thinking," Travis said. It was still hard for Benny to tell what kind of mood Travis was in, but when he felt the hand that was skimming his body move down and around the back of his ass, stopping to cup the lower curve of one cheek, he involuntarily took in a quick breath. Travis continued speaking. "I don't want to have any confusion about you and me."

The hand on his ass certainly wasn't confusing his cock. Benny forced himself to respond in a way that didn't involve thrusting his hips.

"You're right." Benny forced himself to focus on Travis's face.

"Before I kiss you again, we've got to be on the same page," Travis said.

Unable to stop himself, Benny felt himself beginning to smile. "You're gonna kiss me?" Benny asked hopefully, feeling breathless.

Travis frowned. "Did you hear everything I said?"

Benny shook his head. "No. I was thinking about your hand."

Travis rolled his eyes. "Not my thumb again. What the hell, Ben. If you mention my finger one more—"

"Not your finger," Benny interrupted, smirking. "Your hand. On my ass."

Travis quieted, then chuckled. He squeezed the cheek he held. “You mean this one?”

“It’s a little distracting.”

Travis removed his hand, a move that disappointed Benny, though he realized it was probably for the best if Trav expected him to actually listen.

Benny sighed in mock-disappointment. “What were you saying again?”

Travis was quiet for a minute, a thoughtful look on his face. “I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer them honestly. Do you think you can do that?”

Well, if answering questions worked for intimacy dating, it could work here, right?

“Yes,” Benny said, nodding. He had a feeling that everything hinged on this, so he gave Trav all of his focus. And despite the serious lack of coffee in his system, he was as alert as he’d ever been.

“Do you trust now that nothing can destroy our friendship?” Travis asked, a neutral look on his face.

“Trav.” Benny hesitated, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know exactly why I made that stupid decision back then. I don’t know why I was so scared, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to explain it. But I do know this,” he said, reaching out to cup Trav’s jaw. “I’ve been friends with you for a long time now. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, that I ever *will* have. I don’t intend to let our friendship end. If you won’t either, then I think we’re good.”

Trav nodded. “Nothing will stop me from being your friend.”

And hearing the iron determination in Travis’s voice, Benny believed, now, that what he said was true. He didn’t know why he hadn’t trusted in that fact back in college, but now he didn’t have any doubts.

“What else?” Benny prompted.

“Will you promise not to hide your feelings from me anymore?”

“Absolutely,” Benny answered with no hesitation.

“I don’t mean just telling me the truth,” Travis explained. “I need a promise that you’re not going to hide your feelings—your needs—from either of us.”

Benny frowned. It was the part that bothered him the most about what had happened. Coming to the realization that he’d hidden his feelings from himself

for the longest time, losing all those years when he could have been with Travis, was disheartening to acknowledge. It hadn't been a healthy way to handle his life, and he could see now how much it had caused both of them to suffer.

Benny met Travis's eyes. "I'll do my best not to ignore what I'm feeling anymore. I don't want to. I'm sure of that."

Travis nodded slowly. "One last question," he said, reaching a hand up to cradle Benny's face. "What do you want?" Travis asked, his voice emphasizing the last word, his eyes serious and penetrating. Benny grasped at the words in his head to explain.

"You. More. More with you," Benny said. Was that clear enough? No, he'd promised honesty, so he'd have to serve that up. "I want everything. Not just friends. I've been... lonely," he blurted, embarrassed to feel moisture in his eyes. "Not that your friendship wasn't enough. I just... I need to show you what I feel. I need to be closer to you."

"Then show me," Travis said.

Chapter Seventeen

When Benny had kissed him, drunk and in bed the other night, Travis hadn't been sure. He'd been afraid it didn't mean what he'd hoped it did, and he'd feared he'd end up with a broken heart. But *this* time... This time was different. When Benny's lips hit him, he knew. This might be only the beginning, but it was the beginning of *everything*. Friendship, love, the whole damn thing. And now that he was sure, it felt perfect.

Benny's lips were sweet as they traveled across his, but it felt tentative, which surprised him. This was a man that Travis relied upon. In business, he took charge of employee and client alike, making decisions with assertiveness. But here, his lips were hesitant, brushing against him lightly, almost tickling in the way they caressed him.

But when Travis reached over to tug Benny's hips closer, bringing the lengths of their bodies into full contact, that was the switch that turned Benny on. All of a sudden Benny propped himself up on an elbow as he pushed Travis onto his back, covering him with his heavy chest and the downward force of his lips. Lips that weren't only kissing Travis's lips, but which traveled down the side of his neck, biting at that tender spot on his trapezius.

Travis gasped at the pleasure of the tiny pain that made his body shudder. "Benny."

Benny grunted, continuing the alternating licks and bites down Travis's shoulder and over to his sensitive nipple. Benny sucked and nipped at the nipple until Travis was about to scream, then Benny switched to the other one, building the tension inside Travis once again. Right then, Travis became aware of the hard thrust of Benny's cock along his thigh, something he couldn't ignore. When Travis squeezed the length of Benny's cock through the fabric of his boxer briefs, Benny's head shot up from where it had been playing.

"Shit, Trav," Benny gasped shakily.

"Take these off." Travis wanted to feel the naked length of Benny's flesh, something he'd dreamed of for far longer than he could admit. "I need to touch you."

Benny reached down to peel off the briefs, then he trailed a hand up Travis's thigh. When Benny's hand made it up to his hip, his eyes flared as he looked up at Travis. "I see yours are already gone." Then Benny swept his hand

down and Travis felt the most exquisitely firm hold over his own cock—warm, strong, and the perfect pressure.

Travis closed his eyes briefly, concentrating on the feel of Benny's touch. But feeling it wasn't enough. He had to see. He swept the sheet off of them both and looked down. Benny's hand slid up his cock, his thumb hitting the tender spot on the underside of the crest on the upstroke, causing him to gasp. "Shit, Benny, that's—" But Travis couldn't speak because he'd caught sight of Benny's cock.

After being friends for so long, living with each other twice now, it was surprising to think that he'd never seen Benny completely naked before. Seeing him now was no disappointment. If his own cock had been hard before, the sight of the perfection of Benny's naked form turned him to iron.

"God, you're..." Huge? Thick? Perfectly made? The adjectives shot through his head, but Travis couldn't believe that any of them did justice to Benny's body. By the time Travis managed to get his hand around Benny's cock, this time bare, he'd given up on words, focusing instead on watching them both move together while trying to hold back enough to make this first time together last a little bit longer.

As if something in their minds was synchronized, Travis found himself looking back up at Benny's face at the same time he'd looked at Travis. Then they were both leaning in again with a kiss that was wilder than Travis had felt before. Sloppy, even. But he couldn't care less. He was busy tasting and biting, feeling the slide of Benny's tongue twisting with his own, tasting the flavor of want and lust and absolute longing that came from two people who had tried so hard to remain apart, but who had finally given up and found a way to come together.

Suddenly Benny pulled back from the kiss, letting go of Travis's cock.

"Don't stop." Travis's voice was almost a whine, but any separation from Benny's skin was torture.

"Believe me, I'm not," Benny said. Then his lips turned up in a grin. "Roll over."

"You want to—"

"Not yet," Benny said, kissing him on the shoulder. "Remember what you said at the dating thing?"

"What'd I say?" Travis asked dumbly, having trouble making his mind work when so much of him was focused on simply being closer to Benny.

“You know—the thing you haven’t done yet, but want to?”

Once Travis’s mind managed to pull the memory into place, he felt an immediate flush rush up his chest and into his face. He swallowed. “Oh.”

“I think I’m the right partner, Trav,” Benny said softly, with a darkness in his voice that gave Travis a chill. “At least, I want to be.”

“Okay,” Travis said, feeling heat prickle his skin as it traveled over his body. He wasn’t about to disagree.

“Roll over. On your knees.”

Travis rolled onto his knees, supporting his upper half by placing his elbows on his pillow and letting his head hang. Part of him was incredibly embarrassed, knowing what Benny had planned, but most of his attention was on his overwhelming sense of arousal coupled with the hard length of his cock bobbing between his legs.

Travis sensed Benny kneeling behind him. His hands skimmed down Travis’s back, bringing goose pimples to the surface of his skin.

“This tattoo on your back...” Benny said. Travis felt a finger swirl down his back, following what he knew were the lines of the tribal patterns inked there. “So hot.” Then Benny’s hand stroked lower, and Travis knew Benny traced the other pattern inked on his lower back, just above his ass.

A moment later, Travis felt Benny grasp both of the cheeks of his ass, separating them, exposing his hole to the cool air. Finally, when that first swipe of hot, wet warmth came trailing up from his balls to his pucker, it was almost too much.

“Oh, my God.” Travis let his upper half fall forward until his head lay on his pillow, his shoulders supporting him. “Benny,” he managed to gasp.

“Shh,” Benny said, between licks. “Just feel.”

Travis felt everything. Teasing swipes around his hole, causing the muscles to pulse without an ounce of his control. Then the darting pressure as Benny’s tongue zeroed in on the center, fucking him so perfectly, firm and soft at the same time.

“I... yes, I...” Then Travis gave up on words and let the whimpers escape as he felt Benny do what he thought was one of the most intimate acts you could do with another person.

“I’m going to put my finger in now. Okay, Trav?” Benny asked, but Travis couldn’t have answered if he tried. And from the shake in Benny’s voice, he was equally turned on. Travis somehow managed a grunt that Benny must have taken for assent, because he felt a wet fingertip pressing gently but firmly at his hole.

“Hold on,” Benny said, and Travis felt the finger move away. Travis cracked open his eyes and saw Benny fumbling in his bedside table, pulling out a bottle of lube and a condom. Benny leaned down until he was close to Travis’s face. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

“Yes,” Travis nodded, “please.”

Travis was stuck between feeling amazement—that they were both here together, in bed—and the most overwhelming lust and longing that he’d ever felt for another human being. He needed Benny to be inside of him and it couldn’t happen fast enough.

Travis heard the lube click open behind him. “Hurry.” He had intended it to be an order, but it came out more as begging. At this point, he couldn’t care less—he had no problem begging for Benny’s cock to fill him.

A wet drizzle of lube hit his crack and then Benny steadily pushed a finger into him, with a long slide in and another long slide out.

“So good,” Travis moaned, breathing through the pressure.

“Trust me, I can’t wait to be inside you,” Benny said, punctuating his words by leaning in and rubbing his hard cock underneath Travis’s balls, causing them both to groan.

Benny readied Travis quickly, pressing through the burn of two, and then three fingers, before withdrawing. Then Travis tried to catch his breath while he heard Benny tear the foil packet. After another drizzle of lube hit his ass, he felt the pressure of the head of Benny’s cock resting against him.

“You ready, Trav?” Benny asked.

“Do it,” he replied, letting out a breath and pushing out slightly as he felt the sting and pressure of Benny pressing inexorably forward, opening him and filling him in a way that he’d never been filled before. By the time Travis felt the brush of Benny’s balls against his perineum, he knew he wouldn’t last long.

“It’s not just sex, Travis,” Benny said, gasping. Travis felt him still, waiting for Travis’s body to adjust. Then Benny squeezed his hip. “This is... so much more.”

“I know,” Travis said. He let out the breath he was holding and let his body relax around Benny’s cock.

Then Benny pulled out on a slow glide, then thrusting again, increasing the speed a tiny bit each time. It felt so good, better than sex *ever* had. Before he knew it was coming, Travis felt the buzz at the base of his spine. He reached for his cock at the same time as Benny changed his angle so that it perfectly hit the spot inside that he needed.

“Benny. Oh God, I’m...”

“Yes,” Benny gasped, increasing the force of his thrusts as Travis shot onto the sheets. Travis whimpered through the exquisite pleasure, as Benny pegged his prostate so perfectly through his orgasm. He heard Benny groan right after that, the man thrusting deeply once more as he squeezed Travis’s shoulder almost painfully through his release, though Travis was so languid the pain hardly penetrated.

When they’d both quieted, Travis let himself collapse onto his stomach, relishing the feel of Benny lying on top of him, a heavy blanket of heat that Travis adored. He reached a hand backward, grasping Benny’s butt cheek to hold him close, and sighed in pleasure.

Minutes later, Benny gently pulled out, rolling to the side. Travis was cold for a moment as Benny padded off in the direction of the bathroom. When Benny got back, he gently cleaned both Travis and the sheet with a towel. Then he climbed back into bed, pulling Travis onto his side and spooning around him. Travis hooked his foot around the sheet, pulling it up far enough to grab and drape over them both.

The warmth of Benny’s body, at his back once again, was exactly what he needed. The sun rose higher in the sky and the mockingbirds in the garden outside the window filled the room with raucous noise. Travis felt sleepy as Benny’s hand wound around his side and over his chest. He felt the gentle press of lips against the back of his neck.

As Travis stared unseeingly out the window, one thought flitted around.

“One more question,” Travis said.

“Hmmpmph,” Benny groaned. Then he deadpanned, “Your cock is huge.”

Travis laughed. “I thought you said you were going to be honest. *Your* cock is huge.”

Benny chuckled. “You wanna fight over whose cock is huge, now?”

“No. What about what you said *you* wanted?” Travis asked.

“What I wanted?”

“To be said. After sex with someone you care about.”

“*I* already said it once,” Benny jokingly complained.

“You already...?”

“At the singles event. Don’t you remember?” Benny asked.

“Say it again.”

Benny was quiet for a minute, but when he spoke, the earnest tone cut to Travis’s core.

“I love you. I told you that I loved you. That’s the way I meant it. I wasn’t saying what I *wanted*, I was saying what I *felt*.” Benny squeezed him tighter around the chest.

It hadn’t been wishful thinking, then.

Travis smiled. “Love you, too.”

Chapter Eighteen

One year later...

When Benny awoke from the nap he'd been taking, the sight that greeted him made him smile. He would have thought that after a year, the sight of Travis in all his glory would have stopped affecting him. So far, that wasn't the case. There Travis stood, outside on the balcony of their room on the cruise ship, facing the Caribbean Sea, naked as the day he was born. That erupting joy in Benny's chest was still there, as it had been the first time he'd seen Travis in this way.

Benny's eyes catalogued all the parts he loved. The shaved head, deeply tanned from the months of exposure to Florida sunlight. Starting at the nape of his neck, the swirling tribal-styled tattoo that snaked all over the man's muscular back. The toned biceps peeking out from where he had rested his arms along the railing. The tight and rounded cheeks of his ass, crowned with their own spiky "man stamp", something Benny loved to tease him about. And those thighs, so muscular that they touched up at the top, underneath his ass. It was a pleasure to spread those thighs, that was for sure.

There were soft spots on Travis, too, and Benny had catalogued them all. They were just as pleasing as the muscles, as far as Benny was concerned. Maybe it was from eating a little too much of the fantastic food he made—a sin Benny was just as guilty of—but it didn't bother him one bit. Benny loved it all.

As if he could feel Benny's eyes on him, Travis turned to look at Benny over his shoulder. The man made that adorably boyish smile that made his heart squeeze, before he spoke.

"Lazy bones."

Benny stretched his arms and yawned loudly. He climbed out of bed and walked out of the open balcony door, thankful that the balconies were separated with privacy screens on-ship. He stood next to Travis, resting his own naked ass alongside his lover's. They were in port at Belize City, but Benny was thankful that their balcony was on the side of the ship that faced the ocean, so no one could see their cocks swaying in the warm breeze.

"What time is it?" Benny asked sleepily. He could never tell what time it was on ship, unless the sun was rising or setting. That's what he liked about vacations.

“Almost time for us to get going,” Travis answered. He leaned sideways to nuzzle Benny’s neck. “You know, if you’re not going to tell me what you have planned, how do I know what to wear?”

“I packed you a bag earlier,” Benny said. “You can wear shorts and a tee with flip-flops if you like. It’s casual.”

“Flip flops?” Travis asked. “I guess we’re not going dancing, which makes me happy.”

Benny chuckled. It was true that Travis wasn’t a skilled dancer. It was one of the traits he’d only recently learned about the man, since they’d begun dating. But skilled or not, he still liked to get Travis on a dance floor and rub up against him. “You don’t need shoes to dance on a beach, you know. There are beach bars all over Belize where you can kick off the old flip-flops and dance on the sand.”

Travis snorted. “There are lots of more exciting activities to do on sand than dancing.” He turned toward Benny, his lips quirked upward. “Unless you’re talking about horizontal dancing?”

Benny rolled his eyes. “Your jokes need work, baby. But come on. Get dressed. We’re going to be late.”

Benny managed to get them both dressed in record time. It was edging close to three in the afternoon, so he needed to hurry so they’d be sure to catch the ferry to Caye Caulker, a beautiful little island nearby. And he needed to stop by the ship’s kitchen to pick up the supplies he’d arranged for. As he bent to grab his flip-flops, he noticed his hand shake. He steadied himself, trying to calm his nerves.

“You ready?” Benny smiled at Trav, thinking about his plans.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Benny crossed his fingers, hoping that was true.

Benny unpacked the bags as Travis sat on a lounge chair on the sand. Caye Caulker was among the most beautiful beaches Benny had seen, and coming from Florida, that was something. He’d made all the arrangements ahead of time, with both the kitchen on ship and one of the local hotels on the Caye, so that he could make this night special.

Benny bent down to open a box.

“What do you have there?” Travis asked, looking away from the calm water to see what Benny was doing.

Benny pulled out something he hoped Travis would understand the significance of.

Travis frowned, then his eyes lit up. “Is that a hibachi grill?”

Benny smirked. “Yup.”

Travis joined Benny, standing over where he was setting up the hibachi grill on the sand. “We never did get one of those, did we?”

“No, we didn’t,” Benny said. “Are they still part of your dream date?”

Travis tipped his head, mock-thinking with a smile. Then he looked back at Benny. “*You* are my dream date. The hibachi is just an extra.” He bent over and kissed Benny on the back of his neck.

“Well then,” Benny said, piling charcoal into the grill. “I have all the ingredients of an awesome date. Grill, food, the sunset is coming, and me.”

“You bring any lube?” Travis asked. “That might be another nice add-on.”

Benny snickered, glancing around them. “Might be a little public for that, but maybe I can think of something.” He started to unpack the fish and vegetables he arranged for.

“You want me to cook?” Travis asked, moving toward the vegetables in that way he usually did, taking over whatever kitchen they were in.

Benny waved him away. “You’re always cooking for me. So, no. Not tonight. You can just sit there and look pretty while I do the work.”

Travis pulled the lounge chair closer. Benny could feel his eyes watching as he lit the coals and readied the fish for grilling. Belize had the most beautiful fresh fish, though Florida had great fish also. This wasn’t gourmet food, but it didn’t need to be, with the grill and the salt breeze to accompany the simple meal.

“I’m not pretty.”

The soft words from Travis had Benny’s head snapping up from where he worked. He stood, putting the food aside, and stood next to where Travis sat. He pulled Travis’s head into the side of his hip in a sort of a hug. “Are you crazy? You’re the prettiest guy I know. And hottest. Smartest, too.”

Travis laughed. “You should have stopped at hot. I know you’re lying now.”

“Well, I’ve never met Einstein, but you are still damn smart.” He knelt down in the sand next to Travis, entwining his hands with the ones in Travis’s lap. “And I love you. Who cares about the rest?”

Travis looked at Benny with eyes that said everything. Admiration, respect, joy, and most of all, love. “Okay.”

A short while later, after they’d eaten the simple meal along with some tiny cakes that the nearby restaurant had wrapped up, they sat on towels facing the sunset. Each of them sat with bent legs, resting their chins on their knees as they watched the sun approach the horizon. There had been many other sunsets they’d shared in the last year, but Benny was determined that this one would be special.

Benny cleared his throat. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you.” Benny watched as Travis turned to face him, a quizzical look on his face. “We each had our issues, back when we were just friends. I didn’t trust that our friendship could withstand a relationship, and—”

“And I went along with your decision,” Travis said. “Stupidly, I might add.”

“And then,” Benny continued, “you didn’t like not knowing how I felt. You didn’t like the uncertainty of my not knowing how to move forward. I’ve always understood that, by the way.”

“Benny, I—”

“No. I get why you’d need me to be there for you. I remember what it was like for you and your mom, and I never wanted to be a source of worry for you.”

“Benny, you *don’t* worry me. You don’t. You’re such a stable part of my life, and you give me so much.”

“Well, I want to give you something else. Something new,” Benny said. He straightened out a leg to pull a small square jewelry box out of the pocket of his cargo shorts. “A promise.” He held the box out on his palm.

Travis’s mouth dropped open as he froze, staring down at Benny’s hand. “Oh my God.” Then his eyes snapped back up to look at Benny’s.

“A year ago I promised you two things. One promise was that I wouldn’t give up our friendship, no matter what. And the second promise was that I’d tell

you the truth. Now I want to add one more promise.” Benny smiled at Travis’s reaction. He watched his lover’s eyes widen in a combination of surprise and wonder that made Benny’s heart beat faster. Maybe Travis wasn’t traditionally pretty, with his shaved head and broad shoulders, but his reaction to a proposal was damn cute. “Are you gonna open it?”

Travis managed to close his mouth and made a small noise, almost like a whimper, as he carefully lifted the box from Benny’s palm.

Crossing his legs like a pretzel, Benny turned his body to face Travis, wanting to see his reaction, wanting to see his eyes when he opened it. *Fuck it.* The man *was* pretty, he realized. Travis was the fucking prettiest, most beautiful man he’d ever seen, with or without the golden glow of the sunset hitting his face.

Travis opened the box and his eyes widened. “There are two,” he said, looking at the two rings, etched with matching vine patterns, nestled in the box.

“I hoped you might give me a promise, too,” Benny explained. “Besides, if you get to walk around town with my ring on, I want to do the same. I’d be proud to do the same.”

Travis covered his mouth with his free hand, turning to Benny with eyes that were getting shiny. “Ben.”

Benny reached up a hand to grasp Travis by the nape of his neck, pulling strength from their contact, something he’d learned to appreciate almost a year ago and hadn’t forgotten since.

“This is what I want to promise,” he said, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat. “I promise to be your best friend and lover forever. No doubts, no fear, at least not about that.” Benny felt the wet hit his cheek. There was no controlling it, not when he thought about his love for Travis. Not when he thought about how much he wanted to give him. “I’ve been your friend for longer than I can remember, Trav, and I’ve been your lover for a year. Now I want to be your husband.”

Travis squeezed the box with whitened fingers when he tipped his head forward until his forehead was resting against the front of Benny’s shoulder. Benny wrapped an arm around the man, pulling him close, and tried to feel every sensation he could about his lover, about this moment.

Suddenly, Travis’s head snapped up. There were a few tears on his face, too. When he spoke, his voice was soft, but fervent. “We may not have been

lovers for long, but I've loved you for a long time, Ben. There's not a speck of doubt in my mind that it'll ever change."

"Is that a yes?"

"Fuck, yes," Travis blurted, grabbing Benny around his neck and kissing him sloppily.

It was the kind of kiss that reminded Benny of how perfect it could be to kiss a longtime lover. There weren't any worries over technique, but just the pure emotion of his lover broadcasting his excitement over his lips, showing his love in the most demonstrative, physical way you could. It was messy and wet and, most importantly, totally real.

Travis pulled back. "Put it on me."

Benny looked down, choosing the smaller of the rings, which he'd sized to match Travis's more slender finger. Placing the box on the towel, he slid it on the man, kissing the back of Travis's fingers.

"My turn." Travis smiled a radiant smile as he plucked up the other ring and slid it on Benny's finger. He bent to kiss Benny's hand. "There. Perfect."

"Are you as happy as I am?" Benny leaned in until their mouths were almost touching.

"At least."

"Are you going to kiss me again?"

"Yeah," Travis whispered, "I am."

Benny took a sip from one of the pint glasses that the bartender placed in front of him. He spun around on the barstool to face Travis, who sat in the stool next to him, his eyes catching again on the ring on his lover's finger. A feeling of pride shot through Benny. That might make him into a bit of a caveman, but he couldn't help it—he was damn proud that this man had agreed to marry him. Besides pride, he felt grateful. Years ago he'd made a stupid decision to limit himself to friendship with this man. He was thankful now that his decision hadn't held. At least, not forever.

"It's crowded," Travis said, having to lean toward Benny and raise his voice to be heard over the din.

"More than the time *we* went through this." This was nothing like the small crowd that had gathered a year ago to participate in Tampa Gay Social's first

intimacy dating mixer. Jacob had somehow managed to expand the event and gather over a thousand people of the queer variety—on a cruise ship, no less—to do it again.

Suddenly Benny felt a hand clamp onto his shoulder from behind him. He glanced up and saw that it was Jacob.

“That’s because they know it works,” Jacob said, smiling in a self-satisfied way.

Travis laughed. “How would they know that?”

Jacob smirked. “You didn’t think I noticed your rings? When I announce your engagement, everyone will believe it.” Jacob came around Benny and somehow managed to hook an arm around both their heads and pull them in for a hug. “Congratulations.” It sounded like he was almost as happy as Benny and Travis were, if Benny had to guess.

When Jacob pulled back from the hug, a man tapped him on the shoulder and he stepped to the side to speak to him. Benny smiled at Travis, then waited for Jacob to finish his conversation. He wasn’t fully listening to what the two were saying, but it became clear that the other man was a reporter for a local gay newspaper in Sarasota. Benny was about to order another beer when Jacob pulled him into the conversation.

“And these two, here, are the results,” Jacob said, gesturing toward Benny and Travis. Benny chuckled, though he saw Travis’s face flush as his naturally shy personality kicked in.

“You two are engaged?” the reporter asked, his eyes wide.

Benny smiled, feeling that pride kick in again. “Yup.” Would he ever get tired of saying that? Probably not until the time came when he could refer to Travis as his husband instead.

“They were both at Tampa Gay Social’s first intimacy dating event,” Jacob said.

“Wow. That’s amazing,” the man enthused. “Wonder how many couples from tonight’s event will end up together?”

“I have a good feeling about it,” Jacob said.

“So, I mean, what’s the formula then?” the man asked. “How do you make people fall in love?”

Benny saw Travis roll his eyes at the man's comment, but personally he found it funny.

"It's easy," Jacob said. "The event gets people talking. You know—ask, answer, look, yadda-yadda-yadda, kiss."

"Really," the reporter said, taking notes furiously. Now even Benny rolled his eyes.

A few minutes later, the reporter and Jacob had departed and the bar had started to clear out because the event was starting in the adjoining ballroom.

"I wonder what kind of interesting questions Pete and Jacob came up with this time?" Travis asked, his eyes mischievous.

"God only knows."

"Well," Travis said. He looked around as if to check that they were alone and then leaned close to Benny, placing his hand on Benny's knee for support. "Since we're not doing the 'ask and answer' part this time," he spoke softly, "how about we go back to our room and have some yadda-yadda-yadda."

Benny smiled and groaned. "You are so cheesy."

Travis shrugged. "But you love me."

"You bet I do," Benny said, standing. "Let's go."

The End

Author Bio

Livia is a New Yorker by birth, but a Floridian at heart. She lives with her husband and four children in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. She has always known that she was part-fish, but it wasn't until later that she decided that her ultimate happiness would be having the opportunity to swim every day of her life. Living only a half-mile from the Gulf of Mexico has made that possible. When she's not hangin' with the kiddoes and cooking food for what seems like an army, she takes evening bike rides to view the sunset.

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