



A. J. Thomas

*The World in
His Eyes*

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE WORLD IN HIS EYES

By A.J. Thomas

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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THE WORLD IN HIS EYES

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Photo Description

A screenshot of a chat session from an online dating app. The conversation is one-sided, opening with a compliment, then a selfie of a grinning young man with dark skin and a charming smile. His last message begins by announcing his race like a disclaimer: “It’s okay if you’re not into black guys... a lot of people on here aren’t.”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Larry is a flirt and a sweet guy under a bit of swagger. He is tired of one night stands and wants to find a real relationship but he has a hard time staying away from the hook-up sites. Because... sex. Larry feels the sting of being rejected automatically because of his race. But he still has a positive attitude and rolls with the punches. He won’t ignore elephants in the room, however; which sometimes leaves people uncomfortable.

“Beautiful eyes” is a snarky, young, driven professional who won’t be guilted into making a connection. He isn’t even looking for Mr. Right... but he likes Larry’s open face and broad shoulders and is charmed despite himself. Will “Eyes” give Larry a chance when his friends (or colleagues, family) seem less than enthusiastic? Can he grow up enough to accept a relationship that requires some work and commitment?

Can Larry set aside his patter and flirtatiousness enough to let “Eyes” see the sensitive guy hiding?

Please no BDSM.

Sincerely,

Kimberly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: in the closet, coming out, medical personnel, computer programmer, interracial, grief, geek, men with pets, tearjerker, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: secondary character death

Word Count: 45,035

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THE WORLD IN HIS EYES

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Chapter One

Larry bit back a curse when Davis rushed into the elevator with him. He'd spent a good chunk of his day cleaning up the mess Davis had handed off to him during the morning shift change. He didn't want to hear whatever excuses the other resident was going to make for his mistake. He just wanted to get out of the hospital, out of his scrubs, and relax.

"Aren't you supposed to be working this shift?" he asked.

"I've got a minute, and I wanted to talk to you," Davis said, panting. "I owe you a thank you for this morning."

It took conscious effort not to roll his eyes. "A 'thank you' would be nice, but I'm not worried about it."

"I was tired," Davis tried, as if exhaustion somehow absolved him of responsibility for his mistake.

"It happens," Larry said, trying to sound understanding. "Did Franklin give you a hard time about it? I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"I'm not in trouble. Thank god." Davis kicked the floor of the elevator. "I guess a humiliating lecture is better than the alternative."

"Better than the woman from this morning coding when she walks out the door," Larry said, knowing the only thing Davis was worried about was failing his emergency medicine rotation. "Better than having whoever would have performed her autopsy tracking you down afterward and asking why the hell you discharged her without going through a simple checklist."

"It seemed simple enough. She said the pain had started a month ago, and she was stable. I had five red tag traumas come in. I had a drunk trying to take his neck collar off during an X-ray, and the fucking on-call cardiologist was determined not to admit anyone who still had a pulse."

Larry sighed. Davis was used to being the smartest kid in class. He was in the second rotation of his residency, but he'd somehow managed to avoid working in the ER during his internship when he should have been thrown into the thick of emergency medicine. He was still figuring out how to work within the chaos and get patients in and out as efficiently as possible. And beyond the chaos, he hadn't quite figured out how to cope with the abuse heaped on them by patients, the constant struggle to get on-call specialists to actually come in to the hospital, and the constant anxiety of wondering when things would blow up.

“Don’t,” Larry insisted, holding up a hand to silence him. “Just don’t. As far as Dr. Franklin is concerned, it was a mistake. But if you try to convince me you were just tired, I will call bullshit. What was it you said when you handed her case off to me yesterday morning?” Larry snapped his fingers. “What was it? ‘She’s just looking for a warm place to sleep and a Vicodin fix. I just haven’t had time to get her out the door.’ Remember? I don’t care if you’re tired, I don’t care if you have every bed in the unit filled until morning. A person comes in with a headache, you do a neurological exam, no matter how long it takes you to get to it. You don’t write patients off, even if they are junkies, just because you’ve gotten more involved with people sicker than them. And, Davis, if you’re stupid enough to let a drunk trauma patient get to X-ray without being intubated and paralyzed, you brought that mess on yourself.”

Santa Clara Valley Medical Center was one of the few county-run hospitals in the San Jose area. It provided treatment for everyone, whether they were insured or not. The ER typically saw up to a hundred people for “headaches” each night. Twice as many in the winter, when the temperature dropped close to freezing. Most were just drunk and needed someplace safe to pass out.

Too many trauma patients didn’t make it in under their own power, but were brought in after accidents, and the drunks were always assholes. They never wore seat belts, and they never believed hitting their head against their windshield hard enough to leave a star in the glass could break their neck, so they fought and cursed, and sometimes even bit, to try to get up and leave. On Larry’s team, it was standard practice to chemically paralyze, sedate, and intubate anyone who was brought in drunk or unconscious after a traumatic injury. He knew most new interns and residents balked at the idea, but they got over their discomfort quickly enough when they were reminded that the same drunk who just tried to stab them with his own IV catheter would, in six months’ time, wheel his way into a court room to sue them all for failing to stop him from hurting himself in their ER.

It was the others who wandered in off the streets who were difficult for Larry. Some came in covered in cuts and bruises that they wouldn’t talk about. Some were suffering from serious chronic conditions that had never been adequately treated. And some had been living on the fringes of society for so long, or coping with the lifelong effects of traumatic injuries for so long, they simply couldn’t communicate when he asked them what was wrong.

So what if the majority of their patients were just jonesing for whatever their substance of choice was? Every now and then, there were cases like this morning's. The woman had been triaged before midnight, but they hadn't found a bed for her until nearly seven in the morning. Convinced she was just another junkie, Davis had shifted her to the bottom of their list of priorities and resolved to discharge her with a script for ten Vicodin, just to be done with it.

Thankfully, Davis's shift had ended and Larry's began before he'd signed the discharge order.

All Larry had done was perform a basic neurological exam. He hadn't actually been expecting her optic discs to be blurred and inflamed on examination. The odds of the CT scan he'd ordered, after consulting with their senior resident, showing anything had been slim, even then. When the radiology tech had pulled him aside at the nurses' station and whispered that the growth in the woman's brain was the size of a golf ball, he'd been as surprised as anybody.

"That's unfair," Davis insisted now.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. They all lived in terror of making mistakes, and the workload that guaranteed they'd all spend at least sixty hours or more a week in the ER didn't help. "Look, I'm not trying to be an asshole," he said honestly. "Mistakes happen. They happen to everybody. Stop making excuses for a mistake made yesterday and focus on doing the best you can today."

The elevator dinged and Larry shifted toward the door, his opportunity to escape. He strode through the doors as soon as there was enough room for him to slip through and then rolled his head to the side, working the kinks of a surprisingly long day shift from his neck before heading for his car.

He pretended he didn't hear the last words Davis muttered. "Wasting time and a four thousand dollar workup on a homeless junkie..."

He balled his hands into fists and forced himself to stay calm. There was no point to going back upstairs and trying to convince Davis to see the woman as a human being. Being homeless wasn't a crime, especially in San Jose where the programmers and engineers from all of the tech giants drove up the cost of rent until even a single bedroom in a shared apartment could cost well over a thousand dollars a month. Being homeless didn't mean she didn't deserve to be treated with basic dignity. The junkie thing might have been a safe assumption on Davis's part, but Larry didn't see how it made a difference. Being a drug addict didn't magically erase the growth in her brain.

He climbed into his car and fished his smartphone out of the back pocket of his scrubs. Normally, he'd hit the gym after a long shift, just to unwind, but tonight he needed to blow off more steam than he could manage with a workout.

He opened up Grindr and scrolled through the nearby profiles provided, pausing at the picture he'd noticed on his last coffee break. The young man wore a dress shirt in his selfie, even though he looked like he was only in his early twenties. He had pale skin, neatly cut brown hair, and bright-hazel eyes that sparkled with flecks of gold. There was a smile behind those eyes, but he was trying so hard to look serious that the smile didn't quite reach his lips. Larry was willing to bet he could get him to laugh. Spending the night making those lips gasp against his sheets would be fun, too.

His phone buzzed on his desk, but Brandon ignored it. He clicked through each syntax error in the code on his monitor, following the object declarations and correcting mistakes every few lines. On the other side of the cubicle wall, he heard Daniel shutting down equipment and throwing his stuff into his backpack. He glanced at the clock in the bottom corner of the screen and cursed.

Daniel leaned over the cubicle wall, resting his chin on his arms. "Are you going to keep working on that?" he asked. "It's almost seven."

"Am I the only person here who thinks it's okay to send up a code section that won't even compile? Who does that?"

"That's why you got promoted, and the underling who wrote it didn't," Daniel reminded him.

Brandon glared at him.

"What? At least I didn't say you got promoted because of your dad."

He pressed his lips tightly together. His dad had been retired for four years now, leaving Atlas Software the year before Brandon even finished college. But he'd still had to work harder than every other entry-level programmer, just to prove he hadn't gotten his job because he was William Alcott's son. He'd thought his promotion would be the end of those rumors, but they'd just gotten more vicious.

Brandon worked his way through a series of variable declarations, correcting each one and trying to resist the urge to break his keyboard. Or change his name, move to a new company, and start over.

“Everybody who knows you knows it isn’t true. You don’t have to pull twelve-hour days to prove it,” Daniel pointed out.

Brandon ignored him and tried to focus. The fact that he was always in the office early, always stayed late working, and typically produced usable code in a quarter of the time it took everyone else didn’t matter. It was still his father’s portrait that hung over the reception desk in the lobby, still his father’s stock that controlled the majority of votes in shareholder meetings. He wished his dad had taken him aside, when he was entertaining happy delusions about working his way up to the top and taking Atlas Software to new heights, to warn him he’d never be taken seriously at his father’s company.

His phone buzzed again.

Daniel disappeared into his own cubicle for a moment, then dove around the divider and grabbed Brandon’s phone. He swiped his finger across the screen. “Naughty, naughty. You keep Grindr on at work?” he whispered, laughing.

Brandon shoved his office chair away from the desk and lunged for the phone, but Daniel slipped out of range, tapping at his phone quickly. “Oh, that’s lame,” he announced, his eyes fixated on the screen.

“Give me my phone,” Brandon growled, holding out his hand.

“Oh fine.” He plopped it in Brandon’s hand and shrugged.

A series of messages popped up, blue against a dark background.

Your eyes man...

Beneath the first message was a selfie of an athletic-looking guy with a bright smile, dark brown skin, and eyes that sparkled with confidence and amusement. Brandon could tell from the way his sweatshirt draped over his shoulders that the man was in great shape. “Damn,” Brandon whispered.

I’m Larry, BTW

It’s cool if you are not into black guys—a lot of people on here aren’t. I just wanted to give you that compliment.

Brandon studied those words, trying to gauge the best way to respond. It felt insulting, having someone assume he was a racist just because he was white. But he couldn’t deny that a lot of the gay men he knew never seemed to date black guys, so it was probably a safe assumption on Larry’s part.

“What’s lame about it?”

“The guilt-trip angle? You’ve never seen that before?” Daniel asked. “A few guys I played football with in high school used that line on cheerleaders all the time. ‘You’re so beautiful. I know you’d never consider going out with me because I’m black, or Hispanic, or poor, but I just had to tell you.’ It was amazing how often it worked.”

Brandon stared at him. Cheerleaders had never been his thing. Football and basketball players, on the other hand, played starring roles in every high school fantasy he could remember.

“Well, congrats. Those freaky eyes have officially been declared cute enough that you’re worthy of being picked up with a cheap guilt-trip.”

“They’re not freaky,” he insisted, rolling his chair back toward the desk. He liked his eyes. While most hazel eyes were a muted brown, his eyes were green with flecks of golden brown that formed sunburst patterns around his pupils. But aside from Daniel insisting they were weird, most people didn’t even notice.

He stared at the screen in front of him, not really seeing the code anymore. The reminder that his eyes weren’t anything special brought Larry’s comments into perspective.

“It’s Grindr. He’s going to say something he thinks is witty and then ask to see a picture of your dick,” Daniel reminded him.

“Probably. That’s part of the charm,” Brandon said, ignoring his phone on the desk. “You can have an intelligent conversation and admit you just want to get laid all in one go.”

“Well, I’m going to take off. I was going to hit the bar later if you feel like showing up.”

Brandon nodded in time with the clicking of his keyboard. “I might. But I’ve got to get this done.”

It took another two hours to get the damn code section to compile. His phone buzzed once more, but he didn’t check it until he was done.

Larry had messaged him twice more.

You want to meet for a drink? I work in Santa Clara, and my shift ended at 7.

An hour and a half later, Larry had followed up with a simple text:

I guess not.

Brandon scrolled up to look at his picture again. Even if it was a cheap pick up line, Larry's smile was infectious. After twelve hours of sitting at a desk, staring at a computer monitor, it would be nice to see a smile so open and fun that was just for him.

He clicked on the message bar and typed out a careful:

Sorry, work... I'm free now.

After a few minutes without a reply, he tried again.

Place?

He turned off his laptop and shoved it into his messenger bag, shutdown his desktop computer, and then grabbed his jacket and phone. With the phone in his back pocket, he headed down to the ground floor and then walked the two blocks to the garage where he parked his car. When he got to his car, he opened Grindr again, checking out Larry's profile. He didn't have a face shot set as his profile picture, just a naked torso. Albeit, a naked torso that Brandon could easily picture himself licking.

He thought about scrolling through the list of other guys nearby who were online, but he kept going back to Larry's profile. Hot naked torso aside, Larry not only looked like he had a genuine, open smile, but he was also one of the few people Brandon had seen on Grindr who used punctuation. Punctuation with full words, no less. After spending ten hours cleaning up C++ syntax, anyone who took the time to correctly use punctuation and spelling automatically seemed sexier than everyone else on Grindr.

Brandon texted Daniel and found out he'd caught up with some of their other friends and gone out to Rebels. One of the few gay bars in the area that didn't have a flashy club feel, it was a decent place to meet someone for the first time. There was no pressure to dress up, no pressure to dance, and the crowd was usually fun. And if Larry didn't show, or turned out to be a jerk, at least he wouldn't be there alone.

His wrinkled slacks and his rumpled dress shirt, complete with button-down collar, were a bit formal for Rebels. It was the closest thing San Jose had to a leather bar. It attracted all kinds of guys, with the notable exception of the few nerds unfortunate enough to work for a tech company that still imposed a dress code. He folded his dress shirt and set it in the backseat of his car, untucked his rumpled undershirt, and spent a few minutes trying to make his hair look a bit more fun. He didn't look great, but at least he didn't look like he came equipped with a stick permanently shoved up his ass.

He pulled up Grindr once more and sent another text.

Rebels? I'll be there for a bit, hanging out with some friends.

He tapped out the letters carefully then hit “send.” If Larry decided to meet him, they might be able to have some fun. If not, well, he didn’t hang out with his friends enough outside of work anyway.

The warm water rolled over his head and neck, trickling down his back, rinsing away the sweat from his workout and the lingering stress of his shift. Despite the relative ease of day shifts, Larry seldom made it through a shift without having to burn off some tension. Whether he lifted weights at the gym, went out to party, or found someone to get sweaty with, he had to move—even after spending twelve hours on his feet.

But once the nervous energy was spent, once he was exhausted and he stopped running through the day’s cases in his head, terrified he might have missed something, he was good. Even if the boy with those gorgeous eyes ended up blocking him rather than giving him the time of day. He got dressed in the locker room, grateful for the familiar feel of blue jeans against his skin rather than starched scrubs, then packed up and headed for his car.

“Rebels?” he muttered. Splash, the newer club in downtown, was more his scene. Rebels was popular with everyone from old bears to the most glamorous queens San Jose had to offer. But like so many gay bars, it was practically whitewashed. Getting in was a headache. He hated standing at the bar while the bartender served everyone else around him without even making eye contact with him. And aside from the few self-proclaimed power bottoms who’d beeline for him, driven by the stereotype that his skin color somehow equated to having a bigger cock than everyone else, he always felt invisible.

He stared at Hazel Eyes’s profile again, trying to get a feel for what the man behind the image might be like. Trying to pick up guys through an app in the heart of Silicon Valley meant you could bet every selfie and picture a person shared was edited and retouched to make them look hot.

He wanted those eyes to be real, though, so he quickly replied.

I'll be there.

As he was heading to his car, August’s ringtone blared from his phone.

“Hello, beautiful,” he answered immediately. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Larry, are you busy?” she asked. Her tone was sweet and hesitant, and anybody else might not have picked up on the panicked edge her voice held.

“I’m never too busy for you,” he said honestly.

August had, technically, been his girlfriend for almost a decade. They’d been neighbors in the same Oakland apartment complex when they were growing up. She’d been the first, really the only, person he’d confided in when he realized that his mother’s deteriorating health was serious. When they’d started dating at thirteen, it had seemed like a natural extension of their friendship. It had been perfect, even if he didn’t particularly like kissing her. He would have married her years ago if she’d been willing. She’s always refused, saying she’d tell him when things felt right. During the end of the freshman year of college, when he’d gone to pick her up from her sister Tori’s bachelorette party, she’d caught him staring at the male stripper, and all the pieces clicked into place for her.

“You want to marry a girl your mom thinks is nice and give your mom a grandchild before she dies,” August had said simply. “You don’t want me. You love me, and lord knows I’ve loved you for forever, but you don’t want me. Sex isn’t supposed to be a chore, baby. I can’t spend the rest of my life knowing you’re never going to look at me the way you looked at him. And you shouldn’t spend the rest of your life pretending that what we’ve got is enough.”

And she’d been right. He was his mom’s only child. As he grew up, he’d watched his mother’s cancer grow and enter remission, over and over, in a long downward spiral that had left her stuck in a nursing home these last two years. He’d known he wouldn’t have an entire lifetime with her, to make her proud of the man he might someday become. He’d wanted to make the most of the time they were given.

He had never wanted to admit he was attracted to men. His mother, who clung to her Catholic faith in her weakest moments, could never be proud of a gay son. He’d even held out hope that as long as he could work through the mechanics of having sex with August he might just be weird. Straight, but weird. When he suggested it, August had just laughed at him.

Aside from his fear of disappointing his mom, breaking up with August had been a relief. He’d never realized how unfair it had been to ask August to condemn herself to a life as his wife, but once he’d apologized, they’d fallen back into the seamless friendship he’d relied on his entire life, and she’d moved

on to find the love of her life. He'd lost his long-term girlfriend, but he'd gotten his best friend back in the process. And she was still willing to come visit his mom with him. That alone left him so grateful he choked on the feeble "thank you" he murmured every time they left the nursing home together.

"What do you need?"

"My car won't start," she said, her tone cheerful but stressed.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Outside of the Temple Bar."

"Temple?" Larry had no clue what place she was talking about.

"It's just a couple blocks from the club you always drag me to."

"That strip of bars off West Santa Clara? The ones on First or Second?" he asked, making sure.

"Second Street."

"I'm on my way."

In the dense downtown traffic, it took him nearly half an hour. Thankfully, August was standing with a group of friends, safe and sound, when he slowed down. She waved and darted toward him, slipping between the parked cars along the side of the road and wrenching open the passenger side door.

"Thank you!" She slammed the door shut. "I'm parked right around the corner," she said, pointing to the right.

"Okay. Sorry I'm late. Traffic sucks down here at night."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you answered your phone. I would have called Jayden or my dad, but—" She dropped her head back and let out an exasperated laugh. "—either of them would have had an absolute fit."

"I don't want to imagine what your dad would say if you called him for a ride from a bar," Larry agreed. "Especially because your car won't start." Calling him for a ride would mean an hour of lectures about how she shouldn't be out late, shouldn't be hanging out in bars, and should have kept her car maintained well enough to know it would start when she needed it.

"Do me a favor and pull around, so you can park facing my car."

"Sure. All you need is a jump start?"

"I need a new battery. Or maybe a new alternator. We'll see, I guess."

“We will?”

“Yes. If we jump it, and it dies again in a minute, I need a new alternator. If it runs, I need a new battery.”

He pulled around as she instructed, popped the hood, and then felt blindly underneath the hood for the release lever while August got a set of jumper cables out of her trunk. When she joined him between the two cars, she shoved him aside and opened the hood without fumbling with it at all.

He took the jumper cable ends when she shoved them into his hands, but he wasn't entirely sure how this was supposed to go. High school shop had consisted of making a magazine holder and wiring a lightbulb, but a half-recalled warning about grounding out something or other made him hesitate.

August, already done hooking the jumper cables up to her car, took them back from him and hooked them up to his battery. “They're color-coded baby, just like hooking up an EKG.”

“Yeah, but... Can't they explode if you hook them up wrong?”

She sighed and patted him on the arm.

“What? I'm sure they can. I heard it somewhere, probably from your dad. Should I go ahead and start mine?” he asked as she turned back toward the other engine.

“One second,” she said, connecting the black cable to something on the far side of her car. “Okay, go ahead. Just start it and let it idle.”

“Uh...” He pointed to the stray end of the cable.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and smiled. “Larry, baby, if I have a heart attack, I'll let you do your thing. Go start your car.”

Five minutes later, she hopped out of her car and shooed him toward the curb when he went to unhook the jumper cables. He didn't argue, just pulled out his phone and pulled up his conversation with Hazel Eyes one more time. There'd been no follow up message. No acknowledgement of his agreement to meet at Rebels, but no follow-up asking why he hadn't shown up yet, either.

“Who's he?” August asked, leaning over his arm.

“A guy.”

“A guy?” She pouted a little. “Wow, thank you for pointing that out. I'd have never come to that conclusion on my own.” She cocked her head to the

side and stared down at the conversation recorded in colorful text bubbles. “He’s white.”

“Now who’s stating the obvious?” he shot back. “Yeah, he’s white. Look at his eyes, though.”

She squinted. “They’re green. So what?”

“They’ve got stars in them,” he whispered. “Not like the figure of speech. See, gold all around the inside.”

“Is that what I distracted you from? Staring into his eyes?”

“I was going to go meet him,” Larry admitted. “I was trying to figure a way to ask if he was still there, maybe see if we can meet tomorrow instead.”

“You stood up a date to come help me?” August looked touched and then she flicked him in the forehead. “And you didn’t even tell him you’d be late! You can’t still be that clueless.”

“It wasn’t exactly a date. Just...” He shrugged, wishing he could psychically persuade her to drop the subject. As supportive as August had proven to be, talking to her about his sex life was still weird.

She folded her arms across her chest, pursing her lips.

“What?”

“All that talk about finding someone special, someone to come home to, and you’re out fucking around? What happened to Ty?”

Larry stepped back, just in case she got pissed. Ty was the most recent in a long list of guys she had tried to set him up with. “We went out! Well, we sort of met for coffee, and it didn’t go anywhere.”

“Coffee? I thought you were taking him to dinner?”

“I always meet for coffee or a drink first. I don’t want to sit through dinner with someone I can’t stand. We didn’t hit it off.”

“He seemed nice, though. What happened?”

“You honestly want to know? He wanted a fuck-buddy who wouldn’t care about the fact that his girlfriend is pregnant with their second child. That’s...” He shrugged hopelessly. “I don’t want that.”

He wasn’t quite sure what he wanted. The possibility of a real relationship, with all of the support and security he’d had with August, plus chemistry and

excitement too, was damn tempting. He enjoyed sex, but he wanted a lover he could come home to and take out to dinner. He wanted to wake up next to someone he could actually hold a conversation with. Being someone's dirty secret wasn't going to cut it.

August looked disgusted. "She's pregnant again? That bastard! He told me they broke up over two years ago!" She brought both her hands to her temples, obviously fighting off a headache. "You know what? It doesn't matter. I'm sorry. I thought he was single. He's open about being into guys at work, so I just assumed..."

"Oh, he's definitely into guys, he just wants to keep it on the down low."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine, Gus. It happens more often than you'd think. You think your car is going to be able to get you home?" he asked, desperate to change the subject before she pointed out that he was essentially doing the same thing, by trying to keep up the charade of their relationship to his mother.

"I hope so. Would you mind following me, just in case?"

He followed her back to her apartment, being careful to stay behind her in case her car stalled on the road. When they got to her parking lot, she pulled into her spot and killed the engine. A moment later, she was out of her car, lifting the hood again.

"It won't start again," she announced. "But at least it's here and not some place it's going to be impounded."

"You going to be okay for now? You have to work tomorrow?"

"Nope. I've got the entire weekend off. I was going to go to Santa Cruz, but I guess that's a bust now. You going to visit your mom?"

"It's the weekend," he said simply. "My weekend, anyway." The nursing home where his mom lived was in Oakland, and with traffic, it usually took him an hour to get up there. Add a couple of hours to visit and an hour sitting in traffic on the way home and there was no chance of making the drive on a day when he had to work, but he made a point to go on one of his days off each week. "I'm going to try to go on Sunday."

"How's she doing?"

Larry shrugged. "The same as always." The last time he'd seen his mom, she hadn't been doing well, but that wasn't exactly a change from the previous time.

She slammed the hood and stared at him. “Sorry. Do you want me to come with you to visit her?”

“No,” he said, knowing the visits made August uncomfortable. He was grateful that she’d indulged his request to keep their breakup a secret from his mom, but it was getting weird for both of them. “No, that’s okay. She’s probably going to have me trying to fix her laptop for the entire afternoon.”

“If you change your mind, give me a call, okay? It’s the least I can do, since you came to my rescue.”

“Any time, Gus. But... are we good? ’Cause I was going to go and...”

“You got me and my car home safe—thank you for that—go have fun.”

Brandon stepped back to let Daniel move by him, stepping around the corner of the billiards table. For a Friday night, Rebels was fairly subdued—that is, it wasn’t packed full of men in underwear, various states of drag, and leather harnesses. Daniel lined up his shot, missed spectacularly, and then nodded to Josh. He lined up a shot quickly, sank the eight ball easily, and smirked.

Josh was the most flamboyant of his friends, the one most often to show up in heavy eyeliner and impossibly tight pants. They’d known each other since high school, gravitating together when it became painfully obvious they were the only two openly gay kids around. They’d spent high school drooling over the jocks on the football and baseball teams. It had taken discovering Rebels when they were in college to find that there were plenty of openly gay men who could fulfill their jock fantasies, just none on their high school teams.

“You’re going to give me a bit more of a challenge, right, Bran?”

He checked his phone one more time. Email from work, email from his father offering what must have sounded to his father like sagely career advice, but nothing from his mysterious Larry. Nothing from Grindr at all.

“Think he’s going to show up?” Daniel asked.

Brandon shrugged and didn’t resist as Josh snagged his phone. “This guy?” he asked, pulling up the Grindr profile. “Oh, tell me you didn’t make plans to meet him,” Josh said with a groan.

“You know him?”

“Not really,” Josh admitted. “I took him home one night about a year ago, maybe more. He’s hung like a fucking horse, but he was a total douche.”

Brandon stood up straight and shoved his hands in his pockets. “What happened?”

“We met at Splash, danced a little, and I invited him back to my place. Things were going great, until his pager went off in the middle of sex.”

Daniel’s arched an eyebrow. “Pager? What the hell does anyone use a pager for?”

Josh nodded, his expression conjuring up all of the offense he’d apparently felt. “I know, right? Might as well just get ‘DRUG DEALER’ tattooed across his forehead.”

“Josh, I know you get high,” Daniel said, laughing. “Do you know any drug dealers who are still stuck using pagers? When a prepaid cell phone is anonymous, cheap, and you can get one at any gas station or Walmart?”

“Maybe he can’t even make a living as a drug dealer, I don’t know. Anyway, he kept going, and I figured he was just going to ignore it. No. It went off again, and he was gone. He grabbed his pants and socks and left. I mean, seriously, you can’t spare two minutes to suck me off after you just fucked me? No ‘good-bye,’ no ‘sorry about this’ or anything. He was just out the door. Trust me, Bran, you’re better off.”

“He just stopped right in the middle of sex?”

“Yeah. No message the next day, no ‘sorry about shit.’”

“He sounds like an ass,” Brandon agreed. Josh’s story should have quelled his disappointment, but it didn’t. He had no doubt they’d slept together, no doubt Larry had taken off, but he knew Josh was quick to make assumptions and quicker still to take offense. He thought about Larry’s smile and his open eyes, and he wondered just how Larry’s account of events might differ. He didn’t know why he felt like he should defend the guy since they hadn’t even managed to chat online.

“He’s a total ass. Shoot pool with us. You’re better off.”

Chapter Two

When Larry got to Rebels, it was already past midnight. He was surprised there wasn't a line outside. He dug out his ID and cash for the cover charge, and headed toward the bouncer working the door. He mentally braced himself for the interrogation that came every time he tried to get into Rebels—the “Are you sure you're in the right club?” questions from the bouncer intended to tell him he was definitely not in the right club. He stopped when he spotted a familiar jawline and soft brown hair coming out of the club. Although the professional wardrobe and neat hair from his profile picture were gone, it was still him. He wore a close-fitting white T-shirt and dark slacks. His dark-brown hair was tousled, almost like he'd just rolled out of bed, and his eyes... Larry's breath picked up at the sight of those soft hazel eyes. In the dim glow from the streetlights, the gold-colored starbursts in his eyes shimmered.

He glanced up from his phone and met Larry's nervous smile with one of his own.

“I was hoping you'd still be here,” Larry said.

Hazel Eyes smiled. “I was about to give up on you.”

“About to? So, that means you haven't yet, right?”

The guy shrugged and tilted his head to the side, gaze sweeping up and down Larry in open, unabashed assessment. “Grindr's a crap shoot. I try not to set my expectations too high. Sometimes people don't show up; sometimes they show up drunk, high, or with a bunch of friends; sometimes it turns out they used a stock photo for their profile. You're here. That counts for something, and you're apparently real.”

He considered the guy, wondering just how he was supposed to respond to that. “I try to be honest, even online. I don't think anybody could mistake a selfie of me in scrubs for a stock photo.”

A hazel-eyed gaze roamed down his body and back up again, blatantly checking him out. The guy caught his gaze again and smiled. “So are those abs from your profile pic really yours?” he asked, grinning like a tomcat.

“I do like to stay in shape,” he said. He took the other man's hand gently by the wrist and set his fingers against his stomach, tensing enough to make sure the guy could feel the ridges of his abs through his shirt.

His hazel gaze moved to his stomach and then roamed back up to his face. The guy moved suddenly, wiggling his fingertips over Larry's stomach and around his waist, tickling as he moved.

"Stop that," he laughed, trying to push his hand away. "Stop!"

Larry ended up grabbing his arm, pulling them against each other. They both froze, struck by the heat of the sudden proximity. "You know, I'm still not sure *you're* really real," he whispered. They were so close he could feel the heat radiating from his body. "Those eyes of yours are even more amazing in person."

And when the guy's cheeks darkened, his eyes became one part of a complete, breathtaking picture. The huge laughing smile on his face left Larry stunned. He was beautiful.

"They're just hazel," he said, brushing his hair aside.

"They're beautiful."

"I'm Brandon," the guy said, blushing.

"Larry. But you know that."

"Your name really is Larry?" Brandon asked.

Larry couldn't help rolling his eyes. "I might be the only one on Grindr willing to share my real name. Lawrence, yeah. Named for my grandpa."

Brandon grinned. "That's cool. Brandon's a family name, too. I've never met the uncle I'm named after, though. Do you have a place around here? We could probably go back to my apartment, but it's..." He looked hopelessly lost for a moment. "We can't go to my apartment. My roommate is kind of a psycho, and she throws a fit every time she meets a stranger."

He cocked an eyebrow at Brandon's statement. "Roommate? Or wife? Because if you're married, I can see that being a problem."

Brandon scratched the back of his head and smirked. "Cat. My roommate is a cat. I'd call her a pet, but..." He shook his head. "She just kind of lives there and demands food each day."

"Seriously?" He chuckled. "We can't go to your place because of your *cat*? That's one I haven't heard before."

Brandon shrugged and gave him a goofy smile. "It's true. Momo's crazy. And she's not mine exactly. A friend of mine found her as a kitten, but his

apartment doesn't allow pets. Mine does, so he asked if I could keep her until he found a different place."

"How long have you been stuck with her, then?"

"Five years."

"I think that's well past the cutoff for claiming you're petsitting. Besides, you don't need to make up an excuse if you aren't comfortable bringing someone from Grindr home with you," he pointed out. "You don't know me. I don't know you. It's cool. I invited you out for a drink anyway, so why don't we start there?" When he heard Brandon's stomach growl, he smirked. "Or maybe dinner?"

"Dinner?" Brandon glanced back at the line, obviously conflicted.

Brandon seemed more than willing to hook up, but Larry realized that might be all he was interested in. When his first reply on Grindr hadn't been some variation of "Is it true black guys have big cocks?" Larry had been hopeful, but apparently that hope was misguided.

"You should know, if you're just looking to hook up, I'm cool with that. With you, I am definitely cool with that. But I was serious about inviting you out. How about some coffee?"

"An actual date?" Brandon looked like he might laugh. "You were looking for a date? On Grindr?"

He sighed. "It's easier than feeling somebody out, trying to find out if they're into guys without pissing them off."

"I guess it makes sense," Brandon conceded. He still looked like he was trying not to laugh. "When you said a drink, I assumed you just wanted to fuck. I'm not really dressed for... anything except getting undressed."

Brandon gestured at his rumpled white T-shirt. It was so thin it was probably an undershirt, and it clung to his shoulders and followed the slender lines of his torso all the way down to his hips. Imagining running his hands beneath Brandon's T-shirt made his cock stiffen a little.

He bit the inside of his cheek, forcing the surge of interest from his cock to back down. Dragging Brandon into the backseat of his car so they could suck each other off wasn't going to do much to convince him that Larry was serious.

As if Brandon could see right into the depths of his imagination, he ran his fingertips over Larry's upper arm. "My friends are still inside. But I doubt

they'll care if I don't go back in. It's almost one o'clock, though, so our options for coffee are definitely limited."

"Uh..." He knew he should feel like he'd been unfair to jump to conclusions, but he really just felt relieved. "Damn. Even Starbucks is closed."

Brandon reached out and tentatively placed his hands on Larry's hips. His firm grip and long fingers made Larry's pulse spike. His hands itched to reach out and touch Brandon's body, to explore the skin beneath his T-shirt. "I can make us coffee," he offered. "If you're willing to put up with my cat randomly attacking until I can get her locked in the office."

He swallowed hard. "Sounds perfect."

Brandon glared at his tabby cat. As usual, she ignored him and continued to snake her way around Larry's muscular legs, purring so loudly it echoed through his kitchen. They'd been joking about his attack cat since they reached his apartment, but she'd chosen not to show herself until they were in the kitchen. He was about to explain that she liked to corner people in here and in the bathroom, where there was no chance of escape when, just to spite him, she began to purr like a spoiled kitten and demand attention rather than bloodshed.

"I swear, she just stalks everyone else from beneath the coffee table," he said, running his hands through his hair. "I've got coffee, bottled water, or beer. What would you like? Oh I've got vodka, too. Of course, I don't have anything to mix it with..." He realized he was rambling and closed his mouth abruptly. "Sorry."

"Sorry for offering me something to drink?" Larry's smile lit up his face again, just like it had when Momo first cautiously sniffed his shoes and then began to rub herself against his legs.

"I ramble sometimes," he explained, pacing each word carefully.

"I don't mind rambling. Coffee would be great, though. No beer for me."

"You don't drink?" Brandon asked, getting out the coffee and cups. He'd run into stranger things with guys from Grindr.

Larry's bright smile twitched. Brandon wondered if he'd hit on a touchy subject. "I drink." He shrugged and knelt down to stroke the cat. She just stayed there and purred, turning in a figure-eight motion to soak up as much attention as she could manage. "Just not tonight. I don't know if I'm going to get called

in to work this weekend, and there's nothing worse than going in with a hangover."

"You don't know your schedule? That must suck. Where do you work?"

He seemed hesitant. "I'm in emergency medicine at Valley Medical Center," Larry said quietly. "I'm kind of on the bottom rung of the totem pole, so I'm one of the guys who gets called in when things get crazy."

"Emergency medicine? Like a paramedic?"

Larry hesitated. "I was a paramedic. I started out as a CNA when I went to college. It wasn't quite what I was looking for, though, so I worked the paramedic classes into my schedule that first summer."

He stared at Larry for a moment, trying to decide if he wanted to know what he wasn't saying badly enough to press the issue. If Larry started as a CNA, he must have gone to college to move up in the same field. He'd only known one male nurse, a guy his sister had dated for almost five years. He'd been good at his job, and so dedicated to helping people he often worked himself to the point of exhaustion, but he'd always complained about constantly defending his career choice. "You don't like talking about work?"

Larry's dark eyes grew wide for a moment before his smile returned, bright and relieved. "I don't. I'm told I get a little intense when I talk about work. It always gets weird."

Brandon couldn't say why he was so happy to see Larry's smile back in place, but he was. "Fair enough. My job is a headache, so I don't even like *thinking* about it on my days off. It's got to be tough, though, never really being able to relax."

Larry shrugged. "It's not so bad. They need all the help they can get, and I don't usually mind as long as I'm not coming off a night shift. Exhaustion's nothing a pot of coffee or five can't fix. What about you? What's so horrible you don't even think about it?"

"Working in the biggest shadow imaginable," he said thoughtfully.

Larry cocked a single eyebrow at him.

He realized how bitter he must sound. "I'm a programmer. I like writing code. It's fun. But the best job offer I got after college was from the company my dad had just retired from. I thought it'd be cool, but everybody thinks I was just hired as a favor to my dad."

“Were you?”

“No. At least I hope not. I have to do twice as much work as anyone else before they think I’ve done anything, though.”

“If you know you’re good at your job, does it matter? What are you working on?”

“I’m working as a project lead for a team at Atlas Software. We’re making semiconductor modeling software for a graduate school down in Monterey. It’s supposed to let electrical engineering students experiment with different semiconductor materials and arrangements to make super-efficient solar panels.”

“Damn,” Larry said, standing up straight and leaving Momo neglected on the ground. “Most computer geeks I pick up are all about whatever game they’re designing. That sounds like heavy stuff, actually useful, you know?”

“It will be. Once you get into the details, it’s pretty simple, but trying to get a handle on the whole thing is overwhelming. Really, all I’ve got to do is design the user interface and put together a library of material variables programmed by other people. It should be easy, because it’s all repetitive. But there are two other programmers working on it with me, and I end up redoing most of the code sections they send me.”

“Why not just do it yourself? So you’d know it’s right?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s what I’m going to end up doing. But part of being a team lead is supposed to be supervising people, and it’s occurred to me since I started this project that not only do I not want to supervise people, I don’t even like people, I…” Brandon snapped his mouth closed. “I’m rambling again.”

Larry smiled at him, obviously trying not to chuckle. Momo snaked between his legs, purring insistently. “You’re fine.”

“I’m just frustrated. No one else is stuck at work until nine, cleaning up other people’s crap. If I don’t do it, it’s going to be my fault when the modeling software doesn’t work.”

“I’ve got to admit, that makes the asshole at my job seem easy to deal with. He’s a pain in the ass, but I know I’m not going to be held responsible for his mistakes.”

“But if some poor grad student can’t make a virtual solar panel work the way they want, nobody gets hurt. It’s not… you know, important.”

“It sounds important. Maybe not a matter of life or death, at least until the environment ends up a little more fucked, but still... Anyway, what I do isn’t usually a matter of life or death; it’s a matter of how long we have to make people who are strung out wait to get their next fix. And ear infections. I treat a hell of a lot of ear infections.”

“Is it that bad? Not the ear infections, the other bit.”

“Worse. And it’s easy to get angry, because you never know when someone with an actual emergency is sitting in the waiting room. But if you get angry, you get sloppy, and suddenly you’re sending someone out the door when they’ve got a brain tumor the size of a golf ball.”

Brandon gaped at him. “How can you do that?” he asked, trying to put himself in Larry’s place.

“How can you miss a big ass brain tumor? Easy. You don’t look for it. You’ve heard the headache song and dance a hundred times a night for a year straight, and not once has it ever turned out to be a brain tumor. Maybe you peeked at the triage file and know there’s a toddler with a shattered arm who’s been in the waiting room crying for the last twelve hours, or a pregnant woman who’s been bleeding for hours on end, but all she can do is sit in that chair while her baby dies inside of her, because you can’t just kick the dipshit with the headache out. The attending can kick him out, but lowly residents don’t get to make that call. I...” Larry seemed to catch himself. He squeezed his eyes shut and conjured up a forced smile, although Brandon couldn’t imagine how. “Now you see why I don’t talk about work? When I ramble, shit gets grim.”

“I meant, how can you stand to do it? How can you work like that? It’s insane.”

“I enjoy helping people,” Larry said simply. “I’m careful, and I like to think I do manage to make a difference. But it also sucks. Just knowing it’s possible—hell, probably inevitable—that I’ll screw up someday is terrifying. Watching other people screw up is worse, because then I just imagine a whole shitload of cases they’re going to screw up when no one’s around to catch it, and I can’t do anything about that.”

Brandon felt a lump in his throat as he recalled how easily Josh had joked about Larry rushing off to answer a page, assuming the worst of a man who shouldered a burden Brandon couldn’t even imagine. He said a silent prayer of thanks that he hadn’t blurted out his assumption that Larry was a nurse. “I doubt I could handle your job. Hell, syntax errors are enough to make me rip my hair out.”

Larry grinned, not the forced smile he'd used to banish his own memories of work but a real, open look of joy. "It's worth it. Today I had one of those one in a million cases where the headache turned out to be a tumor."

"But you caught it?"

"I might not be able to help everybody, but I can sure as hell try."

Brandon poured two cups of fresh coffee, keeping his gaze riveted on Larry. His open smile had been replaced with a self-satisfied smirk that made Brandon's cock swell with interest.

Larry bent down and tried to wrap his arms warped around Momo's slender body. She tolerated his attempt to pick her up for almost three seconds. Then she snarled, lashed out with her claws, and somersaulted out of his grip to the floor. She dug her claws into the rug and used it to launch herself around the living room to her personal spot beneath the coffee table.

"Shit," Larry hissed, clamping a massive hand over the scratches on his arm. "Talk about a mood swing."

"I warned you," he said, trying not to laugh. "Normally, that's how she says hello." He hurried across the kitchen, grabbing the first aid box from beneath the kitchen sink. "Let's see how bad she got you."

"It's just a couple of scratches, not the end of the world."

"Of course not," he smirked. "If it were the end of the world, there'd be zombies."

"Zombies?" For a moment, Larry looked utterly confused.

"Yeah. Zombie apocalypse, end of the world. My dad always says if there aren't zombies involved in a catastrophe, it's not worth worrying about."

Larry joined him at the kitchen island, pulling his hand away from his scratched right arm carefully. There were three deep scratches where Momo's back claws used his flesh for leverage, but only one of them was bleeding. Brandon squeezed a bit of Neosporin onto a cotton swab and carefully coated each of the cuts. He grabbed one of the large bandages that typically had the best success covering large areas of kitty marks and smoothed it over the cuts. The light cream-colored bandages looked bright and odd against Larry's skin. Had he ever seen flesh-colored bandages for dark skin? He felt like he should be apologizing for not having something that would be a better match, but he wasn't sure if anyone made them.

He traced his fingers over Larry's densely muscled forearm, relishing the feel of the smooth, warm skin around the bandage. Larry was in incredible shape, and it was so easy to imagine his strong, athletic body pinning him against the wall. He shivered and swallowed hard. "There. All better."

"You've got that down to a routine, huh?" Larry asked, grinning down at him.

Brandon tried to look innocent. "I told you, she's vicious," he said, stroking his arm again. He swallowed hard, mesmerized by the subtle curve of muscle. Larry was a good four inches taller than his own five feet ten, and he was broader and bulkier too. He'd love to plow the tight ass he'd been gawking at since they'd met outside the bar, but he couldn't picture Larry being willing to switch. More than happy to take what he could get, Brandon gave in to the urge to touch, running his hand over Larry's bicep and up to his shoulder.

Larry cupped his chin and gently tipped his face up. "If you're willing to patch me up every time she uses me as a scratching post, I'll risk it."

Brandon opened his mouth to insist that he could just lock Momo in the office, where most of her stuff was anyway, but he never had a chance to get the words out. Larry dipped his head down and kissed him, softer than he'd expected, probing the inside of his mouth with a practiced tongue.

The gentle pressure and the subtle tremor he felt as Larry's bottom lip slid against his shut his brain down, erasing all thoughts of cats and coffee in an instant.

Larry released his chin and maneuvered around the corner of the island, almost drawing away completely to get around the counter. Unwilling to break the sudden, electrifying contact, Brandon pushed himself up on his toes so he could follow Larry's lips, savoring the perfect friction.

Larry molded his long, muscled body against Brandon's, pinning him against the counter. The softness of that first touch vanished as Larry turned his head, deepening the kiss. Brandon could feel a solid erection pressing into his thigh, rock hard and trembling with desire, all over *him*.

Brandon had never felt so utterly lost in the heat of a single kiss, so needed. Which was insane. He hardly knew anything about the man exploring his mouth. No one he'd just met should be able to leave him this stunned, this desperate. He clung to Larry's clothes, shaking.

He grabbed Larry's loose sweatshirt and tugged him in tighter, chasing his tongue back beyond the ridge of his teeth. He slid his hands down over Larry's hips and around to his groin, not hesitating when he came to the bulge growing beneath the soft fabric. Brandon stroked him through his sweatpants, trying to touch him, kiss him, and undress him all at once.

"Damn," Larry gasped, drawing away suddenly. He snaked his hands behind Brandon and cupped his ass, then hoisted him onto the counter as if he weighed nothing at all. "You can definitely kiss. Talk to me, tell me what you want," he whispered, before dropping his head to lick at the sensitive skin on Brandon's neck.

He laughed. "Talk? With your tongue right there, you expect me to be coherent enough to talk?"

Larry's breath swept across the crook of his neck, hot and moist. "Sensitive spot?" he whispered, scraping his teeth along Brandon's skin.

He drew in a harsh, shaking breath.

Apparently that was all the answer Larry needed. "Good to know," he said, chuckling. But instead of continuing his assault against Brandon's neck, he pulled away a little and tugged at Brandon's belt, tugging it free of the buckle. He worked Brandon's zipper down and slipped his cock out through the slit in his briefs, stroking it slowly. He's gaze stayed fixed on Brandon's face as he squeezed and stroked him. "Your eyes are so beautiful. They get darker when you're turned on."

"I don't think my eyes—" Cutting him off, Larry bent over his waist and slipped his lips over the flared head of Brandon's cock. He sucked him in deep, his lips sinking all the way to the first curls of hair. "Oh shit."

Larry bobbed up and down on his cock a few times, slicking the entire length. He stroked the base of Brandon's cock in his right hand, while his left slipped inside his briefs and palmed his sac. He licked at the head of his cock, circling his tongue over Brandon's slit again and again.

He felt his balls tighten and tried to groan out a warning. With one last slow lick, Larry pulled away and rose to his feet. His hand replaced his mouth, stroking Brandon so fast he couldn't hold back. He shot into Larry's hand so hard his entire body shook with the pleasure. Larry kept palming the head of his cock, his cum-slicked hand moving in the same circular motion he'd made with his tongue.

He drew out the aftershocks, his eyes fixed on Brandon's face. "Your eyes..." His voice was barely a whisper, and the awe in his tone left Brandon elated, warm, and a little embarrassed. It was stupid to feel embarrassed over a compliment when he'd just had his cock inside someone's mouth.

Someone he might only get one night with, if Josh's experience was anything to go by.

But Josh had described an asshole who shot his load and ran, not caring if the guy he was fucking got off or not. Definitely not consistent with the blow job he'd just received. Not consistent with anything he'd seen of Larry, in fact. Maybe Josh had made a mistake and was thinking about someone else?

Still, if there was a chance he might only have one night to explore the spark that Larry's open smile and bright eyes ignited inside of him, he'd make the most of it. He pushed himself off the countertop, wrapped his arms around Larry's neck, and kissed him hard. When he pulled away, Larry's arms were around him, and those beautiful dark eyes were open wide, filled with something that looked like wonder.

"Bed?" Brandon asked, tugging him out of the kitchen.

Larry nodded, his kiss-swollen lips brushing against Brandon's again. "Definitely."

Chapter Three

Larry followed Brandon into the bedroom. He'd thought Brandon was cute from the moment he saw his photo, but he'd been totally unprepared for the way he kissed, all passion and raw energy. Brandon was so responsive, and watching him come had been intoxicating all by itself. The sight of his ivory skin and his hazel eyes going dark and wide left Larry's head spinning.

Brandon tugged him toward the bed, walking backward until his knees hit the edge, before letting himself fall back. Larry leaned down over him, kissing him again. He pulled away long enough to pull off his sweatshirt and to finish stripping off Brandon's clothes. Brandon's eyes raked over his chest slowly, making him slow down as he shoved his sweatpants to the floor.

"Shit," Brandon gasped, reaching for him.

He trailed his hands over every inch of Larry's skin, and everywhere he touched burned for more contact. Larry smirked as Brandon's cock hardened again, standing erect over his stomach while Brandon explored his body.

"I love how turned on you get," he said, giving Brandon's cock a few quick strokes.

Brandon bucked his hips, thrusting up into Larry's hand.

"I want to see your eyes when I'm inside of you," Larry whispered, thrilled at the gasp that escaped from Brandon's lips.

"There's lube in the drawer," Brandon said, nodding toward the nightstand.

When he'd retrieved the necessary supplies, he nudged Brandon's legs open and knelt between them. He didn't want to rush, though. He ran his fingertips over Brandon's body, from his chest down to his thighs, sweeping around his cock along the way. "You sure about this?" he asked, massaging Brandon's thighs.

Brandon locked his gaze on Larry and smirked. Then he arched his back, jutting his cock out. "I want you to fuck me," he said, his voice husky and deep.

Something in his voice and expression made Larry's balls tighten. He couldn't remember ever wanting someone so badly, being so overwhelmed with the need to bring someone else pleasure. But suddenly all he wanted in the world was to fill Brandon with desire, to make him come so hard he screamed.

He reached for the lube and prepared Brandon quickly, studying his reactions. He twisted his fingers, carefully searching inside Brandon's body for his prostate. When Brandon cried out and shifted against him, Larry rubbed the mound in gentle circles. He was mesmerized by every twitch and gasp he elicited. The long, deep moan he coaxed out of Brandon's throat was almost his undoing.

He ripped open the condom and covered and slicked himself quickly, determined not to come before they'd even gotten started. Brandon was stretched and open for him, so he lined himself up and lifted Brandon's knees, rocking into his body. After a few shallow thrusts, he sank in completely and froze.

"Fuck." Brandon lifted his legs higher. He set his calves on Larry's shoulders and rolled his pelvis.

Larry chuckled and rocked his hips forward, meeting Brandon's thrust halfway. They fell into a natural, easy rhythm, moving fast enough they both ended up breathing hard, but slow enough to drag it out. He wanted to make Brandon come once more, to feel him tighten and quiver around his cock, but they ended up in such perfect sync that he didn't need to think about pleasing the other man. He didn't need to analyze his expression or worry about his pace or angle. He just had to move, and Brandon moved with him. It was perfect, Brandon molding to his body and shifting with him as though this was their thousandth time and not their first.

"So perfect," he whispered, keeping his gaze fixed on Brandon's eyes.

He brought his hands around Brandon's legs and began to stroke his cock in time with their movements. As soon as he felt a hitch in Brandon's rhythm, he gave up fighting his own orgasm, filling the condom with a shudder that rocked his entire body. He kept stroking and squeezing Brandon, bringing him over the edge with a few quick pulls.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Larry let Brandon's legs fall off his shoulders and slipped out, then crawled up over Brandon's body, settling over him.

"You okay?" he asked, nuzzling Brandon's collarbone.

A tremor vibrated through Brandon's body. A chuckle?

"I am damn good," he said. "We should get cleaned up, though."

“I guess so.” He rolled to the side and off the bed. When Brandon sat up, he set a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back down to the mattress. “Let me,” he said. He gestured toward a dark doorway that he knew didn’t lead to the rest of the apartment. “Bathroom?”

Brandon slumped back onto the bed and nodded.

Larry hurried into the bathroom, tossed the condom in the trash, and grabbed a washcloth from the basin. When he got back to the bedroom, he froze. Brandon was still lying there, but both of his arms were draped over his eyes.

Larry didn’t think he was in pain. He’d stretched him until he could slip his cock inside easily enough, and they’d taken things slowly. Brandon had been eager in bed, enthusiastic even. “Regrets already?” he asked, even though he didn’t want to hear the answer.

Brandon dropped his arms to the bed and propped himself up on his elbows. “Regrets?” he repeated the word. He definitely wasn’t regretting his ordinary Friday night morphing into a waking wet dream. “No. Just...” He shrugged.

He didn’t know what to say. He’d known the sex would be good, given Larry’s chiseled body and tantalizing smile. But he’d never expected this. With Larry, every worry and frustration from the day just ceased to exist. Every sensation beyond the heat of his skin had been muted as if the entire world had been nothing but background noise; the rhythm of their bodies moving together became his entire world.

And then it was over. Reality came crashing back, and he’d only had a few seconds to get his head on straight while Larry disappeared into the bathroom.

He had to get it together. This was a Grindr hookup, for fuck’s sake. Larry had been polite enough to offer to buy him a drink, which was more than a lot of guys he met on Grindr were willing to do.

Larry crawled over the bed and settled down next to him, wiping his own spunk off Brandon’s stomach. “I never did manage to take you out for dinner, did I? Can I make you breakfast?”

“It’s three in the morning,” Brandon pointed out. He took the washcloth from Larry and tossed it into the hamper.

“Later in the morning,” Larry said, without missing a beat.

Brandon reminded himself he'd probably find himself alone in the morning, but for now, he felt too good to care.

When he did finally wake up, he was spooned against Larry's body, warm and comfortable with Larry's arm wrapped around his chest. Larry's cock was nestled in the crack of his ass, hard but still, and his lips were fluttering across the back of Brandon's neck.

His cock woke up immediately, even if the rest of him took a few blinking moments. He turned his head to look over his shoulder, and Larry met him for a quick kiss.

And on the floor, something beeped. Larry dropped his forehead against Brandon's shoulder and cursed, then slipped away toward the beeping. He found his pants and dug out a small pager, then his cell phone. "This is Doctor Myers, returning a page."

Brandon tried not to listen. He rolled onto his back and stretched the kinks out of his muscles. He was surprised he wasn't sore after Larry had fucked him last night, but if anything, he felt great, energized.

Larry hung up the phone and grimaced. "Can we try that whole 'me buying you breakfast' thing some other time?"

"You said you might have to work," Brandon reminded him. "It's okay."

Larry's angry expression looked intimidating for a moment until he shrugged and stuck out his bottom lip. Brandon couldn't help but laugh.

"What?" Larry asked.

"You're cute when you pout," he blurted out.

Larry's bottom lip jutted out a little more. "I do not pout."

Brandon turned onto his stomach and burrowed into the pillow. It smelled like a mix of sweat, sex, and spicy cologne. Not a scent he wore, but nice.

"I'm sorry," Larry said, pulling his clothes on with a brisk efficiency. "I really am. A guy on another team called in sick, so..." He shrugged.

Brandon took another deep breath and then got up too. "It's okay. You want some fresh coffee?"

Larry's eyes grew wide and hopeful, his smile huge. The sight made Brandon's breath catch. Would he piss Larry off if he pointed out how adorable he looked? Instead, he climbed out of bed, padded into the kitchen, and started a fresh pot of coffee.

Larry joined him in the kitchen a minute later, fully dressed. He set his hands on Brandon's hips and pulled him back, grinding against his ass and letting out a mournful groan. "Do you always make coffee naked?" he asked, kissing Brandon's shoulder.

"Not always."

Another kiss followed, softer. "Probably a good thing. I might never go to Starbucks again if I could get coffee and an unobstructed view of your ass in one stop."

Brandon lowered his gaze, torn between laughing and feeling embarrassed. "Are you always this over the top?"

Larry's arms wrapped around him, holding him close. "Hmm. I don't know. Have dinner with me tonight, and maybe you can tell me?"

He leaned his head back against Larry's shoulder. "If you want to have dinner, give me a call when you get off work." He patted Larry's arms and slipped out of his grasp, heading back to the bedroom to retrieve his phone. "Here," he said, entering the lock screen PIN quickly. He brought up his contact list and added a new entry. "Give me your number? Then just call yourself so you've got mine."

Larry took the phone, tapping at the screen. A moment later, his own phone rang in his pocket. He set Brandon's phone on the counter and pulled out his own. "Cool," he said, pocketing his phone again.

When Larry left ten minutes later, after chugging two cups of coffee he'd made tepid by pouring them over a half a cup of ice, he promised to call tonight or tomorrow. He'd kissed Brandon good-bye, a soft touch of lips Brandon felt long after Larry disappeared out his front door.

Larry stared at the wet clumps of too-long brown hair plastered to the little boy's forehead. The cardiac monitor beeped softly beside him, his pulse weak but still there. The tube taped in around his mouth funneled air from the ventilator into his lungs, making his chest rise and fall in a mechanical cycle that could almost make Larry believe there was still life in the tiny body.

They'd worked for twenty minutes to get his pulse back. But he'd been down fifteen minutes when the paramedics rushed him in after his father found him in their pool, floating unconscious in the water. For a slow, horrible moment, Larry had noticed that the child's hair was exactly the same shade of dark brown as Brandon's.

Even though they'd gotten a pulse back, Larry wouldn't venture a guess about whether the boy would ever wake up again. Of course, if he came down with aspiration pneumonia he might not even make it through the next few days to have a chance to come around.

"Is the mom here yet?" he asked Carol, one of the RNs.

"Still just the dad."

He shivered. "Will you come with me?" he asked, nodding toward the family room.

She smiled gently and nodded. "I need to get signatures anyway," she said, grabbing a clipboard with the boy's admission orders.

Inside the family room, an older man who'd lost most of his hair was hunched over the table, holding his forehead in both hands. A much younger woman with curly brown hair sat beside him, her makeup smeared beneath her eyes. Larry looked at Carol, wondering about the woman. She shrugged. "Mr. Jenkins?"

The man looked up, his expression grave. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize your wife was already here. I'd have come to talk to you sooner."

"Vicky is my girlfriend," he whispered, each word coming out between quiet sobs. "My ex is down in Hollister. She's on her way, but traffic..."

"That's fine. There'll be a chance to go over everything. I'm Doctor Myers," he began, taking the chair on the opposite side of the table. He kept his voice gentle, but his tone detached, as he informed the terrified father that they'd managed to get his son's heart beating again. A brief flash of relief crossed his face, but Larry continued, crushing the hope he'd briefly sowed. He explained the man's son was unconscious and a machine was breathing for him. He didn't know if the boy would ever wake up again, or breathe on his own. He didn't want to give the father any kind of false reassurance, just the current facts and the time and space to process it all. "He's being admitted to the Pediatric ICU upstairs," Larry continued. "They'll be able to monitor his lungs and keep him comfortable. Do you have any questions?"

The father opened his mouth and then closed it again. He shook his head slowly. "Not right now."

"Would you like to sit with him?" Carol asked gently. The father managed a shaking half nod.

In the hallway, the PA speaker blared to life, like it did every minute or so. “That’s me,” he said, as he was paged to the nurses’ station. Professional mask firmly in place, he grabbed a business card from the pocket of his scrub top. “If you have any questions at all, ask one of the nurses to track me down, or you can call at any time.” The father took his card with shaking hands.

Back at the nurses’ station, two uniformed security officers were hanging around. Rick must have warned them about Mr. Ericson in room five of his own initiative, and Larry was grateful for that. It would save him the time waiting for them to respond.

“Mr. Ericson’s blue sheet ready?” he asked, referring to the involuntary commitment paperwork needed to get the man in room five admitted to the Emergency Psychiatric Services Unit.

Rick, one of the few male RNs working today, passed him the last of the involuntary commitment paperwork he’d been waiting for. “Page one of the charge nurses to come notarize this?” he asked.

“She’s already...”

“I’m here.” A woman in a dark pantsuit hustled up to the desk, a ballpoint pen already in her hand. She didn’t even look over the commitment form as she sprawled her name and filled in all of the notary public blanks.

When he’d signed the form and had it notarized, he added it to Mr. Ericson’s chart and smiled at Rick. “You know this is going to suck, right?”

“I paged them, didn’t I?” Rick pointed his thumb at the security guards.

Larry nodded. “Give me a minute to talk to him.”

Two CNAs shifted gurneys out of the hallway leading to the elevator, clearing a path in case this didn’t go well.

“Mr. Ericson?” Larry kept his tone neutral and friendly as he shifted open the curtain. The bulky, scowling man sitting on the side of the bed glared at him. His wife sat in a chair on the opposite side, wringing her hands. “I’m afraid I was unable to get a bed for you at Crestwood, or the other treatment centers we contract with.”

“So... what? I need help,” he growled.

Larry had no doubt the man needed to be in rehab. He’d come in with his wife asking to go to Crestwood, an inpatient treatment facility he’d been sent to before.

“The only bed available for you right now is upstairs in our Emergency Psychiatric Services Unit.” He stayed near the open curtain where he knew the security guards could still see him. “I’ll need you to lie down. All transfers to EPS from other hospital departments need to be transported in restraints.”

“Restraints? Oh hell no. Are you a fucking idiot? I told you I need to go to rehab! I’m not going to the county looney bin here!”

“Mr. Ericson, you said you needed treatment for alcohol addiction, and you said you had an imminent plan to attempt suicide.”

“But you know I’m not fucking—”

“I know that I take every person who tells me they’re suicidal seriously.” Even when he’d bet money the threat was bullshit. “I know that once you stated you were planning on shooting yourself in the head, my hands were tied,” Larry said simply. Which was sort of true. Technically, the fastest way to get into rehab without insurance was to say you were thinking about committing suicide. At that point, Larry couldn’t legally discharge him. “EPS is upstairs. It’s an inpatient facility where we can provide treatment for seventy-two hours, and hopefully during that time a bed will open up somewhere else.”

“No one is putting me in restraints! I’m not going to no fucking EPS!”

From across the room, the man’s wife looked more worried. “Baby, please calm down—”

He turned toward her, snarling. “No one asked you, bitch!”

Larry watched a nurse pull the curtain back. The security guards, who had somehow tripled their numbers, stood fanned out behind him. “Mr. Ericson, you are going to EPS. There are two ways this can happen. If you cooperate and allow us to transport you, they can get you evaluated, and you might be able to talk your way out of there tonight. If you refuse to cooperate, they will keep you for the full seventy-two hours. And if any of my staff get hurt trying to transport you, when they discharge you, it will be into the custody of the Santa Clara Sheriff’s Department.”

Mr. Ericson eyed the security guards waiting right outside. “Whatever.” Grumbling, he climbed back onto the gurney and squirmed until he settled his head on the pillow, then held up his hands and shook his head, as if to ask what Larry was waiting for.

Once Mr. Ericson was admitted, and Larry had gotten a nurse to pass along a brochure of domestic violence resources to Mrs. Ericson, he grabbed a

handful of grape tomatoes from his stash of snacks at the nurses' station. He managed to eat a little, followed up on the five other patients he had waiting on lab work or radiology results, and glanced at the clock. It was just after six thirty, which meant he might only end up working an extra hour, if things stayed quiet and radiology hurried the hell up.

He grabbed his phone and scrolled through his contacts, smiling when he saw Brandon's name. He'd have to take a picture to go with his phone number. He tapped out a few letters of a text message before the EMS scanner at the desk crackled to life. He half listened to the nurse who spoke with the EMS unit. His senior resident Dr. Franklin and Dr. Solomon, the attending physician, were suddenly there eavesdropping too. "Cyclist struck by a semitruck, no helmet, unable to intubate on the scene," the nurse announced. "ETA three minutes."

"Prep bay two and give the trauma team a heads up," Dr. Solomon said calmly. Solomon was an older man who always showed up for work in nice slacks and a sweater vest. He looked like a television grandfather, and he tended to talk like one too. He never, ever seemed to be in a hurry, but he somehow managed to evaluate and treat more patients in a given shift than Larry could manage. He was also socially conservative, which meant Larry automatically shied away from getting too friendly. But he was methodical and great to work with, regardless.

Not that Larry had a choice, either way. "Myers, you're with me on this one," Solomon announced, heading for the scrub sink.

"You got it." He canceled the text message and put his phone away, the weight comfortable in his back pocket. The EMS entrance slid open and a team of paramedics rushed in, flanking the gurney they pushed between them.

He jumped to his feet and shoved the last tomato into his mouth, then got back to work.

Brandon spent most of the weekend catching up on laundry and going through the code sections he hadn't been able to get to compile at work. Larry hadn't called Saturday night, and he forced himself not to think about it.

He'd known Friday night was likely to be a one-shot deal before he'd ever replied to the Grindr message. It had been one hell of a one-night stand, and he was content to leave it at that. He crushed the little part of himself that had

secretly hoped he might hear from Larry again, burying that naive hope beneath work, pizza, and more work.

He liked working for Atlas, but sometimes at the office, he felt like he could feel the scrutiny of all of the other programmers burning into him through the cubicle walls. He always focused better at home. He'd even managed to ignore Momo's constant glares for most of Saturday. By Sunday morning, she seemed to have forgiven him for having the audacity to bring yet another human into her domain. She curled up under his desk and attacked his slipper-covered feet to show him he would still be tolerated.

Sunday night, his phone rang for the first time since Friday night. His pulse raced at the sound, and then felt like it was stammering to a halt inside his chest when he checked the caller ID and found it was just Daniel.

"Hey," he said, tucking the phone between his ear and shoulder so he could keep typing.

"Hey yourself. You're working again, aren't you?"

"This user interface isn't going to build itself."

"You need to unplug," Daniel warned him. "Like Friday night. Why'd you take off? We found the perfect guy to take your mind off work."

"I managed that just fine on my own," Brandon countered. And he had been perfect.

"What? Who?"

"The guy from Grindr," he admitted. "He showed up right as I was about to leave."

"Better late than never, I guess. You had fun?"

Brandon stared at the command prompt window on his monitor, but he wasn't seeing the code anymore. "Have you ever been with somebody where everything just... clicked?"

"Clicked?" Daniel chuckled. "The sex was that good?"

It had been so far beyond good, Brandon couldn't actually think of any word capable of describing the contented, sated feeling he'd enjoyed all day Saturday.

"Bran, you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. It was nice," he said at last.

He could tell Daniel was probably smirking. “Nice?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, at least you didn’t ditch us and go home. You going to see him again?”

Brandon had spent the entire weekend very intentionally not asking himself that question. “I don’t know. I’ve got a lot to do on this project, and his work schedule is no better. Josh wasn’t kidding about being a slave to his pager.”

“Seriously? Did he do the same thing to you?”

“Not exactly. His pager went off early in the morning, and he had to take off. He was nice about it, but he still left. It comes with the job, I guess.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s an emergency room doctor.”

There was a long pause before Daniel sighed. “So, he said he’s a doctor. And you just took his word for it?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said slowly. He leaned back in his office chair, confused by the skepticism in Daniel’s voice. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because he was probably just saying it to get you into bed.”

“What’s with you?” Brandon asked, remembering the way Daniel had assumed Larry’s initial Grindr message was just a manipulation tactic. “I may have been a kid when my sister Jen did her residency, but I remember the hours and the complaints sounded pretty much the same. Why would you assume he lied?”

“I’m not assuming,” Daniel said, his tone diplomatic. “I just think it seems a bit far-fetched. Guys lie to impress each other on Grindr all the time.”

Brandon thought about the ten-year-old profile picture on Daniel’s Grindr account. The picture had been taken the summer before he graduated from high school. He’d never been that fit during the four years they’d been friends, and Brandon wasn’t sure he ever had been. “Look, just because some guys lie on Grindr doesn’t mean everybody does. I don’t. Besides, I doubt he could manage it. His face is too open, too easy to read, you know?”

“If you say so.” Daniel sounded dismissive. “As long as you know what you’re getting into.”

Brandon was glad they weren't talking in person. He wasn't getting into anything. It had been one hell of a one-night stand. He'd hoped Larry might want to get together again, but the weekend was all but over. There hadn't been a single call or text message, not even a "Hey, last night was fun!" He wasn't going to sit around staring at his phone like an idiot when the weekend was pretty much over.

"Bran? You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Just focused on work. And you can stop pretending to be my big brother. I'm not getting 'into' anything. We had some fun, but I doubt we're going to get together again. Things clicked for me, but I'm not so sure we were on the same page."

"All the more reason to come hang out with us!" Daniel declared. "Come on, we'll cheer you up! Or you could just come over to my place instead. I bet I could make you feel better."

"Don't joke around. If someone hears you say shit like that at work, even being William Alcott's son won't save my reputation. Besides, I don't need cheering up," he lied. "I've got to go, Dan. I've really got to get this done."

Even making a decent salary, the best nursing home Larry could afford for his mom was depressing. It was a hive of activity, patients moving about throughout the facility's recreation rooms, dining rooms, and gardens with the help of the staff, but it also felt stagnant and oppressive. It was either freezing cold or sweltering, never just comfortable. It was often filled with the lingering odor of stale urine and feces, depending on how overworked and short staffed the nurses and custodians were on any given day. Luckily, when he visited, he just walked through the chaos and smell to get to his mom's room—a quiet refuge he'd tried to make as nice as possible.

Despite the grim setting, his mom always managed to stay in a good mood. "Lawrence!" She smiled, adjusting the bed so she could sit up and talk to him. "Did Gus come with you? She still has Sundays off, right?"

"Not today," he said, dragging the rocking chair out of the corner of the room and bringing it toward her bed. "She had some car trouble Friday and needed to get it fixed today."

Her eyes looked him over, quietly appraising him. "Everything okay between you two?" she asked in a tone that made it plain she knew there was something wrong.

“We’re fine, Momma,” he assured her. “We’re both busy. You know how it is.”

“Hmm. You’re busy, you mean. You should make more time for her, Lawrence. A girl like that isn’t going to wait around forever.”

“I know, Momma,” he said, automatically. “How have things been this week?”

“Dreadful,” she said, her tone unusually blunt. “That laptop you brought me keeps throwing fits every time I try to do anything. It gets so hot on the bottom, I’m half worried it’s going to catch on fire. Can you look at it for me?”

“Your computer?”

His mom wasn’t capable of walking down to the game room to play cards. She was also twenty years younger than most of the other residents, and he knew that irritated her. The feeding tube keeping her from losing any more weight between chemotherapy sessions made it difficult for her to even get out of bed, so he’d brought in a nice laptop with a DVD player. He gave her his debit card number to subscribe to Hulu, Netflix, and whatever else she wanted. The computer was one of the only ways she had to occupy her time, so it saw a lot of abuse.

He knew the overheating issue was probably caused by her using the laptop on her blankets. He’d tried to explain the vents need to stay uncovered for the laptop to cool down, but he doubted she actually used her tray table to hold it. “Yeah, let’s see what’s going on.”

Three hours later, Larry was ready to fling the damn computer at the wall and buy her a new one. They spent the time talking, like they always did, about everything from movies to politics. She let him ramble about work, listening to both his complaints and triumphs, until an orderly brought her dinner.

All the while he tried to figure out what was making the computer work normally for a few minutes after starting and then freeze or just plain die at random. “What, exactly, were you trying to do?” he asked.

“I wasn’t trying, Lawrence. I updated the video card driver,” she said, enunciating each word carefully. “But afterward, it didn’t display anything right. I flashed the BIOS hoping that it just needed to be updated too. And it’s still crashing.”

“Still? So, you did all that to try and fix it?”

“That’s right.”

“Damn, Mamma, I don’t know how to make this work.”

“It didn’t come with a restore disc?” she asked.

“No laptop comes with a restore disc anymore,” he said, turning off the power again.

She held up the remote and flipped through the three television channels that the TV mounted in the corner of her room picked up. “Hmm.”

“If you know how to fix it, I’m willing to follow instructions,” he reminded her.

“I’m honestly not sure,” she said, pressing her lips tightly together. “I should know. And I could figure it out, if I could only Google it. But, of course, that’s the problem.”

“The only thing I can think to do with this thing right now is to throw it in the trash. But there are computer repair shops. I can take it in to one of them tomorrow.”

Her expression turned into a deep frown. “Do you think that will take long?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But if they can look at it tomorrow, I can pick it up after work the next day.”

“No, you can’t. You’ve got one of those endless shifts from hell coming up.”

She was talking about the equivalent of a thirty-six hour shift he pulled once a week, with one full shift, followed by a shift spent on-call, and another full shift. “I’ll be able to take a break,” he lied. On-call shifts for residents were so demanding there were rooms set aside for residents to sleep in at the hospital, since it was easier than trying to go home. “I’ll tell you what. I’ve got my computer out in my briefcase in the car. How about I bring that one in, and you can use it until I get this one fixed. That way I won’t have to rush to get it done, and you won’t have to miss an episode of Game of Thrones.”

His mother gave him a huge smile. “Would you? I’m dying to see what happens.”

“Of course. I’ve got notes on mine, but nothing I’m going to need. I’ll probably be able to get this one back to you by Thursday.”

She chuckled and shoved her food around on the plate. She'd only taken a couple of bites, but Larry knew better than to say anything. "Don't bother pretending you're going to be awake on Thursday afternoon. The last time you tried to stay awake after one of those shifts, you weren't fit to be in polite company."

"I've got Friday off too," he said. "I don't need a recovery day if I'm going to get a full night's sleep."

"Recovery day." She smirked. "Grumpy day seems more accurate to me."

He packed up the laptop quickly, toted it out to his car, and returned with his own smaller computer.

A nurse slipped out with his mom's dinner tray as he returned to her room. "She asked me to take this," the woman nodded at the food. "Any chance you can talk her into eating a little more? The feeding tube can supplement her calorie intake, but it can't supply all of her nutritional needs."

"I know," Larry whispered. But he knew all he'd accomplish by encouraging his mother, once again, to eat more would be to upset her. "She's only three days out from her last round of chemo. Her appetite will get better." The skeptical expression on the nurse's face deepened, but she nodded and left with the tray.

He set his own laptop up quickly, disabled the password required to wake the computer from sleep mode, and stared at the icon for the Grindr app on the desktop. With a flare of panic, he started uninstalling things. "I just need a minute to email myself a few files I might need for work." When he was certain there wasn't anything that screamed "gay" left on the computer, he set it carefully on the cleared tray table and entered the password for the wireless router he'd set up in her room, he positioned the table so she could reach it easily. "It's not going to have as nice a display, or as big, but it's something."

"Thank you, dear. It gets so dull in here with nothing but Jerry Springer reruns."

"Sure. I'm just sorry I didn't get up to visit sooner this week, I'd have been able to do something about it then."

"It's all right. You come when you've got time, I know that." She patted his hand.

He smiled at the gesture, trying not to notice the way her hands felt like ice, how thin her fingers looked. "Hopefully I'll get it fixed Thursday and bring it back this coming Friday."

“Wonderful.”

A brisk knock drew his attention to the door. “Ms. Myers,” a feminine but definitely male voice called out. The nurse who came in was a slim Hispanic man with perfectly styled hair and—Larry stopped himself from staring—metallic eyeliner. “The library truck came by this afternoon, so I have a whole box of new paperbacks for you!” He stopped when he saw Larry and smiled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had a visitor. I can come back!”

“No, no, it’s all right. This is the son I was telling you about. He’s a doctor in Santa Clara. Lawrence, this is José. He’s so kind. He paints my nails once a week and even helps me with my hair. I know there’s no point, but it…” His mom shrugged a little.

Larry let himself relax a little. For as long as he could remember, his mother had been diligent about her appearance. Even when she was too sick to do more than pour him a bowl of cereal and hug him as he ran out the door for school, she always dressed nicely. She’d always done her hair and makeup and was careful about “looking put together” as she called it. Not being able to do those things personally had been hard for her, and it was harder still for her to ask others for help, especially for something that must seem frivolous to the majority of the nursing staff. He automatically liked José.

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a bright grin.

“A pleasure,” José almost purred. His gaze stayed locked on Larry’s eyes a little too long, well past the moment when Larry knew any straight man would have looked away. José just grinned. “Ms. Myers, how about I leave these here, and you can pick whichever ones you want. I’ll take the box when I come back around, okay?”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll find something interesting.”

José set the box of books down next to his mom and then left slowly, his gaze fixed on Larry again. The open invitation in those eyes was obvious and would have been tempting a week ago. But Brandon’s eyes, radiating desire and confidence, kept rising to the surface of his thoughts. José was cute, but he didn’t excite Larry the way Brandon had.

He glanced at his watch, confirming that it was too late to see Brandon. It wouldn’t take him too long to get back to San Jose, but he had to be at work by seven in the morning. And as his mom had reminded him, from Tuesday morning until late Wednesday, he would be stuck in the hospital. Seeing Brandon again was going to be tricky.

“There’s that look again,” his mom said, her eyes narrow.

“What look?”

“That look you get when you’re thinking about something you don’t like.”

“Just work.” He shrugged. “Residency isn’t going to last forever, but sometimes it feels like it. There’s just never enough time for everything.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile. “Just take things one day at a time, Lawrence. If they made it easy to become a doctor, everybody would do it. Focus on getting through the task at hand, do the job that’s in front of you, and you’ll manage just fine.”

He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I know.” He thought about the way Brandon had smiled at him Saturday morning. “I’ll have to figure it out.”

Chapter Four

Could I bribe you into doing me favor?

Brandon stared at the text message, wondering if Larry had sent it to the wrong person. He replied quickly.

Depends on the favor. And the bribe.

Larry's answer came a few minutes later.

Dinner @ my place. Anything you want in bed.

Brandon chuckled and rolled his eyes.

Is dinner the favor or the bribe?

Please? Over the phone tech support has eaten my soul. I need to see a real human being.

He chuckled and picked up his phone to answer.

So are you offering to cook, or do want me to bring you food?

I'm offering to order out. Just looking for company.

Brandon didn't think he'd be very good company, and he said as much.

You can be pretty company, no matter how bad work is going.

Brandon sighed and tapped out a reply.

Think you've got the wrong number. I'm not pretty.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to work. He clicked through the user interface, initiating the commands to build a virtual solar panel out of three different semiconductor materials. A window with electrical variables popped up, but froze halfway through streaming the data.

"Fuck." He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to ease the headache mounting behind his eyes. He'd almost managed to catch up over the last week, but the error causing the simulation to crash wasn't something he could fix by going through the code sections looking for typos.

Hot, then?

Gorgeous?

Handsome?

The string of texts made him smile. He could picture Larry staring at his phone with a bright, confident smile.

I stand by “pretty.” Your eyes...

Brandon smirked.

No more getting sappy over hazel eyes.

He leaned back in his chair and began to shut things down. It was only six o'clock, but the office around him was already empty. Even Daniel had only stayed long enough to remind him he'd promised to hang out with him and Josh tonight. Brandon had been so focused on testing the user interface, he'd only been half aware of his friend hovering behind him.

He knew he shouldn't let anything distract him, especially when he was so damn close to finishing this project, but he had to eat. Larry's invitation sounded a hell of a lot better than grabbing dinner from the vending machine in the break room.

But he wasn't going to spend another week with his heart jumping into his throat every time his phone vibrated. The sex had been incredible, but the softness that followed, the casual promises—he couldn't do that again. If he was going to indulge in another night with Larry Myers, he needed to set some ground rules. He needed to get Larry to stop the bullshit and stop pretending that this was anything but sex.

Sex he could handle.

He stood up and stretched, working the kinks out of his back and neck and texted Larry for his address.

Cooking was not Larry's strong suit. A lot of the men he'd tried dating were domestic and able to whip up amazing meals with nothing but the grim contents of his pantry. But by the time he thought about food, he was always too hungry for something so complicated as learning to cook. Instead, he'd run to the supermarket and picked up a six-pack of the beer Brandon had had at his place the week before and ordered some Chinese food. He put on a nice pair of jeans and a T-shirt that showed off just how much time he spent in the gym and then tried to clean up the mess he'd left on his coffee table while trying to fix his mom's laptop. He barely managed to get the laptop tucked away when the doorbell rang.

Brandon was standing on his doorstep in rumpled gray slacks and a light-blue button-down shirt. He had a tie around his neck, but it looked like it had been pulled loose over the course of his day. His hair was tousled just like it had been after they got out of bed last weekend.

Every part of Larry's body tightened at the sight.

He met him at the threshold, taking him by the waist and kissing him softly. They lingered over the kiss for a moment before Brandon pulled away and shoved the door closed behind him.

"Hi," Larry said, bumping the tip of his nose against Brandon's. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to text you last weekend. Or at all. Work is always crazy, and then I spent all day yesterday trying to fix a damn computer thing, and..." He rubbed his forehead against Brandon's hair, enjoying the soft texture against his temple. "I'm glad you came."

Brandon groaned and shook his head. "No," he said reluctantly. "You said food. If this turns into a repeat of last weekend, we'll never even get to dinner, and I'm starving."

Larry smirked and slipped away. "I ordered Chinese. It's on the counter. We can eat whenever you want. Now, later, breakfast..."

Brandon closed his eyes and smiled. He looked like he was trying not to laugh.

Larry set his hands on Brandon's hips and guided him into the living room. "I'm sorry. I know I said I'd text you. My work schedule sucks, and by the time I figured I could text you without seeming like some kind of psychopath, I was caught up at work. It sounds like bullshit, I know, but—"

"My sister is an oncologist," Brandon interrupted. "I remember a bit of her residency years. Mostly, I remember her falling asleep at the dinner table. It was her residency that convinced her to go into research instead of practice, so I get how bad it is."

Larry was surprised and then relieved. "I wanted to see you," he said. "I've only got Thursday and Friday off this week, and I promised my mom I'd spend Thursday getting her computer fixed and returned to her. So..."

"So you figured you could see me and get her computer fixed all in one go?"

“No,” he laughed. “I tried to fix it. I gave up. I’m going to take it in to a repair shop when I’ve got time. That’d be like a date asking me to diagnose their headache, wouldn’t it?”

Brandon gaped at him.

“What?”

“If you were honestly looking for a fuck-buddy, this would be so much easier.”

“Would it?”

“Do you know how many guys I’ve dated who assume I can fix whatever ancient laptop they’ve got tucked into storage units or packed away in their closets?”

“Uh, no.”

“You’re...” Brandon grimaced and shook his head.

Larry felt his stomach sink, his hope tumbling with it. “Not what you’re looking for?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“If I were looking for something long term, you’d be it. But it sounds like both of us aren’t really in positions where our jobs give us time for... you know, actually getting to know someone.”

Larry slouched and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Hey.” Brandon cupped his jaw with both hands. “I’m not trying to say we can’t hang out, or that we can’t fuck. Just that it’d be easier if I didn’t feel like I’ve got to get all OCD about whether or not you’re going to call. And wouldn’t it be simpler if you didn’t end up feeling guilty when you can’t call?”

“So, a ‘friends with benefits’ kind of deal?”

“I know we could have fun.”

Larry leaned into his touch. The warmth of Brandon’s fingers and the passion in his eyes were at odds with the chill that settled in Larry’s gut. Brandon leaned up on his toes and kissed him, not softly but eager, energetic, and perfect. He’d hoped Brandon might see him as worth the effort, hoped for something real, but maybe if they took their time, Larry could convince him they could be so much more. And if he couldn’t, if Brandon was determined to keep things casual, at least the “benefits” part of being friends with benefits would be hot.

His body had already made its decision, inching toward Brandon to feel every inch of warmth available through their layers of clothes. He'd spent an entire week fantasizing about the man in his arms. At this point, he wanted him badly enough he'd take what he could get.

He ground his hard cock against Brandon's body, relieved to find Brandon was also as hard as steel beneath his clothes.

Brandon gasped against his lips when Larry backed up him against the foyer wall.

He snaked his hand between them and squeezed the tip of Brandon's cock through his clothes. Brandon cried out and tried to thrust into his hand, heedless of the fabric separating them. Hands shaking, Brandon shoved him away a little and began to unbuckle his belt.

He caught Brandon's hands and held them still. "Food?" he asked, breathless.

Brandon leaned his head back against the wall, panting. He ran his hands over his face and met Larry's gaze, smiling. Then he grabbed the front of Larry's shirt and spun him around, slamming him against the wall hard enough that his picture frames rattled.

He dropped to his knees, pulling open Larry's pants quickly.

"I thought you..." Larry didn't have the willpower to finish his sentence, to stop him from slipping his cock out of his boxers and swallowing the tip eagerly. He'd been thinking about this so long, fantasizing about it so often over the last week, he nearly came the moment he was inside Brandon's mouth.

Thankfully, Brandon slipped off of him again, giving him a second to try and get himself under control. Brandon looked up at him, his gaze intense. "You said 'anything' I want." He reached into Larry's boxers and cupped his balls, rolling them in his palm as he turned his attention back to Larry's cock.

"Not arguing," he whispered, entwining his hands in Brandon's hair.

Brandon stroked the bottom of Larry's cock and bobbed up and down over the tip, sending him crashing headlong into an orgasm that left him trembling and dizzy.

"Christ," he gasped.

Brandon licked him clean and eased Larry's hands out of his hair. "Too tight," he explained, rising to his feet.

“Shit,” Larry breathed. “Sorry.”

Brandon smirked and kissed him. “You have no idea how hot it is to see you lose control like that. Don’t worry about it.”

Larry managed to stand up straight, once his legs stopped shaking, and reached for Brandon’s belt buckle again. “I don’t have much hair you can pull—”

“Not on your head.” Brandon ran his fingers over the base of Larry’s cock, and the dark tangle of curls around it, one more time. Then he tucked Larry back into his pants and zipped him up. “So, food?”

“But I haven’t done anything for you,” he pointed out.

“Are you planning on kicking me out after dinner?”

“Never,” Larry said, the certainty in his own voice surprising him. He ran his hands around Brandon’s waist and squeezed the tip of his cock. He was still hard, straining against the linen of his slacks. “I’m just surprised you can think about food at all.”

Brandon hissed and covered Larry’s hand with his own. “Sometimes anticipation can be just as much fun as sex. Come on.”

They barely made it through dinner before they stumbled into Larry’s bedroom, shedding clothes along the way. He kept reminding himself to take his time, to make it as good for Brandon as he possibly could. And it was good. Pushing past the tight ring of muscle into Brandon’s ass sent him flying, elated and unburdened all at once.

When it was over, they made a halfhearted effort to clean themselves up then Brandon gathered his clothes and left. There was no kiss good-bye. Just a casual smile, a nod, and then a closed door.

Larry grabbed a beer from the untouched six-pack in his kitchen and chugged it before he went back to bed. He needed to catch up on sleep before he started yet another week at the hospital. He needed to not think about how much worse seeing Brandon leave felt than the one-night stands that had kept him sane for the last four years. Those virtually anonymous encounters had been a chance to get off, but he’d hated the way they left him feeling worn out and depressed. And even that was nothing like this.

By the time he finally got to sleep, he’d made up his mind. He could do casual sex. He could even stick to a friends with benefits kind of deal. But not with Brandon.

In the morning, he sent Gus a quick text message, knowing she'd see it when she woke up.

That guy you mentioned still interested in getting together?

The next weekend, Larry found himself at dinner with a younger white guy Gus had insisted was definitely gay, out, and single. His name was Issac, and he had a nervous smile that was getting awkward quickly. He kept smiling no matter what he said, as if he was worried letting his expression slip might somehow be offensive.

"I think we've really moved past that race stuff. Like me, I don't care if people are black, white, or purple, you know? We're all humans, we're all the same."

Issac was the first gay white man Gus had tried to set him up with. She'd been hesitant, since her own experiences dating a white man had resulted in strangers approaching her when they were together, presuming she was a hooker. Apparently Issac had assured her he was totally cool with dating a black guy. Larry would have to show her the dozens of screenshots he kept on his phone from all the guys who repeated the "So, is it true black guys have big cocks?" line, so she could understand what most white guys meant by being okay with dating a black man.

So far, Issac had done nothing except ramble about how colorblind he considered himself to be. Since the long, defensive monologue had started with Issac being surprised by how well-spoken he was, Larry had decided to smile politely, offer to pick up the tab, and then get away as fast as possible. Maybe he'd call Brandon after he said good night to Issac, and see if he might be up for company.

Ten minutes after their entrées arrived, the familiar chirp of his beeper saved him. The sound had never been so welcome.

"I'm sorry," he said, interrupting Issac. "That's work. I've got to run. Let me get this," he said, motioning to the waiter for their check.

"Oh," Issac said, pursing his lips.

When the waiter arrived, Larry didn't waste a moment. "I'm afraid I have to rush off. I have an emergency to deal with. I'd like to take care of the check now," he said to the waiter.

“Would you like your entrées boxed?”

“I’d like mine boxed to go. Issac?”

He shrugged and handed over his plate too. “Yeah, might as well.”

The waiter took both plates and Larry’s debit card.

“I am sorry,” he said again.

“No, it’s okay. August warned me your job was unpredictable and kind of a matter of life or death, so, yeah... This was fun. Maybe we could try again next week?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “You seem like a great guy, but to be honest, I’m just not feeling it.”

If anything, Issac looked relieved. “Yeah, I guess this was kind of awkward for both of us, huh?”

That was one hell of an understatement, but Larry just smiled politely. “A bit.” He signed the receipt the waiter brought for him and shoved his card back into his wallet. “Thank you for having dinner with me, though.”

He thought about how the night might have ended if he’d called Brandon after his date. He’d probably be rushing off after sex instead of an uncomfortable dinner, since weekends almost always involved rushing to work at least once. And if he didn’t get paged to go in, Brandon would be out the door the moment they were done fucking. He suspected he’d feel like shit regardless.

Chapter Five

The music was so loud it reverberated through Brandon's body, making the headache he'd been trying to ignore pound in time to the deep bass. The black lights and occasional strobes weren't helping. But he'd promised Josh and Daniel he'd hang out, promised he'd meet some guy Josh swore would be perfect for him. The guy, a butch weight lifter with sun-streaked auburn hair, turned out to be more Josh's type than his. Josh had been glued to the guy for the last hour, grinding against him on the dance floor as if he was trying to fuck him with their clothes on.

He spotted Daniel chatting with a couple of older guys, got his attention long enough to tell him he was going to head home, and then escaped from the noise and the lights.

"Bran!" Daniel called, hurrying after him through the doors to the parking lot. "What's wrong?"

"My head hurts, man. I'm sorry; I'm not up for staying here tonight."

Daniel set his arm around his shoulders, steering him back toward the club. "Brandon, how long are you going to keep acting like this? Josh warned you about that fucker. You went after him anyway, and shit turned out exactly the way he said it would. And honestly, you're probably lucky he didn't go through your wallet while you were asleep."

"Why would he do that?"

"You never know. He's a random guy from Grindr, anything could happen. But hiding behind your computer isn't going to make you feel better. You need to unwind and remember that there are other guys who'd love a chance with you."

"My head hurts, Dan. That's all." The cool air outside the bar provided a bit of relief but not enough.

"I've got some painkiller back at my place," Daniel said, stepping in front of him.

Suddenly the friendly almost-hug felt awkward. "Dan," he said, shoving his arm off. "I need to go. I'm sorry. I am, but you should go have fun. I'll see you Monday, okay?"

He didn't wait for Dan's answer, striding to his car without looking back.

He climbed into the driver's seat and dug out a packet of ibuprofen he kept in the center console and then sat behind the wheel, letting the quiet and the cold soothe the pain until the medication kicked in.

He tried to recall how much he'd had to drink. He'd been fine after a beer, but then he'd accepted a sangria from Daniel, and then the headache began. He'd be okay driving with just two drinks.

Before he started his car, he grabbed his phone and tapped out a quick text message.

Hey. What are you up to?

It had been two weeks since he'd gone to Larry's apartment. Two weeks of occasionally checking to see if he might be busy, of trying to remind himself he wasn't taking this seriously. Every time Brandon thought he caught him with a day off, Larry said he had to work, or had to take care of family stuff. They hadn't managed to hook up once. But every time Brandon began a conversation, always with a text message, they typically kept replies going for hours. He only shared a bit about his day, made a few jokes, and tried not to start laughing in his cubicle when Larry found something hilarious on the Internet that he hadn't seen yet.

Nothing entertaining.

He sent back a simple question mark.

Blind date. Double date. My friend Gus is obsessed with setting me up. Most awkward night ever.

Brandon was confused. Over the course of their text conversations, he'd picked up that Gus was somehow female, that they'd dated for a long time, and were still friends. Regardless of the orientation of anyone involved, setting up your ex on a blind date was weird. A blind date with your ex was weirder still. He could only imagine how much Larry had to be squirming.

Your blind date uncomfortable?

He's bi. He thinks it's hot. Like Gus and I are package deal.

Brandon cringed.

What about her date?

Her boyfriend.

After a moment, another text popped up.

*He's suitably horrified and trying to be polite. Call me? Now?
Please!*

Brandon gaped at his phone. "You've got to be kidding me." He hit the little phone icon on his screen and brought the phone to his ear, oddly nervous.

"Doctor Myers," Larry answered, his tone curt and professional.

"Does it matter what I say?" Brandon asked, trusting that whoever Larry was having dinner with wouldn't be able to hear him.

"Not really, no."

How was he supposed to know if anything Larry said was directed at him or the blind date he was trying to ditch?

"I suppose I need to say something, huh? So there can be chatter on the other end of the conversation. Something that sounds urgent and like it might be a matter of life and death?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm sick of bars. I'm sick of clubs. I'd really like to get laid tonight, but it turns out I can't stop comparing every guy I see to you. And the fucked up part is I get the impression that you're avoiding me. Are you avoiding me?" He let his head fall back onto the seat and tried to laugh. "Not that it matters. You're on a date with someone who wants a foursome with your ex, so it's not like you're hard up. Have I rambled long enough?"

He heard something muffled on Larry's end of the line, something that sounded like, "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Operation 'save Larry from weird foursome' managed," he muttered.

"You're drunk," Larry said directly into the phone. "I don't even have to ask if you've been drinking. Where are you?"

"In my car."

Larry breathed into the phone. "Oh, hell no. I don't care where you are, pull over. I'll come get you."

Brandon wasn't sure if he should feel offended. "I'm not driving. I'm sitting in my car." Granted, he was planning on driving home if Larry wasn't up for getting together, but he hadn't actually done it yet.

"Thank god. Where are you parked?"

"Rebels. Same place as before."

“I’ll be there in ten. Don’t move, okay?”

“I’m okay,” Brandon insisted. “I’ve had two drinks. I’m just tired, and my head hurts. I’m not drunk.”

“Fatigue leaves the body just as impaired as a shot of alcohol.”

“Do I get an incentive for sitting here?” Brandon asked suggestively.

“Just stay put.”

It took Larry less than the ten minutes he’d promised. Larry pulled open the driver’s side door and offered Brandon a hand getting out.

“I’m not drunk,” he insisted. “I’m waiting for the ibuprofen to work.” Larry tugged him to his feet and pulled him close, guiding Brandon’s arms up and around his neck. Brandon let himself fall against Larry’s chest, noting the nice shirt and dark, silky suit jacket. “You look good.”

Larry’s breath tickled the shell of his ear as he chuckled. “Not drunk at all, huh?”

He shook his head. “Two drinks.”

At his apartment, he half expected Larry to shuffle him through his front door and take off, but when Brandon asked him to come in for a drink, he agreed.

“Can you manage coffee?”

“I need to eat. Join me for pizza?” He used an app on his phone to order, and by the time he paid the driver, Larry had figured out coffee by himself. He shoved a steaming cup into Brandon’s hands and took the pizza.

“I was just going to grab a beer,” he said.

“The coffee will do as much for your headache as the painkiller. A beer will make it worse. Drink the coffee.” Larry said the words with a quiet, calm certainty that was, admittedly, hard to disobey. He took the pizza into the kitchen before Brandon could argue with him. He took a sip of coffee and followed him, helping get pizza onto plates and out into the living room.

It wasn’t until after they sat down that a ball of gray fur launched itself at Larry’s feet. He spread his legs apart and Momo ended up crashing into the couch. She rolled to the side, shook her head, and stared at them both. “That’s a normal ‘hello’?” he asked, scratching her on the top of the head as though she hadn’t just tried to attack him. She glared then began to purr anyway.

“She likes you. You get a beer but I don’t?” he asked, nodding to the bottle on the coffee table.

Larry groaned. “After the dinner I just sat through, I really want one.”

“No worries about hangovers?”

“If there’s pizza, I’m okay.”

“So what was the deal the first time you came over? You worried I’d spike your drink or something?” he teased.

“Yeah, right. Why drug the willing? No, it’s just a thing.”

“A ‘thing’?”

“A car accident thing. And a drunk asshole thing.”

“I guess you’ve probably seen a lot of victims of drunk drivers,” Brandon said, his smile fading. “I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought about that.”

“It’s not the victims that bother me. They’re trauma patients. I evaluate them and get things started, that’s easy. Drunk drivers, though, usually get hurt too. And they’re always assholes who don’t want to be treated, who can’t remember they’re hurt, and who will inevitably sue my ass if they make their own injuries worse. Gus always told me I just get more fun when I’m drunk, but I don’t ever want to be ‘that guy,’ you know?”

“You ended up staying here that night,” Brandon reminded him, taking a bite of pizza and following it up with a big swig of coffee.

Larry shrugged. “I wasn’t sure how things were going to go. Who can ever be sure what someone’s going to be like?”

“Like your date?”

Larry’s eyes got narrow, his expression angry. “I owe you one. As soon as Gus and her boyfriend took off, things were only going to get worse.”

“I’m sorry. Why’s she trying to set you up, anyway?”

He shrugged. “It’s what girls do. It’s what she does, anyway. We dated for... well, forever, and there wasn’t a single day in our relationship when she wasn’t talking about setting one of her friends up with somebody. When I came out, I got relegated to the ‘friend who needs true love’ category, and that was that.”

“Sorry,” Brandon said, chuckling.

“It’s no big deal.” He took a sip of his beer, suddenly looking thoughtful. “I’d put up with a thousand shitty dates if it makes her happy.”

“How long were you two together?”

“We became friends when we were in preschool. We started dating at thirteen. Well, when she turned thirteen. She’s always been my best friend.”

“Then you should be honest with her. If she’s trying to set you up, it’s because she wants you to be happy. If blind dates aren’t what you want, you should tell her.”

Larry’s gaze lingered on him longer than strictly necessary. He wore a smile, but something about it was sad, almost regretful.

“It is what you want,” Brandon said aloud. “Oh.”

Larry just shrugged. “I want a life with someone. Something real that lasts, you know?”

Brandon’s chest tightened. “Is that why you haven’t been interested the last couple weeks?”

“I doubt I could ever *not* be interested in you.”

“The deal was no bullshit, remember? Every time I suggest we get together, you make a joke, change the subject, and then have to run to work.”

“I’ve been busy. When I’m at work, I can’t afford to think about anything but the job in front of me. I don’t mentally multitask because the risk of making a mistake is too high. But...”

“It’s okay,” Brandon said, even though it didn’t feel okay. “Usually the whole friends with benefits thing means you’ve got to be friends first.”

Larry tipped his beer bottle back and chugged the last few sips then turned toward him. “I’d like to be friends. I’ve been busy, but I’m here now.” He reached for the back of Brandon’s neck, as if he might pull him in for a kiss, but he froze. His fingertips ghosted over Brandon’s hair for a moment then dropped away. “After that blow job, the friends with benefits thing sounded good, but I can’t.” He took a bite of pizza and kept his eyes on the coffee table, not meeting Brandon’s gaze. “When I saw your text, all I wanted was to find a way to hook up with you tonight. It was the same last week, when it was just me and some random guy Gus met through her job. I didn’t want to fuck him enough to put up with him trying to convince me race was irrelevant. I wanted you.”

“So you don’t want to do this?” Brandon felt like he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even think. “We could just be friends,” he said, trying to force the word out. Of course they could just be friends. Larry had left a date and his best friend because he’d thought Brandon needed help. If their text conversations had revealed anything, it was that Larry was fun, intelligent, and he needed someone to vent to about all the subtle injustices he wasn’t allowed to scream about on the job. Brandon had kept responding, kept encouraging him to talk because he felt like maybe he could help Larry too. “Or we could try the whole ‘dating’ thing, but your schedule sucks so much, I don’t know when we could actually see each other. We’d still only be texting each other a couple times a week and seeing each other every two weeks.”

Larry sighed. “I won’t compromise on the work thing. I can’t. But I can try to give you the time I do have.”

Brandon nibbled on a bite of pizza. “Guess we’ll just have to figure it out.”

Larry looked up at him and smiled, not the bright, goofy grin Brandon had missed, but a look of genuine happiness. “Good,” Larry said. “You should finish your coffee.”

Larry reached for the cup and placed it in Brandon’s hands, apparently oblivious to the spark Brandon felt when their fingers touched. “Why?” he asked.

“Because you’ve got a headache. Caffeine makes most over-the-counter pain medication more effective for relieving headaches.”

“The headache was just from the sangria. Red wine does it to me every time.”

“Why drink it then?”

Brandon shrugged. “Daniel shoved it into my hand.”

“Is Daniel the one I’ve slept with?”

Josh’s tale had come out during their text message conversations, too. “No. Daniel’s a friend from work. Josh is the one you slept with. We’ve been friends forever, but he went to work for Google after college. And I’m positive you slept with him. He even described your beeper. I know you said you don’t remember it, but he got you spot-on. Except for the callous douche part.”

Larry stood up for a moment and took off his suit jacket, draping it over the back of the couch. “This is going to sound horrible, but I still don’t remember. I mean, it probably happened, but I wasn’t trying to be a jerk.”

“I know. He can find something to be offended about anywhere. He’s been like that for as long as I’ve known him.”

“How long has that been?”

“High school. Then he followed me to college. Which was pathetic, because all through our senior year, he gave me shit about not leaving home to go to college, like I would be subjecting myself to some kind of worldly isolation by staying in northern California.”

“You’ve been here your whole life?” Larry asked, looking surprised.

There were so many people in the San Jose area with more people pouring in every year with fresh computer science degrees and brilliant ideas. People came to San Jose to make money, to engineer whatever gadget they envisioned changing the world, to build multimillion-dollar start-ups from the ground up. And his parents had done just that—making a home for themselves among the middle class of Silicon Valley. A middle class where a net worth of several million dollars was normal. When Atlas Software took off, their stock portfolio had grown to include a few extra digits, but their lives hadn’t changed much.

“Kind of. My folks live up in Mountain View, so maybe I was a little sheltered growing up.”

“You weren’t a Stanford kid, were you?” Larry asked.

“Almost. It was like fifteen minutes away from my parents’ place, and my mom got her Juris Doctorate from Stanford Law. But I wanted to go to school near the beach. Lame, I know, but I ended up at Cal State Monterey Bay.”

“That’s a whole sixty minutes from home,” Larry pointed out.

“Yeah, I know. I wanted to go to the beach, not leave. I love it here. You watch the news, and it seems like the rest of the country is overrun with psycho conservatives, and this part of California is the only place where people are rational and actually nice.”

Larry laughed and leaned back into the sofa, watching him. “Totally unfair. The rest of the world isn’t so bad, and not everyone around here is decent.”

Brandon rolled his eyes. “What about you? Where are you from?”

“Oakland,” he answered, his tone almost defensive.

“A whole forty minutes away?” he echoed Larry’s last comment.

“Yes, but it’s the other direction. And it’s a whole other world compared to here.”

“Did you go to school locally? Or just come home afterward?”

“This is school,” Larry said simply. “The hospital has a horrible reputation. People say we’re overwhelmed by Medicaid patients and every homeless person who comes in off the streets, and they’re right. But we get so many different cases that Santa Clara is an amazing ER to work in as a resident, and it’s the most important part of the curriculum.”

“So you’re still a student? Do they make you take tests at the end of the week or something?”

“At the end of every six month rotation. With performance reviews from my supervising physicians.”

“Damn. I was so sick of school by the time I finished my bachelor’s degree I couldn’t even think about staying.”

“It’s not so bad. I’m a doctor, and I’m doing the same thing right now that I intend to do for the rest of my career. I even get paid, albeit only about a quarter of what an attending physician makes.”

“So are you planning on staying? At Santa Clara, I mean?”

“Or someplace close, yes. I need to stay close to Oakland, either way.”

“You’ve never been anywhere else?”

Larry shook his head.

“So you can’t really say I’m wrong about the rest of the world, then.”

“I can’t say, in my direct experience, that you’re wrong. Maybe the rest of the world is full of assholes, but we’ve got our share right here. One of the attending physicians I work with comes across as the nicest guy, but I’ve heard him rant about politics and the ‘gay agenda’ and, I tell you, the man freaks me the hell out. But he’s not in some small town in the heartland—he lives in Mountain View.”

He cringed. “I swear my parents aren’t like that. Hell, my mom was happy when I came out. She finally had something new and trendy to talk to her friends about.”

“Trendy?” Larry snorted. “You’re lucky. My mom’s Roman Catholic, so...”

“She doesn’t know you’re gay?”

Larry pressed his lips tightly together and shook his head. “It’s hard, just trying to figure out how to bring it up. She’s liberal, always has been, but not *that* liberal. She doesn’t believe in any ‘gay agenda’ conspiracy theories, but she thinks it’s a sin. Better than either murder or adultery, but still a sin.”

“So you’re trying to figure out how to tell her?”

“Nah, not really. We’ve always been close, but sex isn’t a part of my life I’m inclined to talk about with my mom, no matter who it’s with. I try to go see her once a week, more if I can help it. And that probably sounds creepy, like I’m still attached to her apron strings or something. She’s, uh, she’s sick. She has leukemia.”

“Leukemia?” Brandon shifted closer to him on the couch, forgetting about the pizza and the rest of his coffee. “That’s a kind of cancer, right?”

Larry nodded. “Blood cancer, basically. She’s been dealing with it for a long time, going through treatment then she has months and sometimes years in remission. This time around it spread to her lymphatic system. Aggressively. She’s been in a nursing home for the past two years because the cancer and the treatment hit her hard. She was in an assisted living facility for a few years before that.”

“Is she why you wanted to go into medicine?”

“In a way, yeah. I can’t treat her. There are definite rules about physicians treating members of their immediate family. But I realized around age twelve that her doctors sucked. She didn’t have insurance and didn’t qualify for Medicaid, so no one wanted to bother doing a full workup. They gave her a ten- or twenty-day supply of pain medication and shuffled her out the door without ever listening to her. One guy she went to see actually referred her to the county mental health services center and told her it was all in her head instead of considering her symptoms and ordering a blood test. By the time she was actually diagnosed, what probably started as a treatable stage-one or -two leukemia had progressed to a high-risk, stage-four cancer that was affecting her liver and lymph nodes.”

“I can’t imagine what that must have been like. It’s frustrating just to listen to.”

“It was. It pissed me off. I wanted to be able to go back in time and tell her doctors what to look for. I wanted to make sure no one else went through what she faced—having every doctor accuse you of making up your symptoms while

you get sicker and sicker. Plus, I don't know how much time she has left. Her cancer might respond to the chemotherapy, it might not. She might change her mind about getting on the waiting list for a bone marrow transplant. She might go into remission. And she might go downhill overnight. I wanted to make her proud while I still could."

"Do you have any other family?" Brandon felt his stomach sink. He shifted so close their thighs touched. He wanted to move closer still, to wrap Larry up in his arms and hold onto him tight. "Anybody else?"

"Neighbors, including Gus. Technically, I've got a couple half brothers and a half sister out there somewhere, but I don't know them very well. What about you?"

"I've got a brother and a sister, Jennifer and Luke."

"Jennifer is the oncologist, right? You close?"

"God, no." Brandon took a sip of his beer. "They're old. Jen's forty-two and Luke is turning forty this year. I have about as much in common with them as I do with my dad."

"What? So they're... All right, I don't know how old you are, but that seems like one hell of an age gap."

"I'm twenty-seven," he informed him. "It's a huge age gap. My parents decided they were never going to have any more kids after Luke. Fifteen years later, I caught them by surprise. My childhood involved my brother and sister coming home to visit for Christmas, not actually growing up with them."

"Now see, with me, it's the opposite. My dad took off when I was a kid, and he got married again when I was a teenager. Right about the time I finished high school, he wanted me to meet his wife and new kids. It was weird, seeing this herd of screaming little kids who were technically my siblings. They seem cool, but they're little. His new wife tries to stay in touch—she sends Christmas cards and stuff like that, with school pictures and school news and soccer team photos. They live an hour away, and I doubt I'd recognize any of them if I passed them on the street."

"But no one else who can help you take care of your mom?"

"I can't take care of her. I visit her, and I support her, but I can't do what a nursing home can. I just wish she would quit whatever the hell she keeps doing that kills every computer she touches."

"It happened again?"

“Yes. It was mine this time. She was using it because I still hadn’t gotten hers back from the shop.”

“It’s been two weeks. It should be repaired by now.”

“It’s not going to be. Apparently the video card is fried, or something. They said it was added after market, and it wasn’t meant to go with the motherboard or the power supply. I don’t know what the hell they’re talking about, only that it’ll cost more to fix it than to replace it.”

“Laptops don’t usually have video cards anymore. Some big systems designed for gaming still have them, but that’s it. Sounds like it was an older system anyway.”

“It was, yeah. So, I’m going to buy her a new one when I get paid again and then try and figure out what the hell she did to mine.”

“I could take a look at it for you,” Brandon offered. “Do you have it in your car, or is it at your place?”

“It’s in my car, but it’s all right.”

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“I really hope not, but I might get called in.”

Brandon considered him for a moment. Despite his unpredictable schedule, Larry was still sitting here at nearly midnight. He’d offered to give Brandon what time he had, and he’d even made coffee to help his headache. “Go get it, I’ll figure out what’s going on with it and have another cup of coffee. Then in the morning, or whenever your pager goes off, you can give me a ride back to get my car. You can sleep while I work on it, if you’d like.”

Larry stared at him for a moment, smiling, before turning away. “Not quite how I was hoping to spend the night with you, but sure, okay.”

The absence of sound woke him up.

Despite Brandon telling him to go get some rest a couple of times throughout the night, he’d fallen asleep on the couch, making jokes about an old movie while Brandon somehow got his computer to start again then began a long process of letting software figure out what was wrong with it while Larry watched TV.

Despite the occasional pang he felt when he looked over at Brandon, wanting to touch him but also not wanting to distract him, it had been a fun

night. Now with Brandon on top of him, his head pillowed by Larry's shoulder, covering the rest of him like a blanket, things weren't so simple. The television was off, and he was pretty sure they'd dozed off with it on. He was also pretty sure Brandon hadn't been plastered against him at the time.

Brandon had turned off the television and dropped the remote, but he didn't move his head or open his eyes. Larry ran his fingers through Brandon's hair, savoring his chance to feel the soft, thick texture again. It was so nice, feeling him close without any questions or expectations. He wished he could rewind the last three weeks and make their first night end like this. Not that the frantic marathon sex hadn't been awesome, but they hadn't had time for anything beyond it.

"Morning," Brandon murmured against his chest.

Larry sat up as much as he could without dislodging him. "Morning."

Brandon squirmed a little, stretching out on top of him. He tilted his head to the side so he could kiss Larry's neck. As he squirmed, Larry felt Brandon's cock stiffen against him.

The tickling, fluttering pressure of his lips was going to be Larry's doom if Brandon's frank arousal didn't do him in first.

"Breakfast?" he asked, trying to slip out from beneath him.

Brandon paused with his lips just beneath Larry's ear. "I don't want breakfast."

He stiffened as Brandon fumbled with pants, lifting his hips to make it easier to pull his slacks down. "I suppose breakfast is a little overrated."

He cupped Brandon's cheeks and kissed him, tangling his fingers in Brandon's hair again. Brandon slipped his tongue into his mouth, just for a moment, then pulled away and began to work his way down his neck. Brandon pushed himself up, almost tumbling off the couch as he shifted down.

When he felt Brandon's hot breath gush over his cock, he propped himself up on his elbows, staring with rapt attention as Brandon took his erection into his mouth and sucked him in deep.

"You could flip around," he said, panting. "Give me a chance to be fair."

Brandon slipped off of his cock with a pop. "Nope. I couldn't focus at all if you were sucking me off. I want to make this good."

"No such thing as a blow job that isn't good," Larry muttered.

Brandon took him into his mouth again, his lips slicking the length of Larry's cock over and over.

He reached for Brandon's hair again and hesitated. "Can I grab your hair?" he asked.

Brandon hummed a yes and Larry flinched. The combination of suction, moist heat, and vibration turned the tiny shockwaves of pleasure coursing through him into a spike of sensation. He thought he saw Brandon smirk around his cock before beginning to hum low and deep. The vibrations sent him crashing into an orgasm that shook his entire body. He watched Brandon swallow around his cock, mesmerized by the sight.

When Brandon pulled away, Larry almost whimpered. He missed the warmth instantly. "Where are you going?"

Brandon ran his hands through his hair and headed toward the bedroom. "You can return the favor in the shower."

"I'm totally up for that," he said, rolling off the couch to follow.

After a quick but fun shower, he insisted they either find breakfast or go out to eat. Brandon swore he had food somewhere in his kitchen, but he returned his attention to Larry's laptop before they managed to make it to the kitchen.

"So you'll walk away from a techie problem for sex but not for food?"

"Sex and a shower," Brandon muttered without looking up.

"How'd it go?" he asked, nodding to the thin laptop.

"You had a couple of Trojans hijacking your system resources—just malicious crap."

"I have condoms hijacking my computer?"

Brandon smirked. "You live in Silicon Valley. You know what a Trojan is, come on."

"Like a virus that disguises itself as another program, right?"

"Yes. In this case, it was a system audio file."

"It was giving me security errors, freezing up and stuff. I couldn't even get online."

"The audio file was eating up over eighty percent of your system memory."

"Huh? Is it gone?"

“Gone.”

“How did it get on there?”

Brandon shrugged. “Usually it’s easy to spot programs that are dangerous, but sometimes they can look like normal utilities you’re just trying to update. In this case, it was a bundle of chat software, I think. I got rid of it, and I restored most of the system files back to a restore point from four weeks ago, so they should be all right. The full system scan should be done, too.”

“So it’s fixed?”

“Getting there. It runs for more than thirty seconds so it’s Trojan and virus free, but I want to clean up a few more things.”

“How about I see if I can figure out breakfast, then?” He disappeared into the kitchen where found eggs, along with some peppers and bread, then set about making breakfast.

“Hang on, the rest of it I need to talk to you about,” Brandon announced from the living room. “Even without the malware, it’s still likely to crash on you just because of memory allocation issues. This is an ultraportable. It’s got the system resources to check email, to do some basic office tasks, stuff like that. You really can’t play Warcraft on something like this.”

“Play what?”

“Warcraft. That’s what’s killing it. You don’t have any onboard video RAM because your graphics processor is built into the motherboard chipset. It’s not a gaming machine.”

“I don’t play anything.”

“Well, it’s on there. With all the current expansions and a shit-ton of real-time chat stuff. I’m pretty sure one of the chat programs is where your malware came from. Everything else on it looks to be anatomy databases, medicine databases, and music.”

“The music is mine, but there aren’t any games on there. I think I played some version of Warcraft when I was ten, but not since then. It’s not on there.”

“Oh, yeah it is. Come see for yourself.”

Larry moved the pan of eggs off the burner and killed the flame. In the living room, Brandon turned his slim almost-new laptop so he could see the screen. A buff elf covered in heavy armor stood posed on the screen. “It’s even set to log in automatically. I suppose your mom must have loaded it.”

“My mom?” Larry shook his head. “No way. She’s *my mom*. She doesn’t play...” He waved the egg-covered spatula at the laptop. “No. Just no. My mom watches soap operas. She doesn’t play video games.”

“Then someone else must have. Who else uses your computer?”

“No one.”

Brandon chewed on his bottom lip and scratched the back of his head. “Okay, who else uses your mom’s computer? Someone at the nursing home?”

Larry thought about the endless parade of nurses, CNAs, and orderlies working at his mother’s nursing home. Using a patient’s personal property was a serious ethical violation, not quite stealing from a patient, but a definite breach of trust. “That is not okay. My mom’s laptop had account stuff saved on it. God damn it, this is not what I needed today.”

“I can uninstall the game, but maybe we should wait. If someone’s using your mom’s computer who isn’t supposed to, we might be able to trace whoever the account belongs to.”

“Shit. Would you be willing to drive up to Oakland with me?” he asked, shaking the spatula in Brandon’s direction. “I can ask the nursing home manager and my mom about it and see what the hell is going on.”

“Doesn’t sound like you need me for that.”

“Well, maybe you can warn my mom about disabling security settings and what kinds of programs to watch out for? Or at least explain what happened?”

“Oakland, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Just to explain things to your mom?”

“Well, no. Mostly to keep me company when I’m stuck in traffic.”

“That I can do but on one condition.”

“Sure?”

“We drive over the Bay Bridge and get lunch somewhere on the wharf.” He was subtly bouncing on the balls of his feet, his eyes lighting up.

Larry stared at him. “You got someplace specific in mind?”

“Seafood! I don’t care where. We can split the cost of lunch and gas, if you want.”

He'd give Brandon anything that made him bounce like that. He couldn't help but smile. "Seafood sounds good."

Chapter Six

After a quick breakfast, they picked up Brandon's car and returned it to his apartment, then stopped for gas and got on the highway, driving around the southern tip of San Francisco Bay to the suburb-turned-city of Oakland. It had an industrial feel to it, compared to the carefully planned balance of parks, green spaces, and tech centers that defined San Jose. It felt more like a city than San Francisco, and Larry didn't mind the urban vibe. The nursing home was a multi-story skyscraper affiliated with St. Paul's Episcopal Church. It was close enough to Lakeside Park that his mom's window looked out over one of the few expanses of green in the area. He'd thought that was important, before he realized the level of care she needed would mean she couldn't get out of bed to enjoy the view.

He knocked on her door first. "Mom?"

She was asleep, the only sound in the room the soft electric hum of the television in the corner.

"She's so young," Brandon whispered behind him and, for a moment, he sounded stunned. "She doesn't look a day older than my mom."

"You say that when she's awake, you'll make her day," Larry promised. He set his briefcase down quietly and wondered if he should wake her up. "Would you mind if I go find the staff manager since she's asleep?"

"Will she scream and try to attack me when she wakes up and sees a stranger in her room?"

"If she could do something like that, she wouldn't need to be here. I shouldn't be long."

"Go ahead. You want me to set up the laptop in here?"

"That'd be great."

The senior nurse on staff wasn't helpful, and the administrator who virtually always made time for him when he needed to discuss his mother's care was apparently out sick. After almost an hour of wandering between different offices, Larry was ready to give up and just stakeout his mom's room to see who might be going through her things.

When he got back to his mom's room, he was caught off guard by the shriek that came from within. He flung the door open, ready to reassure his mom that

Brandon wasn't someone who just wandered in off the street. Brandon was perched on the side of his mom's bed, both of them bent over the laptop screen. And they were both laughing.

"There you are!" his mom called out. "Lawrence, where have you been?"

"Trying to find an administrator who works weekends," he said, grumbling.

"You work in a hospital, Lawrence, you should know better."

"What's going on?" he asked, trying to peek at the computer.

His mom's eyes went wide, and she shut the laptop screen quickly. "Your friend was just helping me with something."

Larry resisted the urge to sigh. He shot a glare at Brandon instead.

Brandon rolled his eyes. "I was showing her a Dungeons & Dragons meme. It's cute."

"It's just a little joke. Thank you for bringing this back so I've got something to do, by the way. My dear José brought me new books, but they go so quickly."

Larry took in the quick flutter of her eyes, the dark cast to her cheeks. "I leave you alone for a few minutes and you manage to make my mom blush?"

Brandon plucked the laptop from her blankets, opened the screen, and spun it around. "It is cute," he said, grinning.

Larry scanned the meme, surprised to just see a picture of strange-shaped dice.

"Read it," Brandon urged.

"I really don't think it's the type of thing Lawrence would find amusing."

"I don't get it," he said, feeling clueless.

Brandon's mouth dropped open. "You never played Dungeons & Dragons? Trish, your son missed out."

"He's a millennial baby," she said, smiling. "It wasn't popular when he was growing up. Frankly, I'm surprised someone as young as you has even heard of it, much less played."

"You played Dungeons & Dragons?" Larry asked, looking at his mom rather than Brandon.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” she insisted. “I was too young to have fun in the sixties, and it was cool in the seventies. Well, truth be told, it was never *cool*, but we had fun anyway.”

“So this...” He held up the computer, hoping for more of an explanation.

“Everything in D&D is based on chance. You choose to attack an enemy, but whether or not the attack is successful depends on a roll of the dice. How much your character gets hurt also depends on a roll of the dice. A critical fail, rolling a one basically, means that the attack totally doesn’t work. The dungeon master decides just how badly something not working is going to suck.”

“And the male character ended up married to a male orc. I think I get it.” He said the words, even though he wasn’t quite sure how it was funny. Or in any way appropriate to show to his *mom*.

His mom managed to look serious for about two seconds then her face scrunched up in laughter. “It’s funny,” she admitted. “And, yes, it’s cute.”

“You are so weird,” Larry insisted, pinching the bridge of his nose. His mom thought a joke about gay marriage in an old role-playing game was cute? He had no idea how he was supposed to respond to that. “You’re both weird.”

“Don’t be such a stiff. Brandon was just sending my warlock a bunch of things to disenchant, and we started talking about older games.”

His mouth dropped open again. “What now?”

“Your mom plays Warcraft,” Brandon announced, his smile huge. “Not only does she play, she just got her last character to the level cap. He’s an enchanter, and I haven’t played in forever, so I sent him some stuff I’m never going to use again to disenchant.”

“Him?”

Brandon took the laptop back and used the touchpad for a moment. He turned the computer back around. A butch, pale-skinned thing with pointy ears and a long, flowing red-and-gold robe was on the screen. “Her blood elf warlock. One of his professions is...” Brandon faltered under Larry’s glare. “Enchanting.”

In bed, his mom snickered. “Told you so.”

Brandon nodded and sighed. “You did.”

“Told him what?” Larry asked, plopping into the rocking chair.

“That you’ve run yourself so ragged you can’t imagine having time for something like playing a game.” She turned to Brandon and set her hand on his arm. “My fault, entirely. When I first became ill, I was absolutely convinced that if I dared slow down when I was tired, I’d grind to a halt. I thought if I stopped working, I’d never start again. A work ethic is a wonderful thing, but not if it eats away at your life, your happiness.”

“A lot of people aren’t into video games,” Brandon insisted. “I didn’t stop playing Warcraft because I ran out of time; I just lost interest. I got an opportunity to do something rewarding in my job, and that just felt more important. My job’s nothing compared to his. You can’t hold it against him if he wants to devote his energy to something like saving lives.”

She patted his arm again. “You must be a good friend.”

“And he’s selling himself short,” Larry said simply. “The software he’s designing is going to help engineers make solar panels more efficient. It might not seem like anything big, but give it two hundred more years of using fossil fuels, and it might help more people than me diagnosing an ear infection and treating a half-dozen fake headaches.”

“It’s...” Brandon shook his head, blushing. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Saving our planet isn’t a big deal?” His mom was good at looking suitably impressed. “My goodness, you’re as bad as Lawrence.”

Watching Larry try to come to terms with the idea of his mom playing video games was cute. He cradled his head in his hands and asked her detailed questions about how she’d begun to play and then looked up at him. “So, you said this computer isn’t going to be any good for this game. Right?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Absolutely not. If you want to play Warcraft,” he said to Trish, “you’ve got to get something a lot bigger. I imagine your old system was fine two expansions ago.”

“It was,” she agreed. “And my dear night shift nurse had a laptop with a blown out motherboard, and he said it had a decent video card, so we tried putting it into mine. It worked but never quite right. And it ran so hot. Still, it was better than nothing.”

“Can you help me pick out a laptop that can play whatever she wants without catching on fire?” Larry asked.

Brandon wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn't want to do anything to offend the woman sitting beside him. Every topic he broached and every piece of tech jargon he used, assuming he'd need to explain it, Trish had understood perfectly. She didn't need Brandon to pick out a laptop for her.

"We can go now, swing by Best Buy, and grab some lunch on the way," Larry offered. To his mom, he explained, "I promised him seafood. Lunch is cheaper than a repair bill," he added, trying to provide an explanation he suspected wasn't necessary at all.

"You can't do that," Trish insisted. "Lawrence, I don't want you to go spending money on me. If my computer can't be fixed, I'll save up a bit and order a new one. In the meantime, I'll just have to find some other way to pass the time."

"But Momma..."

"Don't you 'But Momma' me. You've got student loans to pay; your rent is sky high; and last time she popped in for a visit, I noticed you still haven't saved up enough to get August a proper ring."

A flash of panic crossed Larry's features. "I can afford a laptop. Gus is a modern woman. She doesn't want or need a ring to advertise her relationship status."

Brandon tried his best not to look surprised. Larry had said his mom didn't know he was gay, but he hadn't expected her to be ignorant of his son and Gus's relationship ending over two years ago.

"Is that what she told you?" Trish asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"You must realize she just said that because she doesn't want to put any more pressure on you. She wants the ring. She wants you to spend the money. She just doesn't want you to feel like you're obligated to do it."

"Not every woman thinks like you, Momma."

"Lawrence!"

Brandon bit his bottom lip, trying not to laugh aloud. Larry and his mom were a lot alike, even if she managed to leave him confused and suspicious about her videogame choices. "Okay, pause! Pause! Trish, you've got to have some idea what you want. Why not just order something you customize

yourself? You won't have to put up with whatever a sales person tries to sell Larry, which will be the closest thing to a business-class notebook they've got, or whatever I pick out."

"Why would a salesman try to—"

"I'll explain later," he promised. "But your mom already knows exactly what she wants. Or am I wrong?"

She pursed her lips, considering him carefully. "What I want," she said carefully, "is expensive. I'd rather save up and pay for it myself."

"Show me?" he asked, shifting Larry's laptop to the tray table and positioning it where he'd seen her arrange it before.

She quickly navigated to a three thousand dollar gaming notebook with a massive display and a graphics processor that he would expect to find in a desktop computer. "I'd like that one."

He whistled as he looked over the system that promised not only to be a desktop replacement, but a replacement for damn near any gaming console, too. "That would be awesome," he agreed. "But now I have to try and talk you out of it."

"Oh?"

"Look at the dimensions." He pointed to the tiny box of data at the bottom of the system specification. "It's huge. It'd have a beautiful display, but I think it would be about an inch and a half too big to fit on this table."

She turned the tray table, considering its depth herself. "Hmm."

"And it's almost ten pounds. Here." He hopped to the floor and grabbed a couple of books from the stack on top of her dresser. It took almost a dozen of them to come anywhere near what felt like ten pounds. "These won't work," he admitted, before the stack of books slipped and tumbled to the floor.

Larry hurried over, kneeling beside him to grab the books. Brandon's gaze locked on Larry's for a moment, the position so familiar and enticing. He swallowed hard and replaced the books then scanned the rest of Trish's room. "Okay, so not such a good idea. I hate to ask you to take my word for it, but I really think ten pounds of computer would be too heavy for you to lift and move around comfortably. It would be heavy for me."

"Ten pounds, huh? What about one of the lunch trays? Don't they weigh about that?"

“Three pounds, maybe four,” Larry said, pushing himself to his feet. Brandon’s breath caught as he felt Larry’s finger tips travel along the outside of his leg when he moved, the subtle contact brief enough to look innocent and well out of Trish’s view.

Larry looked calm and oblivious.

“Oh.” Trish looked as disappointed as she sounded. “I didn’t think the weight would be an issue, since it would just sit on the tray table. But if it won’t fit on the tray table, that’s a different story. I suppose the smaller one wouldn’t be that bad.”

“The fifteen inch is a model they’ve got at Best Buy,” he chimed in. “Which means we can pick it up today and probably get it on sale.”

“I suppose,” she said, her tone thoughtful. “It’s still a lot of money.”

“How about I call it an early Christmas present, then?” Larry offered.

She sighed dramatically and shrugged. “I don’t want you spending that much on me for Christmas, either.”

“Well, it’s too late anyway,” Larry said, jangling his keys. “I know which one it is now, so if I don’t get it for you today, I’ll just get for you for Christmas. You can be stuck with it now or then, you’re choice.”

“Lawrence...”

“And I did promise him seafood.” He quickly kissed his mother on the cheek and then grabbed Brandon by the elbow and tugged him toward the door. “Be back in a bit!”

In the hallway outside, he finally let himself laugh.

“What?” Larry asked.

“Your mom’s cute,” he said. *Cute* wasn’t it exactly, but he didn’t know a better word. Larry had a relationship with his mom that was so wholesome it would have been weird if Trish wasn’t so down to Earth. Her sense of humor reminded Brandon of his own mom, but only after she’d had a few glasses of wine and stopped filtering everything she thought. Trish was open, funny, and so smart some of her quips had almost gone over his head while they discussed games and computers. “Nope, I take it back. Delightful fits better.”

Larry smirked at him, his right eyebrow arching up high.

“She is,” he insisted.

“That wasn’t how I was expecting things to go,” Larry said, pulling him close. “Thank you, by the way. You saved me from making a huge fool out of myself.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah. I was ready to outright accuse her nurses of going through her property. It wasn’t the right thing to do before talking to her, but I never thought... I still don’t get it. She has never talked about video games with me. She never bought games for me when I was a kid. I really don’t get it.”

“How’d you play an older version of Warcraft, then?”

“I... Okay, I admit, I played that on the old desktop computer we kept in the living room.”

“Uh huh. And did you ever ask her to buy you video games?”

“Hell, no. We never had much money, especially after she started drawing disability. I knew how much she scrimped and saved just so I could have nice school clothes, I’d never have...” He stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, smirking. “Hell, maybe she has talked about games, and I just didn’t listen. To be honest, most of the time when I come to visit we talk about politics for a few hours, and then I dose off.”

“I think falling asleep anywhere and everywhere is just a residency thing,” Brandon nodded. “I got in so much trouble one Thanksgiving during Jen’s residency when I nudged her elbow out from under her when she fell asleep at the table.”

“On Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. I got a huge lecture about the potential dangers of accidentally inhaling mashed potatoes.”

Larry rolled his eyes, his regular smile fixed in place again. “You joke about it, but I swear it happens. I read a case study from a general surgeon who was planning to remove a mass from a patient’s lung. Instead of a cancerous growth, he found a pea.”

“A pea?”

“A green pea.”

“Ok, that’s kind of gross. But if I’d heard that when I was eleven, I’d have thought it was funny as hell.”

“So, over the bridge, lunch, computer shopping?” Larry asked.

Brandon felt warm and giddy when Larry set his hand against the small of his back. It was almost an innocent gesture, like the casual, unconscious touch in Trish’s room. A subtle reminder that it was okay to touch.

Larry didn’t want the day to end. In the four hours between purchasing the computer his mom wanted and the time they’d scheduled to pick it up after the store technicians did whatever they felt they needed to do before letting him take the damn thing out the door, they’d had lunch at a little seafood place right on Fisherman’s Wharf, then spent the afternoon wandering around the tourist attractions and watching the street performers who scratched out a living along the waterfront. Before they left the car, Brandon had carefully pulled a half-dozen one-dollar bills from his wallet and shoved them into a pocket by themselves.

The first time Brandon stopped and watched a man covered in silver paint, and very little else, roller skate around in circles, Larry had been a bit surprised when he tossed a dollar into the man’s hat. The third time, Larry was expecting it and stood close while a juggler tossed four bright scarves and a fake sword in the air in exchange for the cash Brandon dropped into the bucket at his feet.

“You know, I thought you were worried you’d get mugged,” Larry teased him.

“Huh? No. It’s a rule,” he insisted. “My mom used to take me up here on weekends when I was little. She always says if somebody manages to catch enough of my attention that I stop and watch whatever they’re doing, I owe them a buck.”

Larry caught himself before he slipped his arm around Brandon’s waist, frustrated by how easy it would be to touch him and how much he wanted to.

Brandon gaze traveled up and down Larry’s body, his expression serious. “Not so comfortable being out in public?”

“It’s a little weird. That isn’t the same as bad, though. I’m a physical person, but I’ve never...”

“No one here is going to tell your mom.” Despite his serious expression, there was a smile in Brandon’s eyes.

“I know. I’ve just never really had the chance to hang out with a guy outside of clubs.”

“And bed.”

“There’s no one else watching us in bed.”

“Let me ask you something,” Brandon said, shifting close enough for their shoulders to brush. “Right here, right now, does it matter? We passed a couple dudes walking down the street with their hands in each other’s back pockets. So does it matter?”

“A little.”

Brandon smirked and stepped in front of him. He grabbed hold of Larry’s wrists and guided his arms around him. Larry pulled Brandon flush against him, nuzzling his hair. He tried to convince himself the warmth and excitement surging through him when he held Brandon was entirely his dick’s fault, but he knew it wasn’t. All he wanted was to linger on the wharf with Brandon in his arms, even if it meant never dragging him back to bed.

“When you said your mom doesn’t know about you, you could have mentioned she still thinks you’re engaged to your friend Gus.”

He cringed. “We told her we’re putting things on hold. That with me so caught up in school, we were taking a break. That got twisted up in her head somehow into ‘we’re planning a long engagement.’”

“And you didn’t think it was worth clarifying?”

“She loves Gus. And Gus adores my mom. Both of her parents were working all the time when we were kids, so my mom practically raised her too. And my mom is... honestly, she’s kind of weird.”

“She’s awesome,” Brandon countered. “And I think you’re underestimating her.”

“You haven’t heard her talk about homosexuals. I can’t let her think... I just can’t.”

“I get it.” Brandon snaked his arm up around Larry’s neck and gasped as the juggler added three more swords to the rainbow of scarves. “I think you’re wrong, but I get it.”

They wandered on a bit, toward the end of one of the commercial piers and away from the crowd the performer was gathering.

“So do you top exclusively, or are you versatile?” Brandon asked without any apparent concern for who might overhear them.

He glanced around quickly, but there was no one in earshot at the moment. He wouldn't have thought it possible to feel embarrassed with his arms wrapped around another man in public, but Brandon's question had him blushing. "I..."

Brandon stroked the tender skin beneath his ear and shifted away. "You don't have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable."

Larry swallowed and tightened his hold on him. "I don't consider myself a top. I wouldn't mind bottoming, but I've never tried it."

Brandon glanced up at him. "Never?"

"This is embarrassing," he admitted. "I've always been attracted to guys, but I didn't act on it for a long time. When I dated Gus, I really tried to be straight. We even got engaged. I never touched a guy when I was with her, and we were together from the time we were kids on. Thankfully, she was observant and understanding, otherwise we'd probably be married right now. Our last year of college, she caught me eyeing a Chippendale's dancer and, well, that was the end of me pretending. After she broke up with me, I still thought I could fake it with another girl. I went out to a bar, intending to meet someone new, and... I ended up with a guy in the club bathroom. With guys there was passion; there was excitement; there was everything I was too embarrassed to admit I didn't understand when I heard other people talk about sex. I gave up on faking it. But since then, I've only hooked up with guys in clubs when I had time, which wasn't that often, and Grindr made life easier and more interesting, but I... all the guys who..." He buried his face in Brandon's hair, wishing he could crawl away and hide. "I tend to go after guys who are a bit smaller than me, a bit... just like you. And none of them ever asked, so..." He risked a glance at Brandon's smirking face and dropped his gaze to the pier. "Yeah."

"Is the adorable, befuddled thing just an act?" Brandon asked, spinning in Larry's arms so he had to look at him.

"Befuddled?"

Brandon laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You have a doctorate and you were raised by an eloquent, insightful lady who reads a lot. I'm pretty sure you know what befuddled means." He wrapped both arms around Larry's neck. "You want to try it?"

He nodded eagerly. "If we're going to try this whole 'dating' thing, we shouldn't do a half-assed job of it."

Brandon's face scrunched up, and he dropped his forehead against Larry's shoulder, shaking with laughter. "That was horrible," he gasped.

"It made you laugh, though."

Chapter Seven

They didn't start back until five, got caught in traffic heading across the bridge, and covered the last couple of miles into downtown Oakland at a crawl. Even though getting stuck in traffic was one of the things Brandon hated most in life, Larry made it less of a nightmare by switching between radio stations and performing fun parodies of almost every song they came across. He even knew the Spanish version of old rock songs that were broadcast on half the radio stations, and he sang with a deep baritone that radiated confidence and a joy that left Brandon smiling, especially when the bridge vibrated and felt like it was bouncing as traffic on the upper levels moved along at a quicker pace.

When they finally emerged from the elevator onto Trish's floor, it took conscious effort to tone down the jokes and laughter they'd shared on the wharf. A severe-looking woman in scrubs and a long cardigan glared at them, but rushed by without a word.

Halfway down the hall another nurse, a slender Hispanic man with tattoos peeking out from beneath his scrub sleeves, stared at them.

Larry staggered, and his hand dropped away from Brandon's back where it had lingered since they got out of the car. The unconscious touches and easy laughter stopped instantly, and his smile vanished. He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. The door to Trish's room was open, just as it had been, but now feminine laughter filtered out through the door. A slender, petite woman with flawless dark-brown skin and sleek, soft curls was sitting in the rocking chair beside Trish's bed.

"Gus," Larry whispered. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

When she smiled at Larry in the doorway, her grin seemed to light up the entire room. She looked every inch like a woman in love. "There you are! I was bringing your mom flowers and some of my grandma's peanut butter fudge. She told me you'd be back, so I thought I'd hang around."

When her gaze landed on Brandon, he wanted to crawl back into the hallway and hide. She turned to Larry with both eyebrows raised, her expression controlled and unreadable.

"Yeah, we went to pick up a new computer for her."

Brandon held up the box, offering it as evidence, forcing his breathing to stay even and reminded himself that the woman before him wasn't a jealous

girlfriend who'd just found out her ex was bisexual. They'd been there, sure, but Larry had made it pretty clear they'd moved on to being comfortable as friends. She'd even been setting him up with guys.

None of that made him want to hide any less, though.

"The lady at the store cleaned it up," Larry explained. "So it should be ready to go."

Trish snorted.

"Told you she'd want to do it herself," Brandon whispered. He brought the laptop box around the rocking chair, opening it quickly. Computers he could manage. People, not so much.

"Oh my," Trish said, taking in the sleek new laptop with an enthusiasm that Brandon could definitely relate to.

"Larry," Gus hissed. She was smiling, but the grin looked forced.

"You two haven't met yet, I take it?" Trish asked. "Lawrence, despite the manners of the rest of society going to shit, I know I raised you better than this. Introductions are traditional and expected."

Larry rubbed his fingers against his temple. "Introductions? You're right. They haven't met. Gus, this is Brandon. Brandon, this is Gus."

"Nice to meet you," Brandon managed, holding out his hand. Should he say he'd heard a lot about her? While that was technically true, he had a feeling it wouldn't go over well.

"Likewise. Would you mind keeping Trish company for a minute? I've been trying to get ahold of this big lug all day." Her smile was bright and a little menacing as she tugged Larry out into the hall.

Brandon kept his eyes on the computer monitor as they shuffled out.

Trish's gaze didn't leave the screen, either, but she shook her head and sighed.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm just fine," she insisted. "Have you and Lawrence been friends long?"

"Not exactly. We just met a few weeks ago. But you know how sometimes people just click? I think we're kind of like that."

"I admit, that's a surprise. He's been so serious for ages now, always quiet and thinking, always putting his work above everything else. I'm shocked he had a moment to spare, to be honest."

“I work a lot, too,” he admitted. “Actually we became friends by complaining about work. He works with some other doctors who aren’t as thorough as he is, who don’t always take the time to listen. They miss things. After listening to him talk about work, I think he spends half his time at work terrified that he’s going to do the same thing and the other half making sure everyone else is doing stuff right.”

She chuckled and nodded. “That is my Lawrence. Utterly convinced everything has to be perfect, and if anything at all isn’t, it’s somehow his fault.”

Brandon considered her expression, the way her gaze flickered to the door. She wasn’t talking about Larry being a perfectionist at work; she was talking about his relationship with Gus. It wasn’t his place to say anything about that.

She started the long process of downloading Warcraft and its many expansion packs, office software, and live chat software.

“Hold up,” he said. “Don’t click on that one.”

“Why not?”

“It replaces a file in the Windows audio service with a virus. Because it looks like a system file, your antivirus software isn’t likely to pick up on it, and it turns into a huge memory leak. When I isolated the file on Larry’s, it had already eaten up six gigabytes of memory.”

Her eyes went wide.

“It eats up more every time an audio process is called.”

“Oh dear. I had no idea. Could that have been why my graphics slowed down on my old computer?”

Brandon smiled. “I didn’t get a chance to look at it. But Larry took it to a repair shop, and they said that it was a hardware problem. Running out of memory probably didn’t help matters, but that wasn’t what broke it.”

“Thank goodness,” she whispered. “I don’t think I could live with myself, knowing my boy spent all this money to replace something that was broken because of me.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he insisted. “Even my own antivirus software, with all the updates available, didn’t catch it. I only found it by isolating the file that was consuming all the memory, and that was after it was already infected.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “So there was no way to know.”

“None whatsoever.”

“I suppose that’s all right then.”

“Knock, knock!” the male nurse from the hallway called out. “How’s your stomach feeling, Ms. Myers?”

“Atrocious. My daughter-in-law brought me some homemade peanut butter fudge, and I don’t have the heart to tell her my stomach is too upset to eat it.”

Brandon’s gut tightened, although he wasn’t sure why. The woman Larry claimed to be engaged to was responsible for Larry being open about his homosexuality in the first place. It wasn’t jealousy that was making him uneasy. Not exactly.

“Ms. Myers.” The nurse drew out her name dramatically. “You should try a little. It’d break her heart if you didn’t at least taste it.”

“Maybe after the nausea medication. And after supper.”

“That’s why I’m here,” he announced, holding up a small plastic cup and a paper cup with water.

She took the medication eagerly, but her hand trembled as she tried to raise the cup of water to her lips. The nurse steadied her hand without a moment of hesitation.

“Thank you, José. Look what my Lawrence brought me,” she said, gesturing to the computer. “Complete with expert advice about how not to download a virus that made Lawrence’s computer slow down.”

“It wasn’t just the virus,” Brandon explained. “His computer isn’t really designed for video games. It doesn’t have the resources to do what she wants to do.”

“Well it was still sweet of him to loan it to you,” José said. “You have to put it away and try eating in an hour, though.”

“I know.” She glanced up from the screen. “Forgive me, sometimes I can be as absent minded as my son. José, this is Brandon. He’s been helping Lawrence figure out my computer problems. Brandon, this is José. He’s tried his best to help me sort out that old computer aside from doing everything else in the world around here.”

“I try,” José said simply. “On the graveyard shift, we have time to do a lot more than we might during the day.” To Trish, he said, “Let’s give that

medicine some time to work then I'll bring you dinner. It's chicken and dumplings tonight." He tossed the cups in the trash can and nodded to Brandon.

In the hallway, Larry's and Gus's voices had become louder, their conversation turning into an argument that faded away down the hall. Brandon wandered to the door, wondering if they'd left separately or were just looking for a more private place to sort out whatever they were arguing about.

"You're wasting your time with that one," José whispered as he passed by on his way out.

"Excuse me?"

"When I saw you two come off of the elevator together, I couldn't believe it. I never thought someone that far in the closet would dare touch another man in public. It's such a pity that keeping up appearances matter so much to some people that they're willing to do the whole wife and two-point-five kids in the suburbs thing while they're trolling Grindr on the side."

"I'm tempted to say 'excuse me' again," Brandon admitted. "What the hell?"

"Sorry," José said with a laugh. "I guess that was inappropriate. But—" He leaned close enough so he could whisper into Brandon's ear. "—not inaccurate, right?"

"We weren't that obvious," he hissed.

"You think coming out of an elevator with your arms around another man and adjusting your pants and laughing isn't obvious?"

"All right," Brandon conceded. "We were a little obvious. But they're not..." He bit his tongue. Larry wanted to maintain the illusion of his relationship with Gus, even though it sounded like Trish was already well aware of the game they were playing. "It's complicated."

"Sounds like."

Brandon stared down the hall for a moment, wondering if either of them was planning on coming back. The nurse Trish was so fond of hurried off, and Brandon sighed. "I feel like such an idiot," he whispered to himself.

Larry might not be in the closet among his friends or coworkers, but he was too afraid to admit his sexuality to the one person in the world whose opinion obviously mattered most to him. He was out to the rest of the world, but not to the small part of the world he actually cared about.

Brandon spun on his heel and strode back into Trish's room. "Well, it has been wonderful meeting you," he said honestly. "But I feel like I've stepped in the middle of something that they'd both like to keep private, so I'm going to say good night."

"I can't say I blame you," Trish said quietly. "Thank you for all you've done to help with this."

"Any time. It's more fun than the work I was supposed to be doing this weekend."

There was no sign of Larry or his fiancé in the hall, and Brandon had no intention of trying to track him down. If he took the time to try and find him but didn't manage it, he'd miss the last train back to San Jose and be stuck taking a cab. If he did find him, he'd end up in the middle of whatever mess Larry was in with Gus.

Chapter Eight

Larry sent text message after text message and tried calling twice, trying to be cool about it. Brandon didn't answer. Gus glared at him every time he looked up from his phone, but he ignored her. His mom had tried to eat then fallen asleep while a seemingly endless list of software downloaded over her room's network connection.

"I still can't believe you," Gus whispered.

"I already explained," he tried again. "Even if it wasn't an actual emergency, it seemed like it."

"Stopping some..." She hesitated and lowered her voice. "Stopping some guy you've just met from driving home drunk isn't an emergency. If he can manage to call you, he can call a cab. And that's not the point. You lied to me."

"I did," he said, nodding. "I can only say I'm sorry so many times."

The fire simmering behind her eyes faded a little. "You know, he probably called a cab from here."

Larry tried texting him again. His mom said Brandon had said good night, but he hadn't mentioned how he planned to get back to the south side of San Francisco Bay. And he was apparently pissed enough that answering a text to confirm he was alive and taking a cab didn't seem worth the effort.

"If you're that worried, why don't you go check outside again?"

"He wasn't there."

"So go look for him. Seriously, Larry, if you're willing to introduce him to your mom, you need to go look for him."

"It's not like it matters," he grumbled.

She rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse. "Whatever. You're a grown man, and I know you're not stupid. If you want to sit here feeling sorry for yourself, trying the same thing over and over, when it's obvious it isn't going to work," she nodded toward his phone, "that's your business."

Larry glanced at the notification bar on his phone one more time and then reluctantly shoved it back into his pocket.

"Are you okay getting home?" he asked, mostly out of habit.

The anger that had all but fizzled out flared back to life. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Right. Stupid assumptions. Sorry.”

In the end, Larry went back to San Jose alone and ended up back at Brandon’s apartment. Brandon’s car was still safe in the parking lot where they’d left it that morning, but there was no answer at the door.

He was determined to talk to Brandon, not to let the last twenty-four hours end on such a shitty note, but his only option was to wait for Brandon to find his way home. Of course, waiting in the entryway by his apartment door was likely to result in someone calling the cops, so he parked in one of the guest spots and resolved to stay awake until Brandon showed up.

After what felt like a few seconds, he jerked awake and found Brandon rapping on his window. The parking lot was dark and Brandon looked exhausted, but he was smiling.

“Hi,” he said, climbing out to meet him.

“Hi yourself. How long have you been here?”

“Uh...” He groped for his phone and checked the time. “About an hour and a half. You got home okay?”

“Caltrain runs on Saturdays,” he explained.

Larry felt a strange mixture of shame and shock at the thought of Brandon resorting to public transportation. But then, it was just one more sign of how fundamentally different they were. In the working-class neighborhood where Larry grew up, being able to afford a car was one of the hallmarks of success. Among his neighbors and peers, you were either a delinquent or a young man who took pride in himself—and in a city designed around its highways, being able to afford a car payment was one of those basic things that established which side of that divide you were on. Among the more affluent white families in the suburbs, where kids had the luxury of knowing their basic needs would always be met, using public transportation was eco-friendly and cool.

“I didn’t know where you’d gone,” he said simply. “Am I going to get the chance to apologize?”

Brandon shrugged. “If you want.”

He almost laughed at the comment. What he wanted had never figured into things. If he had any choice, he’d find someplace where he and Brandon could hide away from the rest of the world and spend all their time naked.

“Well I’m sorry,” he began. “That... It wasn’t what it seemed like. Gus was angry, but not because you were there. She was mad because I ditched her and her boyfriend Friday night. And I lied to her about why. After you called, I said there was an emergency at work and left, and I never called to tell her what had actually happened.”

“So she figured she went through all the trouble of setting you up with somebody and sitting through the date from hell with you, just for you to run off and hook up with someone you met on Grindr?”

He nodded. “And while that is technically what happened, it wasn’t... No, to be fair, it was exactly what she thought. It was a selfish thing to do, and it put her in an awkward position.”

“Sounds like the guy she tried to set you up with put her in an awkward position. She trusts the guy she was with?”

“Yeah. Jayden is a good guy. They’ve been together for about a year now. I would never have left her alone with that dick she tried to set me up with. But now she’s mad that I lied, that I bailed out on her, and that I didn’t mention you.”

Brandon shook his head, but he was smiling. “Come inside. You didn’t get much more sleep than I did last night. There are a couple of beers left.”

Upstairs, they each sipped a beer, but Brandon seemed to be having trouble. He opened his mouth to say something three or four times, then closed his mouth again.

Larry sighed. “We suck at this, huh? One day and I’ve fucked things up somehow.”

“You didn’t fuck it up,” Brandon insisted. He chugged his beer, left the bottle on the counter, and wrapped his arms around Larry’s neck. “I don’t like this,” he said, his expression all too serious.

“This?” Larry glanced down at Brandon’s groin.

Brandon laughed. “I like you. I don’t like dating closet cases. It always turns out shitty.”

“I’m out, mostly. Just with my mom, I...”

“You don’t want her to be disappointed in you,” Brandon said, nodding. “And you think being gay means being a disappointment.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s so ingrained in your head that being gay would disappoint her that you were willing to condemn yourself to a life pretending to be straight rather than even take the chance. Can you honestly say you know what her reaction would be?”

“It’s not that simple with my mom...”

“But it is that simple with you. In your head, being gay is something you’re ashamed of. You say you want more. All right, cool. But the way things are, the most you can ever have, with any guy, is a dirty secret. You’re an amazing person; you’re hot, and every time I see you, I end up happy in spite of myself. I can deal with long hours, rotating shifts, and never knowing if you might have to run out the door in the middle of sex. You’re worth it. But I can’t be a dirty secret. It would all blow up somehow, and your mom would be the one hurt the most when it did.”

Larry felt like he couldn’t breathe. This was what he wanted. Brandon was what he wanted. Fucking other men had opened up a world of physical pleasure and release he hadn’t known with August, but it had also tossed him into one empty hookup after another, and they were always the same. Going into a club was always the same. As soon as he walked through the door, he became practically invisible, except to the dozen strung out guys who made a beeline toward him and eagerly asked what drugs he was selling. After an hour, someone might make eye contact, but the guy’s first question inevitably was about his cock. Unlike the crowds of guys who didn’t seem to see him at all, Brandon did.

“I’ll tell her,” he said, cupping Brandon’s cheeks. “I might need time to figure out how, but I’ll tell her. I’m not ashamed to want you. But I’m a little scared. Today was...” He touched his forehead to the top of Brandon’s head. “Nice.”

Brandon melted against him, sighing. “It was nice. I can’t believe it was the first time you’ve touched a guy in public.”

“Outside of a club,” he clarified. “But even then mostly just on the dance floor. God, I hate dancing.”

“You hate it?” Brandon chuckled.

“Everybody assumes I can dance. In a club, they assume all I can do is dance, or get them high. I hate dancing.”

“How do you feeling about shooting pool?”

“Now that I can do.”

“Then I think we’ll manage. But if we’re officially dating, no more guys from Grindr, and no more blind dates with every gay man Gus meets.”

“I always figured it’d be one of those blind dates who said that. But I’m onboard—no more Grindr—so long as you do the same.”

Brandon chuckled. “I should probably stop using the app to text you then, huh?” He leaned up and planted an almost-chaste kiss on Larry’s lips. “Come take a shower with me, and then we can get some sleep.”

He followed Brandon into the bathroom, watched him undress, and shucked his own clothing while the water warmed up. Together under the hot spray, Brandon took his time washing his hair, lathering his chest and arms, and then washing Larry with soft, intimate movements that were gentle and arousing at the same time. Larry let his hands wander over Brandon’s body, enjoying the slick heat of his skin and the rough patches of hair over his chest and around his groin.

He trailed his hand up the length of Brandon’s shaft, watching his eyes darken and the green in them shine. Brandon placed his hands over Larry’s cock and his own, jacking them both together while he stared into Larry’s eyes. The languid strokes and subtle pressure were different from the frantic, rushed sex they’d had before. Being able to meet Brandon’s gaze, to kiss him, and toy with his tongue felt far more intimate. The pressure built slowly, but when Brandon finished, spilling over his fingers, Larry came so hard he felt the shock of pleasure all the way to his toes.

They stood there together, letting the water flow over them until it started to turn cold, then Brandon turned off the shower and wrapped a towel around him. “Bed,” he whispered. “We’ll figure everything else out later, but we both need sleep.”

Brandon stared at the toothbrush in his hand, his sleep-fogged brain not coming up with a ready explanation for why he didn’t recognize it before he covered it in toothpaste and used it to brush his teeth.

Of course, he’d known Larry’s toothbrush was there. There were two of practically every hygiene product imaginable in his bathroom now.

Larry rotating back to night shifts just a week after they’d decided to try dating had made spending any time together difficult. They’d had to get

creative, seeing each other whenever they had the chance. An hour between the end of Larry's shift and the beginning of his, the hour and a half window between rushing out of the office and Larry hurrying to work.

He'd suggested Larry keep a few things at his place to make getting ready easier. It had also been his idea for Larry to sleep in his bed so he could get an extra hour of sleep. Momo didn't seem to mind when one human space heater replaced another in what she knew was *her* bed, and most mornings she was curled up next to Larry and purring when Brandon rushed out the door.

A morning four weeks into Larry's graveyard rotation when he never showed up had changed things.

He'd tried texting him, to see if he was just heading home to get some sleep, but there'd been no answer. Half an hour later his phone rang, and a woman he'd never met asked if he was a friend of Larry's. His heart had stopped in that moment. He'd imagined a hundred different horrible things the woman might say—that Larry had fallen asleep behind the wheel leaving work and been in an accident, or that one of the endless supply of psychotic patients who frequently assaulted emergency room staff had hurt him, had killed him.

Instead, she'd said Larry had had a bad night; she didn't think he should be driving himself home and asked if Brandon might be able to come get him. In rush hour traffic, it took him almost forty minutes to get to the hospital and then another half an hour standing in line at the still-busy triage desk to ask about Larry. The triage nurse's professional expression melted for a fraction of a second as if she might cry. But she pulled herself together quickly and paged another nurse. The second nurse introduced herself, asked if he was Brandon, and walked him back outside. He followed her around the ER entrance to the ambulance bay then beyond that to a loading dock about thirty yards away. She didn't ask if he and Larry had been friends long or make small talk. She just nodded to a spot where Larry sat on the ground, his back to the cinder block wall behind him. His knees were drawn up toward his chest, his arms folded across them. He hadn't looked up when Brandon sat down beside him, so Brandon just sat. And stayed.

Eventually, he'd gotten Larry to look at him, gotten him to his feet, and home to bed. He missed a day of work to stay in bed with him, wishing Larry would talk about what was wrong and dreading it at the same time. He never did. But he'd wrapped his arms around Brandon and pulled him close, spooning against him so every inch of their skin touched. Even in his sleep, he'd held on tight. And at six o'clock, he'd whispered the words "thank you," kissed him on the cheek, and had gotten up to go back to work.

That night there'd been a story on the local news about a local young couple who were being charged with murder in the death of their four-year-old son. Two simple sentences caught his attention. The first began with "Doctors reported..." and concluded with a list of injuries the child had suffered. The second, noting the child had been pronounced dead eight hours after being transported to Santa Clara Valley Medical, left Brandon feeling sick. Larry had spent eight hours trying to save that child. And who knew how many hours afterward detailing the injuries that killed him for a police report. And he'd gotten up after a few hours of sleep and went right back to work again.

The next day, he'd given Larry a key to his apartment and asked him to stay, not for a night or a week or between shifts, just to stay.

There were still a few bumps in their road, but he hadn't regretted it for a moment. They were together now. Which explained why the toothbrush he'd just shoved in his mouth didn't belong to him.

Larry cast his scrub top off over his head. It was sheer luck that it landed in the hamper. He'd woken Brandon up when his night shift ended. Early morning blow jobs, it turned out, were a wonderful way to wake up. It more than made up for the awkward moments when he found himself using a toothbrush that wasn't his or cutting himself with a razor that didn't quite feel right.

"I think I grabbed your toothbrush by accident," Brandon muttered.

Larry met his gaze in the mirror. "You think there are any bacteria in my mouth that aren't already in yours?"

"You never know. All those germs floating around at your job..."

"All those germs," Larry drawled. "Which we actually take steps to minimize transmission of, yes. So different from every other job in the city where no one bothers with hand sanitizer or soap, much less gloves and masks."

"Whatever. If we both get sick in two weeks, I get to say 'I told you so' over and over again."

"In two weeks, I go back on days," Larry reminded him. "Which means we've got four weeks."

"Huh?"

"Day shift is when kids with ear infections, colds, and pneumonia come in. All the stay-at-home moms aim for about ten o'clock in the morning, thinking it

won't be crowded. So, given most common viruses require a ten to fourteen day incubation period... four weeks before we're both sick."

"Make no plans for two weeks after you rotate back to day shifts. Got it. But we should go out sometime when you're sleeping normal hours again."

"Like *out* out?"

"Yes. My friends have been complaining that I never hang out anymore. I thought it might be fun to go together."

His friends had been complaining about everything. When he'd told Daniel he was going to try actually dating Larry, his friend had been worried and didn't hesitate to say so. When he admitted he'd given Larry a key to his apartment, and that Larry stayed at his place more often than not, Daniel had been shocked. He'd spent the entire first week at work trying to convince him Larry was just using him, conning him into a place to stay and whatever else he could get out of him. Brandon tried pointing out that Larry stayed with him because he'd invited him, and that Larry had essentially started buying his groceries, but Daniel insisted it was part of some warped manipulation tactic.

He was trying to figure out how to tactfully introduce Larry to his parents, too. He'd told his folks about him, and they were eager to meet him, but he knew Larry hadn't managed to tell his mom about them yet. He didn't want to bring his family into things until they could introduce everybody on a happy note.

Larry pursed his lips. "At Rebels?"

"That's where we usually go."

"Yeah, sure. When? Night shifts are easier for clubs and bars, so there's no point in waiting."

"Are you working Friday and Saturday?"

"I've got Thursday and Friday off this week, but Thursday..."

Brandon nodded. Thursday would be the end of an endless shift. Larry would be dead to the world for most of the day and a good chunk of evening, too. "Friday, then."

Chapter Nine

Rebels was more fun than Larry had expected, but only because it was grimly amusing to watch Brandon's reaction to the guys around them. And to the bouncer. And the bartender.

"If another person asks you if they can buy drugs from you, I'm going to fucking smack them," Brandon snarled over the music.

Larry knew he should have warned Brandon, but the last thing he'd wanted to do was start talking about race with him. Brandon's worldview was shaped by liberal, forward-thinking parents who, as far as Larry could tell, filled his childhood with things like Habitat for Humanity volunteer days for the whole family. They seemed to sincerely believe in treating other people with compassion and respect, and they'd raised their son with the illusion that the rest of Northern California did too. He seemed sensitive to racial issues that appeared on the news from other parts of the country, but the few times Larry had mentioned that the Bay Area had its own share of race problems, Brandon had seemed dubious. A conversation about race wouldn't have led to support or understanding, but to Brandon being insulted by the idea that racism still existed in his forward-thinking hometown.

Instead of starting that conversation now, he shrugged. "It's always this way."

"But this is San Jose!" Brandon's indignation was almost as cute as his eyes.

"It doesn't matter. I've been to gay bars all around the bay, and they're pretty much the same. Gay bars are..." He shrugged, trying to think of the right words. "They're like this protected stronghold where white gay men want to escape from everyone else in the world who isn't a white gay man."

"But it took half an hour to get a drink!"

"It took *you* half an hour to get a drink because you were standing next to me. If you hadn't ordered for both of us, I'd still be standing there."

"Now I get why you didn't want to do this," he muttered.

Larry tugged Brandon toward an empty corner where the music wouldn't be quite so loud. "Did I ever tell you why I wanted to go out with you?"

"Something about my eyes?" he asked, grinning.

“That too. But I tell anybody I talk to on Grindr that I’m black—”

“You’re still talking to guys on Grindr?”

“No, you know I’m not. But I used to start out telling them I’m black, because one of two things always happened if I didn’t. The guy would find out and either act offended and tell me he’d never have agreed to meet if I’d been honest, or he acts like my dick is some kind of exotic toy he can’t wait to ride.”

“How is not specifying your race lying?”

“People assume.”

“That other one doesn’t sound so bad.”

“You’d want to date somebody who treats you like a dildo instead of a person?”

Brandon looked thoughtful. “Would you think less of me if I told you there’d been times when I’d have been totally okay with being someone’s sex toy? Entire stretches of high school and college, in fact.”

He laughed and tugged Brandon close. “We can go home where I can spend the night playing with you if you’d like.”

“After we hang out for a bit. Daniel and Josh said they’d be here, and I want them to get a chance to get to know you. Platonically this time.”

“You’re never going to let me live down that thing with Josh, are you?”

“Once it’s stopped being funny, I promise I’ll let it go.”

Daniel and Josh did eventually show up, almost two hours after they’d agreed. Daniel was already acting drunk, and Josh looked like he’d rather be anywhere else.

Larry recognized him as soon as he saw him in real life. When they’d hooked up, Larry had been in a daze—working through the most grueling clinical shifts of his internship, struggling to stay sane and conscious through an endless series of sixteen-hour days, all while exploring the possibility of actually having sex with men. Josh hadn’t been the first guy he’d hooked up with, but close to it, and it had been more of a clumsy disaster than a fun night.

“I owe you so many apologies,” he said, holding out his hand.

Josh huffed and didn’t shake his hand. “Yes, you do. You were a dick. What was up with that?”

“Work turned me into a zombie. All I was thinking about was what must have happened for them to page me twice, and I was too fried to think. Too sleep deprived, maybe. But I am sorry. I didn’t mean to just take off like that.”

“You didn’t even message me.”

Larry thought back to those endless hours on his feet, trying to keep up with cases in trauma surgery and emergency medicine, all while transferring his mom to the nursing home and coming to terms with his engagement to Gus ending. “The whole month was kind of a blur. I’d just come out, and life kind of sucked. I still should have sent you a text or something.”

Josh’s eyes went wide. “At, like, twenty-four? You’d just come out of the closet?”

“I was just fine living in denial,” he admitted. “My girlfriend wasn’t.”

Josh stared at him for a moment then glanced at Brandon. “It’s true. I’ve met her. She’s sweet. Scary, but sweet.”

“Well, who’d have thought?” Josh laughed. “You came off as a player. I’d have never guessed you were just starting on this adventure. Honey, if you’d said something, oh the things I could have shown you!”

Did that mean Josh was over it? God, he hoped so. He hated knowing Brandon had canceled nights with his friends to hang out with him instead, but he’d been dreading the idea of facing both the atmosphere at Rebels and someone who had every reason to be angry with him.

“I’d like if we could be friends,” he said, offering his hand again.

“Absolutely.” Instead of shaking his hand, Josh hugged him. There was nothing remotely sexual in the hug, and Josh released him a moment later only to loop his arm through Brandon’s. “Besides, it’s all worked out. This idiot’s been crazy happy for the last two months. If you can do that, we’re good. But now I’m curious. What was so important?”

“I was interning on a trauma surgery team. One bad accident can overwhelm an ER pretty easily, and—”

“You’re still trying that ‘doctor’ angle?”

The voice was right behind him and filled with loathing. Brandon glared over his shoulder. Before Larry could turn to see who was standing there, Brandon was in front of him, his fists clenched and shoulders shaking. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he demanded.

“I believe him,” Josh said, stepping between them. “I can see the county hospital being too cheap to change over from a pager system they had fifteen years ago so long as it still works.”

He gaped at Brandon. “What?”

Brandon ignored him. “How much have you had to drink?” he asked his friend.

“Not nearly enough.” Daniel laughed. “This is a con, Bran. I don’t get how you can’t see it.”

“Excuse me? Brandon, what’s going on?”

“Dan’s acting psycho,” Josh said, grinning. “He’s convinced you’re some kind of gold digger who’s just after Brandon’s trust fund.”

“Trust fund?” Larry laughed. “He lives in a tiny apartment. He eats ramen if I don’t feed him.”

“But he’s Brandon *Alcott*.”

“Okay, he’s got the same name as the Atlas guy, so what? You don’t go around assuming everybody named *Gates* is related to the Microsoft guy, do you?” Larry didn’t know what to make of the pained expression on Brandon’s face until things clicked. “But you’re actually the son of the Atlas guy, aren’t you?”

Josh’s eyes bulged. “You didn’t know? How?”

Larry waved his finger at Brandon. “You said you worked for the company your dad retired from, not a company he *founded*. That explains a lot about why nobody at your job appreciates the work you put in.”

“It’s not exactly something I advertise,” Brandon insisted. “And I didn’t lie. My dad didn’t throw some money into a hedge fund and leave. He put thirty years of his life into that company, and he retired when I was in college. I applied with human resources, the same as everybody else. I get paid the same as everybody else. Well, I’m assuming, I don’t actually know that. The point is, I support myself, I have since I started college. And I don’t have a trust fund, Daniel, I just know how to budget my paycheck. I don’t have anything of value, unless you consider my Prius to be a collector’s item.”

“Just because it has over two hundred thousand miles does not make it a collector’s item,” Josh insisted.

“He probably just assumed. If he’s not playing you, why can’t he prove it?” Daniel asked.

“Actually, I have my hospital ID badge—”

“He doesn’t have to prove shit to you!” Brandon yelled, cutting him off. “You’ve been negative about this from the moment I told you Larry and I had started dating. Since he moved in, you’ve been an ass. What’s wrong with you?”

“Seriously, Dan,” Josh said, his voice calm and soothing as he stepped between them. “He’s not into you. It’s time to get over it, and stop acting like this.”

“What?” Brandon yelled.

Two uniformed police officers pushed their way through the crowd, a bouncer trailing behind them. “This is him,” the bouncer said, pointing toward Larry.

One of the police officers approached him his hands open and out. “Evening. We’re going to need you to step outside with us.”

“Yeah, that figures,” Daniel muttered, folding his arms across his chest.

Larry sighed. “Actually, outside sounds like a good idea.”

“What?” Brandon shouted, tugging on his arm. “What the hell is this? You can’t just come up and arrest him! He hasn’t done anything! Anything at all! Except put up with every asshole in this bar treating him like a criminal! This is fucking bullshit!”

“Brandon.” Larry tried to keep his voice soothing, but it was hard to be heard above the music. “They’re not arresting me. They asked me to go outside. I really haven’t done anything wrong. Let’s both of us go outside. It’ll be fine.”

The police officers followed them both out, Brandon squirming and arguing the whole way. Josh shoved his way after them, and Daniel followed, smirking. Once they moved past the glaring bouncers and twinks who stopped to gawk and laugh, he turned back to the officers with an open smile. “Now, what can I do to help clarify this mess?” he asked.

“Well sir, the bar’s security staff reported that a man matching your description was selling narcotics on the premises tonight. Several members of the staff and a few patrons have reported seeing people approach you. Legally, all we need to search you is a reasonable suspicion, which the witness reports have provided. This’ll be easier if you cooperate, though.”

“You’ve got it.”

“Start by emptying your pockets please.”

“This is such bullshit,” Brandon hissed, while Larry began pulling out his wallet, keys, phone, and all the miscellaneous stuff he carried throughout the day. “People came up to him in the bar and asked if he was selling stuff, but he wasn’t! He said no, and they left! That’s it! They wouldn’t have even bothered if he’d been white! And every single one of them was!”

“Sir,” the other officer turned toward Brandon, “you’re not involved in this. You need to step away.”

“Brandon, it’s fine. They’re doing their job. And you’re upset,” he said, smiling. “There’s no point in getting pissed. It doesn’t do any good.”

“Myers?” The officer held up his hospital ID. “Doctor Myers from Valley Medical?”

“That’s right.”

“You even had an ID card laminated?” Daniel scoffed. “This is such a joke.”

“Daniel, I seriously don’t know what your problem is, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re no better than those assholes in there! The only reason you don’t trust Larry is because he’s black! Because he’s not white, you assume everything he says is a lie!”

“Bran, you’re acting like an idiot,” Daniel insisted.

The police officer sighed. The look on his face was professional and stoic, but Larry was pretty sure he was maintaining that calm demeanor only through sheer force of will. “What’s this?” he asked, holding up a small pink pill in a plastic bag.

“Over the counter Benadryl,” he explained. “There’s an AMA Medication Guide on my phone, if you need to verify it.”

“We’ve got our own,” the officer said. “Come with me, please.”

This time leading the way, the officer went to a patrol car that was parked in the street outside. He stood by while the officer sat in the patrol car for a minute, doing something with both his ID and the pill on the patrol car’s laptop. After sitting there for a few minutes staring at the monitor, the officer climbed back out and handed all of his things back.

“Thank you for cooperating with us, Doctor Myers. Looks like we’ve got a bit of a misunderstanding on our hands, but you’re free to go.”

Larry shoved his ID back into his wallet and then began to place his things back into his pockets. “What we have is a lot of drama and bullshit,” he said, nodding at the crowd that was gathering around Brandon and Daniel. “I’m sorry you had to waste your time because of it.”

“Calls that are a waste of time are good calls,” the officer insisted. “No one gets hurt, and there’s no paperwork. Hey, you remember a twelve-year-old girl hit by a car? About six months ago?”

Larry winced. It would sound horrible if he said he didn’t remember, but he saw a lot of hurt kids. Then a memory flashed through his mind. She had been ridiculously tall for a twelve year old, with dark-brown skin and naturally curly hair that was cut short. She might have passed for a boy if not for the dozen colorful barrettes in her hair. “We couldn’t ventilate her properly with a size four tube,” he said, noting the only detail he could really remember. “But her windpipe was so small, and her vocal chords kept getting in the way, so I couldn’t get the size six tube in place.”

“You managed it. I’d started chest compressions on the scene,” he explained. “The medics wouldn’t let me stop, just told me to keep doing them as we moved her.”

“You did, too,” Larry remembered. “Damn, you must have been sore. Getting her intubated the second time took forever.”

“Eleven minutes,” the police officer said, nodding. “I looked at my watch afterward, and I couldn’t believe it had only been eleven minutes. I’d rather do something like this any day of the week than ever do that again.”

“That was a bad day,” Larry agreed.

The officer nodded grimly. “I hope you have a good evening, Doctor Myers. Maybe calm your friend down.”

“He’s fine,” Larry said, hoping it was true. “They’re all friends. They’re just being...” One of the rules his mom had taken great pains to reinforce was “You never swear in front of police officers,” but he was having a hard time finding any way to describe the way Brandon and his friends were acting that didn’t involve some creative expletive. “I’ll try,” he said instead.

As soon as he started back down the sidewalk, the argument between Brandon and his friends exploded into shouting. People shifted back and forth,

some shoving, some throwing punches. Larry stared at the mass of moving arms and legs, trying to spot his boyfriend in the tangle. “Shit. He’s going to jail for this, isn’t he?”

The officer reached for his radio and sighed again. “Oh yeah.”

Bailing someone out of jail was a slow process. After showing his ID, putting his keys and cell into a funky little locker, and telling the severe-looking woman behind the safety glass who he was there for, Larry took a seat among the rows of anxious family and bail bondsmen. It felt a lot like the waiting room at the ER, with a few nervous people pacing, some exhausted-looking mothers rocking sleeping infants in car seats, and a lot of people grumbling. A nice change was that no one was shouting threats, and no one was glued to their cell phone.

An older man had sat down two seats from him. He glanced his way occasionally, but Larry figured he was as nervous as the rest of the people waiting to find out how much their loved one’s stupidity was going to cost.

“You’re the only one here who doesn’t look like the world is falling apart,” he said with a small smile. “I’m sure it feels that way.”

Larry shrugged.

“But, of course, it’s not the end of the world,” the old man went on. “If it were the end of the world, there would be zombies. Everyone knows that.”

Larry sat up quickly. How many times had he heard Brandon mutter the same thing? Not quite a dozen, but close. He made a show of looking around carefully. “No zombies,” he agreed. “Not worth panicking about, then.”

“Indeed.”

Larry leaned forward, resting his forearms on his legs. “Do you know who I am?” he asked, curious about whether Brandon had told his father he was seeing someone. He must have, Larry realized.

“I’d be lying if I said I was certain. But my hunches are often reliable. Larry?”

He nodded slowly. “And you’re Brandon’s dad.”

The old man huffed, chuckling to himself. “Not that he likes to admit it, but yes. You might as well call me William. Will, if you’d like.”

“He doesn’t mind admitting you’re his dad; he just doesn’t like people devaluing his contributions at work because you’re his dad. He loves talking about you. He says your help in the science fair made his childhood all *Meet the Robinsons* and stuff.”

“The Disney movie?” He squinted for a moment. “Now that’s silly. I explained from the time he was in preschool that time travel is just a ridiculous notion. Our planet moves in space just as it moves in time, so even if it were somehow possible, whatever apparatus went back in time would end up in an empty spot in space. The Earth simply wasn’t in the same physical position in space as it’s in now. So... splat. No good science ends with a splat.”

“I meant in terms of fun, not the actual science involved.”

He nodded his head from side to side. “I try. Not that you’d know it to talk to him now. He’s convinced that if he doesn’t personally produce the next billion-dollar software utility, he’s somehow failed. I admit my first thought when he woke me up at this god-awful hour was ‘It took twenty-seven years for my son to learn how to have a good time, but he’s finally done it!’”

Larry couldn’t help but laugh. “I guess that’s something he and I have in common. We’re both pretty serious.”

“I imagine you’d have to be. Brandon told us you’re in the middle of a medical residency?”

“Emergency medicine,” he confirmed.

“How are you liking it?”

“I love it. I’m slated for a rotation through internal medicine in a few months, but I’m going to stick with emergency medicine when I’m done. I like being able to actually fix things, and that’s something that’s difficult to accomplish when treating someone with a lot of chronic problems.”

“Sounds like you find it rewarding,” William said, a soft smile on his face.

“It is. But I worked as a paramedic during college so knew what I was getting into. Plus, when I’m finally done, I will never have to carry a beeper again in my life. Attending ER physicians don’t have to do on-call hours when there are lowly interns and residents who can camp out at the hospital instead. From what I heard, that might be what started this mess.”

“Beepers still exist?” William looked stunned. “And they’re forcing you to use one?” His tone suggested he considered the offense to be a form of torture.

“We work with what we’ve got. But one of Brandon’s friends decided I must be a gold digger and a drug dealer because I’m chained to that beeper, and he’s your son. From the sound of it, he’s been crushing on Brandon for a while and was just jealous. But one of the bouncers called the cops because they were finding drugs on folks in the bar. The police wanted to talk to me about it, and I guess Brandon assumed his friend was the one who called. Things kind of blew up.”

William’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Oh dear. That sounds a little ridiculous. If you don’t mind me asking, which friend?”

“Daniel,” Larry said, hoping he wouldn’t cause more trouble.

“Well that’s... Honestly, that’s ridiculous. I’m disappointed. I’d hoped he’d gotten arrested for something interesting,” William said, slumping into his seat.

“I’m surprised he called you. I told him I’d come bail him out before they pushed him into the police car.”

“He called his mother, hoping she might know how to get the charges dropped. He didn’t say anything about bail.”

“Can she do that?”

William shrugged. “Probably. But we’re his parents. What good would it do for him to have his mom swoop in to save the day?”

“So you want him to face assault charges?” Larry asked, a little confused.

“Disturbing the peace,” William clarified. “And no, I don’t *want* him to. But Lynn seems to think it’s not our place to rescue him from trouble he got himself into.”

“But you’re here,” Larry pointed out.

William smiled. “I’m not my wife. Before the phone cut us off, Brandon told me he did what they said he did, but he had a good reason. He didn’t get a chance to tell me what it was, so here I am. I’m nothing if not curious. Good thing, too, because it sounds like he did have a good reason.”

“No, he didn’t. He can’t get pissed off and assault everybody in the world who makes a racist assumption when we’re together. There’d never be an end to it.”

“You’re an interesting man,” William said, his eyes fixed on Larry’s face. “You’re saying you’re disappointed by this turn of events, but you’re smiling.”

“He can’t take on the world,” Larry insisted. “But he’s the only one who’s ever tried to take on the world on my behalf.”

A cell phone rang inside the long wall of plastic lockers beyond the metal detectors. Phones had been ringing and vibrating in the lockers all night, but this time Larry recognized the ring tone. “Excuse me for a moment, that’s mine.”

His cell stopped ringing by the time he got the locker open, but whoever had called had left a message. “Mr. Myers, this is the Kaiser Foundation Oakland Medical Center. It’s very important that you call or come in to our facility right away.” He recited the number too fast for Larry to catch the entire thing, but he heard the extension. He pulled up the number on his phone and called back, hit the extension he needed, and tried to will his heart to keep beating.

“OMC ER.” An exhausted woman answered the phone.

“Ah, hi. This is Lawrence Myers. I’m just returning a call from this extension. My mom is Patricia Myers.”

“Hold on for a moment, please.”

When the attending doctor answered the phone, Larry listened to a brief, painfully dumbed down list of problems his mom was having. “In a healthy person, the combination of anemia and an upper respiratory infection wouldn’t be anything to be concerned about. But with your mother’s condition, her anemia isn’t caused by her diet but by her bone marrow producing nothing but cancerous white blood cells. We’ve managed to stabilize her with a blood transfusion, but she’s not doing very well. I realize it’s the middle of the night, but I think it’s important you come in as soon as you can.”

The unspoken implication was clear. Come in and talk her into at least letting us try to find a bone marrow donor, or come in to make the final decisions about her care.

“I’m over an hour away,” he whispered. “But I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Chapter Ten

Brandon never thought he'd be so grateful for socks and shoes. The holding cell, and everything between there are the bond desk, was cold concrete. They'd taken everything but his pants and undershirt, and the floor felt like ice against his bare feet.

He signed a half-dozen papers, pulled his socks and shoes on, and then wandered out with the rest of his clothes and stuff in his arms. His dad was standing at the counter, looking as laid-back as ever. "I really can explain," he began, but his dad held up a hand to stop him.

"Larry explained enough."

"He's here too? Shit. Talk about awkward. This really wasn't what I had in mind for when I finally introduced him to you." Brandon looked around, confused.

His dad nodded toward a row of metal detectors. "This way."

"But if..."

"There's no time."

Brandon squeezed his eyes shut as his father maneuvered him out into the parking lot. The sun was already coming up. He wanted to curse and laugh at the same time. He'd managed to ruin his weekend before it'd even gotten started, but at least he knew Larry would be up for staying in bed all day.

Larry was pacing on the sidewalk near the entrance, talking into his cell phone quickly. He said he had to go and hung up when he saw Brandon. The blank look on his face was one Brandon had hoped never to see again, but that he'd also come to accept as inevitable. It was the same expression he'd worn when Brandon had rushed to the hospital to pick him up after a bad shift. It was like he'd been shutting off every emotion or giving in to despair, and he'd made the only choice that would allow him to keep functioning. The mixture of pain and fear in his eyes hurt to look at.

"I need to go to Oakland."

Brandon didn't mean to fall asleep, but after the fifth cup of waiting room coffee, his brain refused to be revived by anything but sleep. He woke up late in

the afternoon when Larry plopped into the seat beside him. “Hey,” he said, stifling a yawn. “How is she?”

Larry shook his head grimly.

Brandon set his hand on Larry’s shoulder. He wanted to support him, wanted to help him, but he wasn’t sure just how much support Larry would accept in public. August, dressed in an oversized cardigan she held tight around herself, stepped in front of them, glaring. “You cannot do this,” she insisted. “Help me talk some sense into him?” she asked, appealing to Brandon.

“What’s going on?”

“Trish has been out since they brought her in. The doctor says she woke up for a few minutes, wrote something that kind of looks like ‘no more blood’ and then slipped unconscious again. It might not be ‘no more blood’ or it could be her trying to tell the doctors what her problem is. It could be damn near anything. You need to sign the consent.”

“You think I don’t want to?” Larry whispered. “She asked me to witness her ‘do not resuscitate order.’ It’s consistent with everything she’s ever told me she wanted. It doesn’t matter if I want to do something else.”

Brandon squeezed Larry’s shoulder when he felt a tremor run through him. He didn’t know what he could say that might make things better. Telling Larry it would be okay would sound empty because it was bullshit. It wouldn’t be okay.

Larry shut his eyes. “I never got the chance,” he said, turning toward Brandon but not meeting his gaze.

“What chance?”

“To tell her. I... God, that’s a lie. I had months of chances, didn’t I? I kept telling myself it wasn’t the right time, or I hadn’t quite figured out how to say it yet. And I blew it. I’m not going to be able to tell her.” Larry leaned forward, bending at the waist, and buried his face in his hands. “I wanted to tell her. I wanted her to know.”

Brandon rubbed his back, choking back a sob as he felt Larry trembling. The things Larry faced every day, all for the sake of helping people, still amazed him. And he was trying to face this the same way, by making careful decisions and fixing things, by forcing himself not to fall apart even when everything else in the world was crumbling.

“Let’s go tell her,” Brandon said, taking his hand.

“She’s unconscious. Her blood can’t supply enough oxygen to her muscles and organs to keep her alive.”

“Let’s tell her anyway. Maybe she’ll be able to hear, maybe not, but we should still try.”

Larry entwined his fingers with Brandon’s. He didn’t say yes or no, but he got up when Brandon tried to pull him to his feet. Outside of the waiting room was a long hallway with three different sets of sliding glass doors each leading to long rows of ICU rooms curtained off from one another in a feeble attempt to give the friends and family hovering around the beds of their unconscious loved ones a little privacy.

Trish’s “room” was near the front of the long line of beds. Her skin looked gray against the stark white sheets. The tight skin around her fingers and hands had a blue cast that made Brandon shiver. An oxygen tube ran across her face, her lungs filling with shallow breaths every few seconds. Her eyes were closed as if she were asleep, but Brandon knew from what Larry and Gus had told him she was far beyond sleep, even though her body still technically clung to life.

A couple of hard, plastic folding chairs were sitting beside her bed with nothing as comforting or warm as a cushion in sight. Even the air around them felt sterile and bleached. If by some miracle Trish did wake up, it would be to this frigid, makeshift room.

Larry sat down in the chair nearest his mom, so Brandon took the other, pulling it close so he could keep his hand on Larry’s shoulder.

“I still don’t even know where to begin,” Larry said, keeping his gaze locked on his mom. “All those times you told me I needed to take time away from work, to be happy... It was hard to admit how right you were and how miserable I was, all because I knew I wasn’t everything you thought I was. I couldn’t be everything you wanted me to be. And I wish to god I’d found the courage to admit it because I’ve found someone cool. He’s smart and funny and amazing, and he stood up for me in a bar, of all the stupid things...” Larry rubbed his eyes with the back of his knuckles. “You got to meet him, at least, even if I was too much of a coward to tell you how big a deal it was.”

It hurt, listening to Larry call himself a coward. Brandon remembered their conversation in his apartment, after he rode the train home, when he’d used the word himself. He felt sick at the memory. “I didn’t mean it,” he gasped. “You’re not a coward, Larry. You’ve never been a coward.”

Larry didn't look at him. "I was. And it was stupid. I'd never gotten excited about anyone before, never felt anything like this before. All I want to do now is share that with her... and I can't." He set his head down on the side of the bed and took a deep breath. "God, this sucks."

Brandon draped his arm across Larry's shoulders. "I wish I could say something that would make this hurt less. I know I can't, but I'm here."

Larry squeezed Brandon's knee.

The curtain behind them shifted. "Excuse me, Doctor Myers?"

Larry looked up, almost pulled his hand away from Brandon, but settled it back into place resolutely. "I'm not ashamed of being crazy about you," he whispered.

"Doctor Myers?" The nurse from Trish's nursing home, who'd seemed to be her favorite, stood behind the curtain. "Ms. Myers asked me to bring her personal effects to you directly since the ICU here can't store them. I was going to call you about them tomorrow, but when I came in to check on her, the nurse said you were visiting."

"You have her stuff with you? I thought it was supposed to go into storage there, in case she..." Larry choked on whatever he'd intended to say next. Even the nursing home staff knew Trish Myers wouldn't be getting better.

"We have a van we use to transport patients to and from the hospital. When a patient needs to be moved by ambulance instead, we transport their things the next day. And I know this isn't a good time, but you should at least get her computer. She couldn't work a pen very well over the last week or so, but she typed a letter for you."

Larry's face scrunched up a little, and he shook his head. "I..." He was already emotionally exhausted and was just holding on.

"Can I get them? I can load everything in the car downstairs, and you can look at it later," Brandon offered.

"Would that be okay?" Larry asked.

"Yeah, if you'd like."

Brandon gave Larry a quick hug and followed the nurse down in the elevator. After they got two small boxes loaded into the trunk of Brandon's car, José handed over the bulky laptop case. "Take it upstairs. They don't like electronics in the ICU, but you can look at it in the waiting room."

“She’s not dead yet,” Brandon hissed. “Even if everyone else has already decided she’s dead, Larry’s hasn’t. There’s time.”

José handed him the case with a sad smile. “I know it can be hard to think about her loss, but it’s normal. And it’s okay.”

“I get that you’re trying to be comforting, but it’s just hard to listen to everyone telling him it’s time to start grieving when she’s still breathing. Her heart is still pumping.”

“Whether it’s hard to listen to or not, he’s already grieving. And he should be. I get that you don’t want to see him in pain, but not being realistic about her prognosis won’t help. But showing him her letter might help a little.”

“You went through her files? Her personal correspondence?”

José’s friendly smile vanished, and his eyes narrowed. “I helped her type it. After I told her I was pretty sure that what she wanted to say wouldn’t offend *either of you.*”

Brandon wanted to smack himself in the forehead. “I’m sorry. I’m tired, and I’m making stupid assumptions...”

“If you’re sorry, read her letter. Get him to read it. It’s what she wanted.”

Brandon made his way back into the hospital and rode the elevator up to the seventh floor. The waiting room was right beside the elevators, and he went straight to the chair beside Gus. She was on the phone and wiping away tears as she spoke, but she smiled and waved when he sat down.

He fished the computer out of the bag and opened it up in his lap. Her games were still installed, but she’d cleaned up the rest of the desktop and removed almost all of the extra programs. One of the only files on the desktop was labeled “Letter to Lawrence.” There were others, including what looked like a list of accounts, with her user names and passwords, and instructions for canceling each.

Gus leaned over his arm and stared at the monitor. She reached for the touch pad and opened the file quickly. “Momma, I’ve got to go. Yeah, I will. Love you!” She closed the phone and looked at him, her eyebrows raised. “Should I go get him?”

“I don’t know.”

But Gus’s eyes weren’t focused on him but on the lines of text on the page. She covered her hand with her mouth as fresh tears spilled from her eyes.

“Of course it’s sad,” Brandon said. “It’s a good-bye letter, it’s not going to be—” She slapped him in the head and pointed at the monitor. “I don’t...”

“Can we bring this in?”

“No. There’s even a sign saying cell phones have to be turned off.”

“I’m going to go get him.”

“Okay.” With nothing to distract him, he skimmed the words on the screen.

Lawrence, these last days I’ve been so tired and my thoughts so clouded, I wanted to put this into words while I could. For years now I’ve worried about you. You’ve been so depressed, so lost. Worry for you made me urge you toward what I thought would make you happy, without realizing I was only adding to the problem. It only took a moment of seeing you really smile for me to realize how wrong I’d been.

Your father and I never loved each other, you know that. We married out of obligation, because that was what you did when you were expecting a child. At the time, we got along all right and thought we could make a marriage work for your sake. We tried, but there was nothing but animosity between us in the end, and that animosity and anger hurt you more than being raised by two loving, but separate, parents ever could. All staying together did was cause everyone more pain. If you marry August for my sake, or even for the sake of my memory, you’ll be making the same mistake. These last two years, I’ve dreaded seeing you end up the same way we did. You can’t build a happy life with someone you don’t love.

But I’m confident I don’t have to worry anymore. When you looked at the friend you brought to help get my computer problems sorted out, your smile was like the sun coming out after a long winter. You looked at him like you could see the whole world in his eyes. Tired as I’ve been, I’m not blind yet, and I’ve seen that same smile on your face every time you’ve visited since that day. I had my doubts about whether you’ve even considered the matter, but a dear friend who’s knowledgeable about this sort of thing assured me that saying this won’t leave you blindsided. It might be embarrassing to hear from your mother, but you’ll just have to get over it. You

need to live the life that makes you whole, a life with someone who makes you smile like that. Maybe he can help you sort through the list of services and subscriptions that will need to be cancelled?

I have always been so proud of you, and I'll always love you.

He set the computer on the chair Gus had been sitting in and squeezed his eyes shut tightly. He didn't know if reading those words would make Larry feel better, but he knew they needed to be read.

"Gus, I really don't want to do this," Larry protested as she shoved him into the waiting room.

"I don't care," she snapped. "You have moved heaven and earth to make her proud of you, you will damn well sit down and read this."

"Gus..."

She picked up the computer and pointed at the chair. "Sit."

Larry flopped into the chair, his arms and legs sprawling.

If Gus was offended, she didn't show it. She sat the computer in his lap and stood over him, her arms folded across her chest. "Read it."

Brandon watched his eyes cross the screen, taking in each line of text. His face remained passive, his gaze bleak. When he reached the end, he closed the computer and handed it to Brandon. Then he got up and moved back toward the ICU doors. Brandon fumbled the computer back into the case and moved to go after him, but Larry stopped him without looking at him. "I need time," he whispered. "I just want to go sit with her alone. I'm sorry."

"Whatever you need," Brandon said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Just time."

For three days, Brandon drove Larry back and forth to Oakland, staying from the time visiting hours started until they ended at ten o'clock. On the fourth day, Trish's doctor called them in the middle of the night and told them to come in immediately. The doctor met them at the door and asked to speak with Larry alone. Larry shook his head and clung to Brandon's hand. They were both escorted to a small room with a table and comfortable chairs, where Trish's doctor told them she'd passed away about ten minutes before they arrived.

Paperwork happened. Larry flipped through all of it and signed appropriate spots without even looking at it. Phone calls were made, appointments scheduled, and then they went home. Larry slept wrapped around him, his arms locked tightly against his chest.

Brandon went back to work two days later. He was surprised when Daniel approached him. His friend's black eye had almost healed, and Brandon muttered a halfhearted apology. Daniel swore, again, that he hadn't been the one to call the police, but Brandon couldn't seem to care. Brandon stared at Daniel until his friend's attempts to chat and mend things fizzled. The world had kept moving, everything at Atlas was functioning the same as it always had, and Brandon couldn't seem to get back into the same flow. He didn't say anything as he walked away from Daniel, retreating to his cubicle where he buried himself in work and tried not to think about Larry sitting in bed alone with no one but Momo for company.

But when Brandon got home, making record time through five o'clock traffic, Larry was dressed and throwing together food.

"I went to the funeral home; seemed like a good excuse to get up and do something," Larry explained, kissing him on the neck.

Brandon's heart sank. He'd had no idea Larry was going to work out the details of his mother's funeral today. He wouldn't have gone to work if he'd known. "I thought that was Saturday."

"It was. I felt like I needed to do something. And there was family..."

"Oh? How'd it go?"

"Bad." Larry stepped around Momo, who just did a figure eight to wrap herself around his legs again. Despite the show of affection, Brandon noticed two fresh scratches on Larry's hand. "My dad showed up. I was so angry with him. I spent about an hour screaming at him right there in the funeral home. Told him he didn't have the right to be there, to make any decisions about her funeral. I told him about you and me, and that I was just fine handling things on my own." Larry's voice shook, and he turned away, fiddling with the salads he was making but not actually doing anything. Brandon wrapped his arms around him. "The bastard... hugged me... He had no right to be there, no right to have anything to do with her funeral, no right to touch me. And I couldn't quit bawling like a little kid."

There wasn't anything he could say that would make things okay; he knew that. He didn't know much of anything about Larry's dad. He knew Larry hated

him for divorcing his mom when she got sick, even though Trish herself had insisted her illness had nothing to do with their divorce. The man had remarried, and his new wife had made more attempts to get in touch with Larry than he ever had. Even if the man had never been there for his first wife, he'd tried to be there for his son today. He wished he could tell Larry it was okay to be angry, to be hurt, and it was also okay to acknowledge that his father represented more than a portion of his DNA. It was okay to need him just as much as he hated him.

But he couldn't find any words, and he didn't think Larry would hear them anyway. He just wrapped his arms around him and stayed there, holding him in the kitchen, until the shaking stopped.

They ended up back in bed, the plates of food tucked in the fridge uneaten.

Larry stared at the priest officiating over his mom's funeral without really seeing him, without hearing the Latin prayers he said aloud. When the priest's eyes lingered over him and Brandon, he held Brandon's hand tighter and kept his features passive. They hadn't spoken to anyone when they'd arrived, and as the service ended, his mom's neighbors and friends came up, one by one, to offer their condolences. He expected the funeral to be devastating, but most of his grief had been wrung out of him by the turmoil of the last week and a half. He managed to thank people for coming, with his emotions in check, to smile and nod when they shared their memories of his mom's life.

After everyone else had approached, his father stepped up to him with his new family in tow, and Larry unconsciously tightened his grip on Brandon's hand. He seethed at the idea of his father bringing the family that replaced him and his mom to her funeral, but he forced himself to keep a neutral expression. He refused to break down here. Screaming about the inappropriateness of it all wouldn't do shit to honor his mom's memory, and it wouldn't make him feel any better. His father didn't say anything. Not an "I'm sorry" or a "Are you okay?" or even a basic greeting. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and just as he had at the funeral home, he wrapped his arms around Larry and hugged him tight.

"Christ, I don't want to start crying again." Larry sniffled, knowing it was hopeless.

"Ain't nothing wrong with crying," his father said, pulling away. His gaze shifted between Larry and Brandon. "Is this your..."

He braced himself for the worst, the huff of indignation, the quiet look of disapproval. The only question was what his father would choose to point out—the fact that Brandon was a man, or that he was a white man. “My boyfriend,” he said, managing to at least summon a bit of defiance for that. “This is my boyfriend, Brandon. This is my dad,” he said to Brandon.

“Mr. Myers,” Brandon said, nodding.

His dad managed a smile and a little nod. “If you need anything, Larry, anything at all...” The rest of the sentence went unsaid, like so many things with his father always did.

He thought his dad was going to walk away, but instead, the man stopped in front of Brandon. “You were there with him? In the hospital?”

Brandon only nodded.

His dad clasped Brandon’s shoulder for a moment, not quite a hug but something strangely close to one, and then he left.

“I’m so sorry,” his stepmother whispered, hugging him tight. “I am so, so sorry. He meant it. If you boys need anything, please call.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

His siblings were older now, teenagers who each offered him weary smiles, handshakes, and hugs. His father must have warned them all in advance about the “dating a white guy” thing, because each of them greeted Brandon and introduced themselves without a hint of surprise or censure.

Afterward, Brandon squeezed his hand and rubbed his thumb across Larry’s knuckles. “Ready to go home?”

“I’m ready to get back to a routine again. Back to work.”

“Not tonight, I hope.”

“No,” he agreed. “Not tonight. I’m such a wreck I’d end up getting somebody killed if I tried to go to work tonight. But after a solid eight hours of sleep and a gallon of coffee, I want to get back to normal.”

“I can’t imagine anyone else in the world calling a graveyard shift in the ER normal.”

Larry laughed a little, and Brandon stopped moving. “What?”

“I don’t think I realized how much I missed hearing you laugh.”

“I’m sorry this has been so hard,” he said, pulling Brandon toward the car. “I’m honestly not sure what I’d have done without you.”

“It’s no problem. I love you, Larry. I’m just glad to see you smile again.”

Larry pulled him close and reveled in the chance to really kiss him. “I love you so much. You always make me smile.”

Epilogue

Calling the Alcott family home in Mountain View big was a ridiculous understatement. Brandon swore his parents had lived in the same “small” house his entire life. He offered the fact as proof that his parents hadn’t let money go to their heads. Their house was a five-bedroom minimansion with a rolling yard, gazebo, and three levels of wooden decks that gave access to the backyard from all three stories of the house itself. Larry didn’t want to point out that the apartment he grew up in would have fit neatly inside the Alcott’s living room, but he’d have fun teasing Brandon about it later.

Thanksgiving had been a quiet event with just Brandon’s parents, Brandon, and him. But as Christmas grew closer, they spent more and more of their nights off sitting around the Alcott’s living room. Brandon’s older brother and sister, each with a family of their own in tow, had come for the holidays, and he was honestly surprised when all of them welcomed him with open arms. Larry had spent several nights chatting about the horrors of medical school and then even more evenings listening to Brandon’s sister excitedly talk about one day using bacteria to reprogram the DNA of cancerous cells. His brother, Luke, and his wife shared stories about how they’d met in the Peace Corps, and he heard the story of how William had met his wife, Lynn, when he stumbled into her office desperate for advice about copyright law.

Both he and Brandon changed the subject when they were asked about how they got together. His instinct told him any story that began with “We met on Grindr...” was not something to be shared around a dinner table.

As interesting as Brandon’s family was, Larry was itching to leave before they’d even sat down for Christmas Eve dinner. He retreated to the backyard and the comfortable patio chairs where he could listen to the strange sounds of laughter and voices he couldn’t quite tell apart yet without feeling like he had to participate.

For eight months, things had been getting better. He’d known going into October that the holidays would be rough, but that knowledge had done nothing to prepare him for those moments when the ache of grief snuck up on him and stabbed him in the heart all over again. But his mom’s last words had inspired him to embrace every moment he had to enjoy with Brandon, so he was determined to be happy, despite the pain.

He smelled Brandon's cologne before he felt his arms wrap around his shoulders from behind. "Hey," he said, looking up into Brandon's eyes. The starbursts in the center caught the golden glow from the Christmas lights, but the green looked so dark it was practically invisible.

"Hey yourself. You want to skip dinner and just head home?"

Larry shook his head. "What would your parents think?"

"That I can put a smile on your face better in private than I can here?" Brandon teased.

"Exactly. I don't know if I could ever face them again. Come here."

Brandon shifted around the arm of the chair and sat down in his lap. He shifted and wiggled until he was between Larry's legs, then leaned back against him.

"Have you made a decision yet?" Larry asked, thinking about the twelve companies who were in a veritable bidding war over Brandon now that he'd put in his notice at Atlas. Working in the same office as Daniel had proven too awkward and uncomfortable, even after they'd all apologized and tried to move on. The New Year would bring a new job and a fresh start for Brandon. It would also bring Larry to the end of his Internal Medicine rotation and the start of a rotation in cardiac medicine. He had another six months of sleeping nights and having every weekend off before he dove back into rotating shifts. Six months before his schedule became a nightmare to work around.

"Not yet. Josh is trying to talk me into going to a venture capitalist meeting with him next week. Not that he needs me, he's an amazing programmer, but you know..."

"So everything's still up in the air?"

"For now. Josh is excited about this project he's developing, and it sounds like it could be pretty cool."

Larry tried to remember the details of the augmented reality thing Josh had become obsessed with. "The hologram thing?"

"Not holograms, but that's what he's calling them. Put on a pair of glasses and suddenly you've got a smartphone right in front of you, a television on any wall you want, the ability to design objects for 3D printing by using your hands to manipulate them... It's going to be cool."

"It sounds like it. You know my schedule's going to go back to rotating shifts in another six months."

“I know. That’s what it’s going to be like forever, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re worth the funky hours. Going in to this project with Josh might be good for us, though. I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to earn a living, but I could pretty much set my own hours. Maybe even work from home, which I like more anyway. We’d be able to spend more than an hour a day together when you’re working nights.”

“You’d do that? Pick a job based on my work schedule?”

“Yeah.”

“But, I want you to be happy, Brandon. I don’t want you to end up doing something that isn’t challenging or worthwhile just for me.”

“Being with you makes me happy. And it does sound like a cool project.”

Larry melted a little, realizing how much Brandon was willing to give to make their life together work. “I know it’s too soon to ask this, but since you don’t know what you’re going to be doing, and I know I’m going to be busier if we wait, I was wondering if... Well, if you want to... I mean you were already talking about forever, and if you really want people to see you instead of your last name it’d be one solution, but... I...”

“Are you saying you want to get married?”

“Not if you don’t want to, obviously. But... yeah. If you’d be willing.”

“When?” Brandon asked, craning his neck so he could look up at him.

“I have no idea.”

“Sometime when we both know we’re going to have the same day off,” Brandon suggested.

“Next weekend?”

“If we only give my mom a week’s warning, she’s going to go insane.”

“Good point. Two weeks?”

Brandon laughed, leaned up to kiss him, and then settled back against his chest. “Two weeks sounds good.”

The End

Author Bio

A.J. Thomas writes romance and romantic suspense. She's earned a Bachelor's Degree in Literature from the University of Montana and worked in a half-dozen different jobs from law enforcement officer to librarian before settling down. Life as a military spouse has tossed her around the country so many times she doesn't know how to answer when people ask her where she's from, but she delights in living as a perpetual tourist, visiting new places and discovering amazing things.

Her time is divided between taking care of her three young children, experimenting with cooking and baking projects that rarely explode these days, and embarrassing her husband with dirty jokes. When she's not writing, she hikes, gardens, researches every random idea that comes into her head, and develops complicated philosophical arguments about why a clean house is highly overrated.

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