

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

MENDED HEARTS

Katherine Halle

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MENDED HEARTS

By Katherine Halle

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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Photo Description

A man with closely cropped, blond hair and wearing blue scrubs leans over the bed of a patient, who is wearing a hospital gown. The patient has similar hair color and the same cut. The man in scrubs is grasping the hand with the IV and leans over, pressing their foreheads together and holding the patient close with a hand clasped on the nape of his neck just above his hospital gown. The patient mirrors his hold, fingertips brushing the edge of the blue scrubs.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

You see the love between us, don't you? He's my soul mate, my salvation. He's the bravest person I know, and I'd give up everything I hold dear for him. But it was not always that way.

Oh, I loved him, but I thought I could survive without him. Worse? He thought so too. I couldn't see past my selfish needs. I wanted from him what his weak heart couldn't give me.

He'll be alright now, but there was a moment when he wasn't, and fate almost took him away from me. It gives me chills just thinking about how close I came to losing him.

Sincerely,

Ruthie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, architect, hurt/comfort, illness/disease, medical personnel, non-explicit, tearjarker

Word Count: 27,984

MENDED HEARTS

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When Dr. Trey Walker met Justin Shaw, he was just another patient in a very long day.

“Patient is Justin Shaw, twenty-two-year-old male, history of rheumatic heart disease, in for a routine checkup and prophylactic antibiotic prescription for wisdom teeth removal. How are you feeling today, Mr. Shaw?” Trey asked, giving Justin a quick glance over.

He appeared healthy, albeit a little on the skinny side. Not unusual for a chronic heart patient.

“I’m not actually a chronic heart patient,” Justin spoke up, offense showing clearly in his dark-blue eyes. “And I prefer lean to skinny.”

Much to his chagrin, Trey realized, too late obviously, that he had spoken his observations out loud. “You’re right, I apologize. According to your history, you’ve actually had very few complications, and today you’re only here for a routine antibiotic prophylaxis.”

He turned to speak to his med students. “Justin contracted rheumatic heart fever while his parents were stationed in Europe when he was in elementary school. After his initial bout, he only had one flare up right after they moved back to the States when he was nine?” He looked over at Justin for confirmation, who nodded in acknowledgement.

“He hasn’t had any trouble since. So, what would be your first question for him? Redfield?” He pointed to a third year with curly brown hair who liked to hide in the back and pretend she wasn’t there.

“Um,” she stammered, her face coloring at being put on the spot. She swallowed hard and Trey could see her eyes harden with determination. “I would ask him how he’s doing and have him give me his current history.”

“Good. Why don’t you go ahead and do that,” Trey said, gesturing toward the exam table and moving aside to give her room.

Her eyes went wide, but she did as she was told and Trey settled back into listening mode, half an ear on her and the rest of his attention on the young man

on the exam table. Young man, almost ten years his junior. While Redfield went through her assessment, Trey made his own. Skinny, but not wasting, almost wiry, Justin definitely did more than cardio at the gym. Skin a little on the pale side, meaning he must spend a lot of time indoors, and a military buzz cut to his light-brown hair, probably easier to take care of.

He tuned back into Redfield just as she finished up.

“Most rheumatic patients can live a normal life, however, if they show signs of failing valves, conservative treatment is the first step including alleviating stress to the heart to prevent the damage from progressing. Both physical and mental stress. If they do progress to the point of requiring surgery, heart valve repair or replacement can make it possible for them to live normal lives once again.”

Trey smiled as she turned to him.

“How’d I do?” Redfield asked brightly, eyes hopeful.

“You did fine. Make sure he gives you the doses of his current meds not just the names, you can’t always rely on the med record. And also, ask him when his wisdom teeth extraction is scheduled for.”

“Right. Sorry,” she said, stepping back into the group.

“Don’t be sorry, just remember for next time.”

“Yes, Dr. Walker.”

“Now, onto the physical examination. What are the important parts you don’t want to skip?” Trey looked over the group with a practiced eye. “Based on the history Ms. Redfield has just obtained for us, Mr. Stamper, why don’t you move on up here and see if you can answer the question and do a thorough physical assessment.”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes as Stamper sauntered up to the front, restrained from cringing when he saw Justin stiffen up. Stamper had a tendency to be an arrogant ass, and he wondered briefly if it had been a mistake to put him on the spot with Justin.

Stamper pulled his stethoscope out of his pocket and reached for Justin’s gown. Justin pulled back with a scowl. “Maybe you could introduce yourself first? I don’t let just anyone go around touching me.”

His eyes flicked over to Trey’s and he gave a defiant jut of his chin, and Trey bit back a grin. Nope, his decision had been spot on.

“Sorry, sorry,” Stamper stammered, his face flushing in embarrassment. “My name is Bill Stamper, I’m a third-year med student, this is my internal med rotation and if it’s all right with you, I’d like to listen to your heart and lungs.”

“Much better,” Justin said, relaxing. “Listen away.”

Chastened, Stamper carefully pulled Justin’s gown to the side so he could listen directly over his skin. His technique was impeccable, it was only his attitude that needed adjusting, and hopefully a few more experiences like this and he would get the message.

The rest of the exam went without a hitch, all the med students thanking Justin, while Trey wrote his prescription and shook his hand before herding his students into the hall.

He debriefed them while Justin got dressed, praised their good work, and admonished them on the things they missed.

“That’s it for today. I expect you to be ready to go at six tomorrow morning, I have a full schedule of patients, including a long-term COPD patient, so read up on it; you’ll be in charge of his plan of care tomorrow.”

The door opened behind him as the students drifted off, groaning about the research they would have to spend time on tonight.

“Do you do that a lot?” Justin asked, shrugging his coat on over his shoulders.

Trey frowned. “Do what?”

“Bully your med students?”

Trey grinned at Justin. “Seriously? You think that was bullying? You clearly never went to med school,” he said with a chuckle. “It’s my job to make sure they know their stuff. To make sure this hospital turns out the best doctors we can. If you’d prefer not to have a resident and med students take part in your care, you’re welcome to request my attending, Dr. Tsang, to take care of you personally. Please feel free to take it up with him.”

“Whoa.” Justin held up his hands. “All I meant was, Redfield? Was obviously uncomfortable and yet you made her be front and center.”

“Redfield is a brilliant young woman who will eventually become a brilliant doctor. She just needs to get over some shyness and confidence issues. I

guarantee you that after today, she'll have less of both. It's a work in progress. And need I remind you, that you yourself shut down Stamper pretty hard."

"Yeah, well he was a rude, arrogant ass and needed to be knocked down a peg or two," Justin muttered, running a hand over his buzz cut.

Trey let out a snort of laughter and Justin gave him a startled look before cracking a smile himself.

"You're not wrong about that," Trey agreed. "Look, sorry if any of that made you uncomfortable. Seriously, if you would prefer no more med students or residents, just let Dr. Tsang know."

"No, no. It's fine." Justin ran a hand over his head again, making Trey wonder if it was a nervous tic. "I just hate being treated like a specimen, that's all. It makes me a cranky bastard. Anyway, we good, Doc?" Justin asked, extending his hand to shake.

"Yeah, we're good. Good luck with the wisdom teeth." Trey shook his hand.

"Thanks. See you around." Justin waved a hand over his shoulder as he took off down the hallway.

"Yeah, see you around," Trey said to himself, already checking the calendar on his phone for the next thing on his schedule and absolutely refusing to think about how amused Justin had made him. Nobody stood up to him like that. Ever. It intrigued him, made him hope he really would see Justin around.

It turned out, he ended up seeing Justin more than once over the next several months. Trey didn't indulge in fancy coffee drinks very often, but every once in a while when he treated himself to an afternoon mocha, he would see Justin working behind the counter at the coffee shop near the hospital. They didn't ever have time to exchange more than simple pleasantries, but it definitely kept Justin at the forefront of Trey's mind—especially as he delved into extra research on the effects of stress on rheumatic heart disease for an upcoming presentation. He was glad he only ran into Justin during the slow shifts.

One Saturday morning, Trey and some friends came stumbling into the coffee shop after a rather long and dirty bike ride, mud clinging to their backs and legs.

"I'm gonna go wash up, at least what I can." Shane plucked at his shirt woefully. "This is never gonna come out. Jess will kill me." He clutched at

Trey's arms. "You'll tell the police right? Tell them my girlfriend killed me because I let her favorite shirt get muddy?"

Rolling his eyes, Trey playfully shoved him away. "Jess hates that shirt, idiot. Go wash up. I'll order the coffee."

"Hey, get me one of those triple berry scones too. Those things are awesome."

When Trey got to the cash register after waiting his turn in line, he put in their order, still looking at the bakery case. "I'll have one of those triple berry scones and..." He paused. He frowned trying to decide what he wanted. "Um, just make it two, I guess."

"For here or to go?"

"To go, please."

"Oh good, I wasn't really looking forward to cleaning mud off the furniture," the barista said dryly.

Startled, Trey looked up right into the twinkling blue-green eyes of Justin Shaw. "Oh, hey, Justin. You're here. I mean, obviously, you're here, I just meant that you're not usually here on Saturdays. Not that I keep track or anything," Trey stammered.

"Yes, I took an extra shift."

"Huh, great. Um, how are you?" Trey handed him some cash and his rarely used frequent customer card.

"I'm good. No problems to speak of. Which, as you know, is a good thing."

"Definitely a good thing. Sorry about the mess," Trey apologized.

Justin leaned over the counter and grimaced at the mud and dirt smeared across the floor from where Trey stood all the way back to the door. "Yeah, that's going to be a pain to clean up."

"Sorry," Trey said. His face flushed with embarrassment. "I guess we didn't really think."

"No biggie." Justin shrugged, deftly handling the espresso handle and the milk steamer. "Most people don't."

"Is this job stressful?" Not the best subject transition, but Trey plunged on ahead, hoping it sounded casual and not overly intrusive, like he had been

thinking about Justin or worrying about him. “I mean, people can be really thoughtless and rude and it gets so crowded in here during—”

“This isn’t any more stressful than any other job.” Justin’s mouth tightened as he cut off Trey’s rambling and handed him his coffee with a thin-lipped smile. “Your coffee, Dr. Walker.”

Oh damn. “Thanks. Um...”

“Your scones and Dr. Anderson’s iced coffee will be ready at the end of the counter.”

Knowing a dismissal when he heard one, Trey smiled weakly at Justin, took his coffee and moved to the end of the counter, dropping his head when he realized he had managed to smear even more mud across the tiles.

Shane came bopping out of the bathroom right when their order came up.

“Perfect timing.” He smiled, taking a long sip of his drink. “So good. Want to find a table?”

“No, we should probably head out. I think we tracked in more than our fair share of mud and dirt.”

“Oh,” Shane said. “Yeah, wow. Whoops.” He turned back to the counter. “Sorry about the mess.”

Justin waved him off.

“Oh, hey, Justin!” Shane said. He gave Justin a chastened smile. “Really sorry about the mess. We should have been more careful.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out a handful of bills and stuffed them into the tip jar.

Justin grinned. “Thanks, Dr. Anderson!”

“No problem. See you around.”

Shane made for the front door with Trey right on his heels, frowning. “Do you see him here a lot? Isn’t that, I mean, I can only imagine how hard this job is on his heart. I’ve seen this place when it’s mobbed with residents, med students, and surgeons.”

“Seriously?” Shane shot him a withering look. “You’re in your fifth year of cardiothoracic residency, you know the guidelines for patients like him are much more lenient than in the past. Why are you being such a hard-ass about it? Did you say something to him? Because damn, he said a nice good-bye to me,

but if looks could kill, they'd be drawing a chalk outline around you right about now."

"I might have commented that a job like this could be stressful."

"Idiot." Shane shook his head. "You should know better than to say something like that."

"He was a patient!" Trey protested. "I'm allowed to worry about a patient."

"Okay, I'll give you that. But, remember, he's a human being and honestly, who likes to be reminded of their inability to do something? It's like you forgot basic psychology or were raised by wolves or something."

"Says the one slurping his ice drink like straws are going out of style."

"You know that's not really an insult, right?" Shane asked.

"Whatever." Trey went quiet for a moment or two. "Hey, you never answered, do you see him there a lot?"

"I guess." Shane shrugged. "Justin makes the best damn iced coffee I've ever had. He's a good kid. Got his head on straight, wants to be an architect. This job is paying his way through college. Told me once that he has a scholarship, but with all his medical bills, he wanted to help anyway he could."

Their conversation shifted after that and eventually they went their separate ways. But Shane's words niggled at Trey the entire rest of the day and into the night. He couldn't even explain to himself why he had fixated on Justin so much. But seeing him behind that counter again, his eyes sparking with mischief and happiness stirred Trey up in ways he really didn't want to linger on. And still Shane's words echoed in his head, so much so, he found himself walking into the coffee shop on his way into the hospital the next day.

Justin stood behind the counter, happily chatting with one of the ER nurses. When he noticed Trey, his mouth tightened and his shoulders stiffened into a tense line.

Guilt stabbed at Trey. Had he done that with his pushy overbearing attitude? Acting like he knew best when Justin's own doctor probably already discussed the stresses and strains of working in a coffee shop. Then again maybe Justin just didn't like him. After all, he had called Trey a bully. He smiled nervously at Justin when he got to the counter.

"What can I make for you?" Justin asked without even a hint of familiarity.

Trey winced internally. “A large mocha please.”

“One large mocha. Would you like whipped cream on that?”

“Yes, please.”

“With whip. Will that be all?”

“Can I get a triple berry scone as well?”

Trey watched Justin grab the scone from the case and hand it over to him. “Look, I’m sorry about yesterday. I overstepped and I apologize. I just—” He ran a hand over his hair. “I care about my patients, okay? And I’ve been knee-deep in research about your condition for the last few weeks. And I see so many patients who don’t do what we tell them, who aren’t conscientious about their conditions and I would really hate to see you in that position. Hence my question about the stress level at this job. I know I should have minded my own business and from now on I will, but I am sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” Justin handed Trey his change and his coffee. “Rest assured, I’m not usually here during the really busy hours. I’m only filling in this weekend because somebody else called in sick and Kam was desperate. Normally I take all the slow shifts because they’re the ones that fit best with my classes. So don’t worry, Doc, I got it covered.”

“It sounds like you do. Again, sorry for being a pretentious ass yesterday. It won’t happen again.”

“No problem, Doc. See you around.”

Trey raised his coffee in acknowledgment. “See you around.” His mood considerably lighter, Trey felt a smile spread across his face as he entered the hospital.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in and with a smile no less.” The sarcasm practically dripped off of Shane’s words as he sidled up to Trey’s side in the hospital lobby.

“Really,” Trey deadpanned, not even bothering to lift an eyebrow at Shane’s ridiculous greeting.

“I see you have a cup of coffee. In to visit our good friend Justin?”

“No. Yes. I mean.” Trey huffed out an exasperated sigh, feeling the tips of his ears burn in embarrassment. “I felt the need to apologize after yesterday. I don’t usually act so paternalistic and I wanted him to know that.”

“Yeah, dude, that was weird. What the hell, man? I mean, it’s not like he’s a regular patient of yours, right?”

“No, no he’s not,” Trey said.

“So with all the patients you see every day, how did you even remember him?”

“Huh, well, because he called me a bully.”

“What?” Shane laughed. “You? A bully?” He frowned for a moment. “I guess I could see that.”

Trey shot him an offended look just as they reached the elevators.

“What?” Shane shrugged his shoulders. “You’re pretty tough on your med students and interns. An outsider could probably easily see that as bullying. Even though, to those of us in the know, you’re just a big old teddy bear.”

Ears burning even more, Trey scowled at Shane and then down at his coffee cup. “Not a teddy bear.”

“Right. So that wasn’t you buying ice cream for Redfield in the cafeteria when her asshole boyfriend dumped her because she got a higher score on the intern exam? Must have been someone else.” Shane nodded knowingly. “Yeah, was probably Jasper. He’s good for comforting,” he said derisively.

Trey snorted. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?” The elevator doors opened and he and Shane walked out onto the post-op floor. “Last I heard he was ‘comforting’ one of the cath lab nurses. I’m sure that will end well.”

“I’m kinda surprised he’s making his way through the nurses. Usually they look out for their own and shut that shit down pretty hard, pretty fast.”

“I think she’s new and hasn’t made very many friends yet. Plus, I heard she’s forcing him to keep it on the down low.”

“Must not be too down low, seeing as how I know about it,” Shane muttered.

“Seeing as how you’re the local gossip, it doesn’t surprise me that you know. I’m surprised I know.” Trey stopped as they reached the doctor’s lounge. “What’s your schedule today?”

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Shane rocked back on his heels. “Anesthesia for a lap-choli in about twenty minutes, then a hip replacement.

After that, I'll have to look at the board again. How about I come find you for lunch? You think you might let your prisoners go for a little bit then?"

"Maybe. See you later." Trey winked at him and pushed the door to the doctor's lounge open.

Lunch never happened, at least not with Shane. It was a hurried affair in the cafeteria amidst a handful of his newly assigned med students going over the diagnostic criteria for COPD and the various plans and procedures that followed. His chronic COPD patient had been readmitted last night and he wanted to make sure they knew the necessary details. Trey speared his lettuce while Jordan presented, gave Claire a glare when she tried to interrupt, and almost choked when he spotted Justin work his way through the line and sit down at a nearby table by himself.

He didn't stay alone for long. One of the ER nurses joined him along with one of the desk clerks from the surgery waiting area and one of the techs from the radiology labs. The four of them laughed and joked and Trey found himself barely listening to his students.

"Nope, nope, that's the wrong dosage," Jordan argued.

Claire rolled her eyes. "Look, my uncle has COPD and I know my shit. It's—"

"Just because your uncle has it doesn't make you an expert," Ana piped up. "He may be on an old med protocol and his doctor doesn't want to change because it's working for him. We're supposed to be knowledgeable about the most recent med routines. Right, Dr. Walker?"

"Huh?" Trey said. He brought his attention back to the table and took a deep breath when he realized all his med students stared back at him. He mentally replayed the conversation and thanked whatever deity would listen for giving him perfect auditory memory recall. "Oh, right. Yes, your uncle is most definitely on an older protocol. We changed that about a year, year and a half ago. It's not completely different, but different enough. Jordan is right."

Jordan flushed and smiled proudly when Ana and Dan both gave her high fives. Trey ducked his head and smiled. She had obviously done her reading last night and had definitely spent time preparing for today. All of them had.

The five of them gathered up their trash and made their way to the entrance. Justin looked up right as they walked by. "Hey, Dr. Walker." He waved, giving Trey a big smile.

“Hi, Justin,” Trey replied. He returned Justin’s smile and followed his med students out of the cafeteria.

After that, it felt like Trey saw Justin everywhere. Some Baader-Meinhof principle thing. Now he saw Justin in the cafeteria, the coffee shop, the grocery store, the gym, and even out on the beach when Trey managed to get out for a morning run.

When Trey lapped the parking lot for the second time, he barely glanced at the man stretching by the curb beyond a quick appreciation of the toned legs and back muscles he could see.

“Looking good, Dr. Walker,” a voice called out as he jogged past.

Trey slowed and turned, jogging in place, realizing the stretching man was Justin. He gave him a slow, easy grin, his eyes roving over Justin’s form appreciatively. “Nice... technique.” He winked and went back to his run.

The next morning he ran into him at the market. Trey watched as Justin picked up a melon to sniff it.

“So, does that *technique* work?” Trey asked playfully, echoing his words from yesterday.

It startled Justin so much he bobbed the melon and almost dropped it. Trey shot an arm out and managed to steady Justin enough to set the melon back on the pile.

“I’ll have you know there’s nothing wrong with my technique. Full working order, Doc.” Justin’s face colored and he ran a hand over his freshly buzzed head. “So, do you come here often?”

Trey threw his head back and laughed. “Okay, that was pretty bad.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Justin offered him an embarrassed smile.

“Don’t apologize and I actually do come here pretty often. A couple of times a week to be honest.”

“Oh yeah? I just found this place. Nora? The ER nurse? She told me about it.”

Trey fought against the spike of jealousy that went through him at the mention of Nora’s name.

“I think she thinks of me as a little brother she needs to take care of.” Justin gave Trey a shy grin.

Instantly, the jealousy vanished and Trey smiled back. “Yeah, she does that. Takes care of everyone. She’s made it her personal mission to get everyone to eat organic.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong. The produce here is really nice.”

“Yes, it is.”

An awkward silence grew between them, but Trey was reluctant to end the encounter and obviously Justin was as well. But then Trey’s phone beeped with a text and when he pulled it out, he frowned.

“Sorry, um, one of my patients, I better—” He jerked his thumb toward the checkout.

“Right. Good seeing you,” Justin said and Trey could hear the wistful tone in his voice.

“Bye, Justin.”

Three days later, Trey found Justin manning the coffee shop again.

“Good morning, Dr. Walker. Same as before? Large mocha?”

“Yes, thanks. Nice that you remembered. And I think by now, you can call me Trey.”

“I remember all the good customers, Trey.” Justin winked at him.

Trey let the warm feeling caused by Justin’s words wash over him and stay the entire morning.

Two nights after that, Trey ran into Justin when he and Shane stopped to pick up a pizza for dinner.

“Oh hey, Dr. Anderson, Trey, how’s it going?”

“*Trey*,” Shane mouthed at him out of Justin’s line of sight.

“Hi, Justin.” Shane turned and gave Justin a big smile. “Things are great. Just stopped to get a pizza.”

“Obviously,” Trey muttered, not sure what exactly to say to Justin, seeing as how his heart fluttered and he felt out of breath just at the sight of him. “Hey Justin. Didn’t know you liked deep dish Chicago Pizza. You eat it a lot?” He eyed the large pizza box in front of Justin.

Instantly, Justin’s face shuttered and Trey winced and wondered if he should just ask for an extra side of sauce to go with the foot in his mouth.

“Sorry.” Shane clapped Justin on the back. “He hasn’t eaten since about five thirty this morning. Man was stuck in the OR all day. His brain’s not really online right now, so you’ll have to forgive him. Once I get some food into him, he’ll definitely be more socially acceptable. And he won’t be judging people for making the same food choices we are.”

Justin let out an understanding laugh. “Wow, that’s a long day. Sorry to hear that.”

“Here’s your change.” The cashier smiled at Justin.

“Thanks.” He smiled back and then turned to Shane and Trey. “You guys have a great night. Bye, Dr. Anderson.” His eyes slid over to Trey’s. “Trey.”

“Bye, Justin.” Shane waved.

“Bye, Justin,” Trey repeated.

Shane squeezed his shoulder. “You okay there buddy? Kinda judgmental on the whole pizza thing and since when are you and Justin on a first name basis?”

“Um, yes? We keep running into each other, and I finally told him to just call me Trey because Dr. Walker felt awkward at the grocery store.”

“Dude, why’d you criticize his pizza? You know, seeing as how we’re eating the same thing.”

“Because.” *I get tongue-tied when I’m around him.* Not that Trey was going to tell Shane that. His best friend wasn’t best known for his secret keeping skills. “I’m an idiot who is socially awkward at times?”

“You got that right,” Shane agreed. “But don’t worry, you’ll be fine once you get some pizza in your belly.” He squeezed Trey’s shoulder again before dropping his hand and reaching for his wallet.

“Order for Anderson!”

“That’s us. My treat, zombie surgeon.”

Trey rolled his eyes and reminded himself to apologize for being intrusive the next time he saw Justin.

Three mornings later, Trey saw him out on the beach again. He slowed down to a jog and matched Justin’s pace. “Hey, sorry I was such a rude bastard the other night. I really do tend to cease social functioning when I haven’t eaten.”

“No problem.” Justin smiled over at him. “We all have our little quirks.”

“That we do. See you around?” Trey asked.

“Definitely.” Justin’s grin widened.

Trey nodded at him and resumed his previous pace with a smile on his face.

They didn’t exchange greetings every time they ran into each other because sometimes circumstances didn’t allow for it. But even if no words were exchanged, Trey noticed Justin giving him appraising, almost considering, looks. Combined with all the subtle flirting the two of them had going on and Trey had to wonder just what Justin had on his mind.

He mentioned it to Shane when they went out for drinks one night, but Shane didn’t have any answers either. In fact, Shane had a whole rash of shit to call him out on. “You blow hot and cold with him all the time. Every time you tell me about seeing him, you’re all happy smiles and excitement. But the few times we’ve run into him together you’ve been cold and overbearing. Or worse, rude. Poor guy probably doesn’t know if you like him or barely tolerate him. Or worse yet, he thinks you’re embarrassed to be seen being friendly with him.”

“I don’t, I mean, what? I do that?”

“Yeah, dude, you do. He’s asked me at least once what your deal was. Possibly more, I don’t remember.”

“Wait, you talk about me? Are you like, friends?”

“If by friends you mean he’s my friendly caffeine dealer on just about every occasion, then yes. If you mean bosom buddies, then no. He’s just a nice kid that serves the world’s most perfect coffee, and you know how I am before coffee. I’m usually so out of it, I would probably give up state secrets if I knew any. You need to figure it out, man.” Shane clapped him on the back. “Come on, next round’s on me.”

Trey followed him back to the bar, his mind still reeling from Shane’s observations. Maybe Shane had a point. Trey would have to be a little more conscious of his reactions the next time he saw Justin and he might find out what those appraising looks meant. For now he would relish in the thought that Justin asked Shane about him on probably more than one occasion.

A month after their first meeting in the coffee shop, all those flirtations came to a climax at the market. Trey had just pushed his grocery cart into the

cereal aisle only to find Justin there as well. “Fancy running into you here,” Trey said.

“Hey, Trey, how’s it going?” Justin smiled at him in greeting.

“Well. It’s going well. Finally got a stretch of three days off, so I’m doing a little shopping. My fridge is crying about how empty it is.”

Justin laughed. “I hear that. Just finished exams, and my body is crying over the lack of nutritional food, seeing as how I’ve been living on pizza and water.”

Trey glanced over the contents of Justin’s cart, and noting the fair amount of fresh fruits and vegetables, refrained from commenting on Justin’s exam diet. “How did you do?” he asked instead.

“Pretty well. I have one more semester left, then I’ll have my master’s degree in architecture and I hope I’ll be able to get a job at the same firm where I did my summer interning.”

“Congratulations. That must make you pretty happy.”

“It does. So you still picking on those med students?” His eyes twinkled when he asked, and Trey felt a rush of warmth wash over him that Justin remembered their first meeting so well.

“Yup. Gotta whip them into shape. Make sure they’re qualified to take care of any patient they come across. Not everyone is a model patient such as yourself, you know.”

Justin let out a bark of laughter. “Well, I don’t know about model patient, but I do try to take care of myself the majority of the time.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Trey said, groping around for something else to keep the conversation going. For some reason he didn’t want to walk away. Unfortunately, he came up blank. “Well, I don’t want to keep you.”

“Right. Right. Good seeing you,” Justin replied.

He ran a hand over his short hair. The nervous tic made Trey wonder if Justin had wanted to say something else.

Trey watched him push his cart toward the end of the aisle and then stop. He glanced over his shoulder and Trey gave him a smile that Justin didn’t return. He only frowned and turned back toward his cart, before stopping once more. This time not only did he turn around, he abandoned his cart and took several steps back toward to Trey.

“Look, I may be out of line, and if I am, tell me, but um, would you like to go for coffee sometime?”

The question shocked Trey so much he almost dropped the box of cereal he had plucked off the shelf.

“I mean, you don’t have to,” Justin rushed on. “It’s just, we keep seeing each other, and it seems like there’s something there and I thought maybe—”

“I would love to,” Trey interrupted him. “You name the time and place. Just know I have night shifts coming up, but it usually takes me a while to wind down so I could still do coffee in the morning.”

A hint of pink colored Justin’s cheeks and he gave Trey a pleased smile. “Great. Um, lemme give you my number.”

Hastily, Trey handed over his phone trying hard to hide the trembling of his hand. It had been so long since he’d done anything like this. The hospital kept him so busy he didn’t have time. He couldn’t even remember his last hookup, let alone his last date. Trey watched as Justin’s fingers flew over the face of his phone and suddenly Justin’s own phone chimed with a text alert.

“There.” Justin handed Trey his phone back with a smile. “And now I have your number. So, um, just let me know when you might want to go pick up that coffee. I expect my schedule is a little more open than yours. Speaking of which, I better go. This was just supposed to be a quick run for a few things and as usual, I’ve gotten distracted. See you around?”

“Yes,” Trey said. The hopeful tone in Justin’s voice compelling him to agree.

“Great. See ya.” Justin gave him a little wave and pushed his cart off down the aisle, leaving Trey staring after him.

“He’s not my patient anymore,” Trey muttered to himself. “It’s perfectly okay for me to go out for coffee with him. And I’m going to enjoy the hell out of it.” He grinned as he pushed his cart down the aisle in a rush to finish his shopping.

Out in the parking lot, he sat behind the wheel of his car and called Shane.

“Guess who I ran into at the grocery store?”

“Milla Jovovich.”

“No. Justin.”

“Oooh, Coffee God Justin? The one you’ve been flirting with for like a decade?”

Trey rolled his eyes. “I have not been flirting with him.”

“Oh Justin, you make the best coffee. It always tastes better when you serve it,” Shane said in a falsetto voice.

“First, I don’t sound like that. And second, you said yourself he makes the best coffee and you’re right, he does. I don’t know what that Michael kid does, but the coffee always tastes burnt when he’s working. And Samantha isn’t much better. She puts way too much mocha in my mocha. It’s like I’m having coffee with my chocolate.”

“Blasphemy!” Shane shouted in a shocked voice over the phone. “You can never have too much chocolate. So what did he have to say? Or did you do that thing where you ignore him because you can’t seem to not trip over your own tongue?”

“Just stuff,” Trey replied petulantly. He was starting to wonder why he called Shane.

“Are you going out?”

“Maybe.”

“Finally. So what are you doing? Dinner, movie, ooh maybe a club? Dancing all up and down that hard body,” Shane teased him.

“And you wonder why people don’t believe you when you say you’re straight,” Trey said dryly.

“Hey, just because I’m straight doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the hotness of a man’s body. I mean, take Channing Tatum. He’s hot, like smoking. Or, what’s that other dude’s name?”

“Which other dude?” Trey asked. “There are a million ‘other dudes.’”

“Idris Elba. He’s definitely fine.”

“Can we stop talking about celebrities you think are fine and start talking about how Justin asked me out for coffee and I’m having a minor freak-out about it?”

“Why the freak-out?”

“I don’t know,” Trey sighed. He ran a hand over his head, scratching at his scalp. He needed a haircut, a trim or maybe a buzz cut this time. Either way, his

hair was definitely too long, much longer and he would have to put the back of it into a ponytail. “I can’t even remember the last time I went on a date. How pathetic is that? I mean, I don’t even know what to do on a date. Of course it’s just coffee, but what if he wants an actual date?”

“Then you say yes and go. Did you ask him or did he ask you?”

“He asked me.”

“Then stop worrying. He knows who you are, it’s not like he doesn’t know what he’s getting into. Besides, with his health record? He knows how hard doctors work. It’s not like he’s going to be pissed if you get called in, right in the middle of something. And it’s just coffee. Everyone knows you could use a good coffee.”

“Really?” Trey’s voice dripped with derision and Shane laughed.

“Stop freaking out. I am giving you the all clear on the whole doctor-patient thing and seeing as how I’m practically an attending—”

Trey scoffed and Shane squawked. “Hey, I’m a lot closer than you. You still have like a decade before you can practice on your own. I mean, really, you’ll be eligible for retirement before you’re even allowed to practice.”

“Fuck you.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Shane laughed and Trey could picture him holding his hands up in surrender. “In all seriousness though, I really do think you’re in the clear in terms of the whole doctor-patient thing. So the only thing holding you back, is you. Go out for coffee. Just see how it goes.”

“That your final suggestion?”

“Yup.”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime. Hey, isn’t Shaylene having that thing at her house tonight?” Shane asked.

“The ‘bring your own appetizer’ thing? Yeah.”

“What are you bringing?”

“I bought the ingredients for some guacamole and that black bean salsa everyone likes. You?”

“Cocktail weenies.”

“And yup, definitely know you’re straight now.”

“Jerk.” Shane laughed. “Okay, I’m gonna run. Say yes when Justin picks a date for coffee.”

“Fine.”

Trey ended the call and headed home, less freaked out and more excited about having coffee with Justin.

It took Justin almost a whole week to text Trey and then it came in late at night when he was elbow deep in the chest cavity of a gunshot victim. He felt his phone buzzing in his pocket, but seeing as how he was in the ER, he figured it could wait.

When he checked it later he grinned.

Coffee? Tomorrow after your shift?

His heart skipped a beat at the idea of Justin knowing his shifts. The knowledge made him warm and tingly. Quickly, he texted back.

Yes. Off @ 7

He didn’t expect a reply at two in the morning so he put his phone away and went to dictate on the gunshot patient.

Two MI patients, one atrial fibrillation, and one severe indigestion later, he reported off to Shaylene, one of the other senior residents. She smiled at him and rubbed his arm. “Go get some sleep. You had a busy night.”

“Gonna get coffee first,” he mumbled.

“As long as it’s decaf.”

He waved a hand at her, grabbing his stuff and heading for the doors. It took him ten minutes to get to the coffee shop down the street to find Justin waiting for him just inside the door.

“Oh man, you look so tired,” Justin said. “Wow. You must have had a rough one!” He looked genuinely horrified at the thought, and Trey felt the overwhelming need to comfort him.

“Yes, I mean, no, I mean, no different than any other night so, it’s fine. I’m usually so wired after a night shift it always takes me a while to relax enough to sleep. I’ll just have decaf though or I’ll never get to bed.”

“Decaf it is. Mocha, right?” Justin asked.

“Yeah,” Trey replied. A rush of pleasure flowing through him at Justin remembering his favorite coffee.

“You find a seat. I’ll be right back.”

“But—”

“My treat, remember? I asked you. I’m old-fashioned like that. Now sit tight.”

Trey snagged the two comfortable chairs in the corner and laid his head back closing his eyes. This feeling of being taken care of was definitely something he could get used to. He felt himself drifting off, lulled into a relaxed state by the soothing music and the calming bustle of work happening around him.

“Hey.” Justin’s voice startled Trey awake. “Sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. Was just resting my eyes.” Trey could tell from Justin’s raised eyebrow that he didn’t believe him. “Okay, you’re right, I’m exhausted. But that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy a cup of coffee before I head home to crash face first into my pillow.”

“Tell me about your night?”

“Gunshot wound to the chest, close range. One of those armor-piercing bullets that fragments after they get inside? So yeah, pretty terrible. At least it wasn’t a cop. Those are the worst.”

“Why’s that?” Justin asked, his head tilting in curiosity.

“Because we usually end up with half the police force waiting in the lobby and the surgical waiting room.”

“Oh yeah, that would be hard. A lot of pressure. So you worked on him all night?”

“Nah, just for a couple hours. Then it was mostly routine. Saw a couple of patients with unstable angina. Stabilized them, sent one home, and admitted another. Then I had a guy who had just recently converted to A-fib in with chest pain. Turns out he just had a really big, really fatty meal. Then a couple of patients in for possible MI, both I ruled out, but told them to follow up with their doctor and institute some lifestyle changes. Nothing spectacular.” He closed his eyes and took a sip of his mocha, letting the chocolate flavored coffee coat his tongue, savoring the sweet bitterness of it.

“Good?”

“Not as good as yours.” Trey opened his eyes and winked at Justin, pleased to see his cheeks pink up. “What are you up to today?”

“About six foot two.” Justin grinned at him mischievously.

Trey rolled his eyes and Justin chuckled before he continued, “I’ve actually got an interview with an architecture firm about a possible job. I’m a bit nervous.”

“Yeah? Which firm?”

Justin rattled off a bunch of letters that didn’t make any sense to Trey, but he nodded his head to cover it up. “Are they a pretty big firm?”

“Yes. They do a lot of big contracts for office buildings, schools, and such, but then they also do residential jobs. One of the partners specializes in accessible homes. I’d really kind of like to work with him but we’ll see.”

“Wow. That sounds impressive.” Trey took another sip of his coffee suppressing a smile at the pleased look that appeared on Justin’s face.

“How much longer do you have in your residency and what are you thinking about doing afterward?”

The question almost seemed forced in its casualness combined with Justin taking an immediate slug of his coffee, and Trey knew that question and his answer had to be secretly important. It sent a thrill through him, just the idea that Justin was interested enough to wonder if Trey would be sticking around.

“Well, fortunately for me, I’m in the new, integrated six-year cardiothoracic residency program here and I’m on year five. So I have one more year to go, at which point I hope to become an attending here. After spending six years seeing patients, making friends, and networking, I would hate to have to go someplace new and start all over again.”

“Oh, that makes a lot of sense.” Justin nodded. “Is it hard? The long hours, I mean?”

“Yes and no. I’m lucky in that this residency program decided to do away with the whole ‘work a resident to death’ thing. Now we have mandatory twenty-four-hour shifts instead of thirty-six or even forty-eight, and a mandatory minimum twelve-hour downtime between shifts. Usually I get at least a day between the super long shifts. Oh, and that’s the other thing, you’re not allowed to have more than two in one week. So there’s that. I still spend a

lot of my off time reading and researching, making sure I'm always up to date on the latest surgical trends and techniques. And sometimes I scrub in with Dr. Tsang on my off days, if he's got an interesting case. Every little bit of experience helps."

"I definitely agree with that. It's one of the reasons I don't normally mind being the guinea pig for residents and med students. The only way for me to get experience in architecture is for someone to give me a chance to practice it. I figure it's the same for doctors, and if a patient doesn't give them that chance?" His voice trailed off.

Trey wanted to hug him. So many people didn't get it, didn't want to get it.

"I'm also really glad they did away with those insane hours." Justin interrupted Trey's thoughts. "When I was first diagnosed with rheumatic heart fever, I spent almost twenty-four hours waiting in the ER. They were *that* busy. But the thing I remember most is the patient in the bed next to me coding. The doc in charge was a resident who was in his fortieth hour of a forty-eight-hour-shift. I heard him telling one of the nurses. I never truly understood what happened, but the patient died and it was easy enough to figure out the resident was taking the blame. Which was admirable, but—"

"If the resident had been able to sleep, maybe the patient wouldn't have died?" Trey asked gently.

"Yeah. I remember my mom was really angry because he was the doc assigned to me too, and she railed at my dad that it could have been me dying on that table because the resident was too strung out and exhausted to handle his patient load properly. So yeah, I'm glad they're starting to fix that problem. Oh, that reminds me of a funny story. I was six. So dumb." Justin shook his head at himself, already chuckling. "One of my first visits to the ER. And a woman came into the room and introduced herself as my doctor. I looked her right in the eye and said, 'You can't be my doctor.' 'Why?' she asked. 'Because you're a girl.' I thought my mother was gonna have a heart attack and end up in the bed right next to me. She was so mortified, she and my dad couldn't apologize enough. The doc thought it was hilarious. She even gave me a sucker when I left, told me to keep charming the ladies and I'd find myself married before I turned seven."

Trey laughed so hard he cried, stomach hurting from how much. "Oh my God, even then you were a terror."

"I know, right? My mom said she should have known by how much I moved inside her that I would be trouble. Even the heart thing didn't stop me.

Although, she did make me take naps all the way up to high school until I finally put my foot down and said I was old enough to make my own sleeping decisions.”

Trey shook himself, having blinked for too long while Justin spoke.

“Speaking of.” Justin let out a chuckle. “You should go home and get some rest. Are you okay to drive?”

“Yeah, sorry man. Just a really long night and you’re right. I could face-plant right here.”

“No problem.”

They stood and cleared their trash and walked to the door together. Trey held the door open for Justin, who scooted through with a smile. Trey grinned as well when he noticed the tips of Justin’s ears turning pink.

“So hey, maybe we can do this again sometime when I’m not Trey the Zombie Surgeon? Maybe even, say, dinner? Or you know, catch a movie together on one of my off days?”

“I would really like that, Trey.” Justin winked at him and his words sent a thrill through Trey that made him long to continue their conversation. Except his body vetoed that idea when he yawned big enough for Justin to see his tonsils.

Justin laughed. “Sorry. It’s just, wow, you really are tired. Go home, Trey. Call me when you’re not the zombie surgeon.”

With a quick wave, Justin turned and left and Trey trudged tiredly to his car. The temptation to just sleep in his car almost overwhelmed him, but in the end, Trey made it home and crashed without even taking a shower.

True to his word, a week later, when Trey had two days off in a row he gave Justin a call.

“Hey, it’s Trey.”

“Oh, hi. You finally awake?”

Trey chuckled softly. “Yes. Feeling a bit more human.” He paced in front of the window in his living room, where it looked out over the city. His heart pounded and he felt almost as nervous as he had when he had taken the medical boards. He liked Justin. Justin made him laugh. “Were you serious about meeting up again? For say, dinner?”

“Absolutely. When are you free?”

Trey’s face split into a wide grin and in the solitude of his apartment he fist punched the air in victory all while simultaneously attempting to keep his voice calm and level. “I’ve actually got today and tomorrow off. I was thinking we could meet at that Chinese restaurant over on Fourth tonight?”

“Peking Dragon Dynasty?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yes. They have the best hot and sour soup and their Mongolian beef is to die for. What time?”

“Oh, um...” Trey stammered, frantically glancing over at his cable box for the time. Noon. “Six sound okay?”

“Yup, that should be fine.”

“Great. I’ll see you then. Oh and I’ll get some rest today so you don’t have a date with the zombie surgeon.”

Justin laughed. “Glad to hear it. See you at six. Bye.”

Trey ended the call and threw his phone on the couch.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

He jumped up and down a few times before collapsing on the couch next to his phone and rubbing a hand over his face in embarrassment for acting like a twelve-year-old with a crush instead of a grown-ass almost-full cardiothoracic surgeon.

His cat, Bob, sauntered out of the bedroom to check on the noise situation and fixed Trey with a pointed stare.

“What? I can’t be happy? How long has it been since I’ve had a real official date? I have a date, and I’m gonna be happy about it. Oooh, I should call Shane or maybe even Shaylene. Huh, I never thought about how close their names are. Weird.”

Bob swished her tail and meandered into the kitchen without so much as a meow. But Trey’s happiness didn’t diminish in the least. He got up to make sure Bob had fresh water and to put some food down for her. Reaching down to scratch behind Bob’s ears, Bob butted up against his hand and purred. “There’s my girl. I have a date. I have a date.”

The day went by so fast, in no time Trey found himself parking outside of Peking Dragon Dynasty and wiping damp palms on his jeans. He walked up to the restaurant and paused, unsure whether he should go in and wait or wait outside.

“Hey, Trey!” Justin walked up saving Trey from his decision.

“Justin.” Trey smiled. Justin beamed at him and in a flash leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. Trey’s heart skipped a beat and he wanted to memorize every single aspect of the kiss even if it went by much too fast.

“Thanks for inviting me. I love this place.”

“Well, let’s go in.” Trey opened the door and ushered Justin inside in front of him with a hand at the small of his back. The kiss encouraged him to be freer with his affection and being honest with himself, he wanted to touch Justin as much as possible. It made him think Justin wanted the same thing. Or maybe he was making too much of what was probably just a friendly greeting.

Once they were seated and drinks ordered, Justin sat back and gave Trey a thorough once over. It lasted long enough that Trey began to shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“You look good. Sleep agrees with you.”

“Oh really?” Trey smiled.

“Really.” Justin smiled back. “Your eyes look more alive today, they have more sparkle, especially when you smile, which you should really do more often. It makes your whole face look softer, less like you just sucked on a lemon.”

“What?” Trey asked. “I normally look like I sucked on a lemon?” He didn’t know whether to feel offended or horrified.

“Um, kind of?” Justin shrugged, his face going red. “I mean, when you were with the residents, I mean med students. Wait, is that like your resting asshole face? You know, to intimidate them? Not let them know that inside you’re just a gigantic teddy bear who’s hard on them because he wants them to do well. Am I getting anywhere close to the mark here?”

“I have resting asshole face?”

“Oh, honey.” Justin flapped a hand at him, rolling his eyes. “Next time, I’ll take a picture so you can see. You probably don’t need to practice anymore.”

Trey stared at him in shock—was his face doing that right now?—but then Justin laughed.

“Wait a minute, you’re joshing me,” Trey protested.

“Maybe just a little.”

“Good evening.” The waiter interrupted them, nodding his head and giving them a polite smile. “Are you ready to order?”

Justin flipped open the menu and Trey shook his head at the waiter. “We may need a minute, but I know my friend here would love to start off with the hot and sour soup and I think I’ll join him in that. And maybe an order of crab Rangoon, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter nodded again and headed off to put their order in.

“Is that okay?” Trey asked, suddenly hoping he hadn’t just put his foot in it.

“Yes. And I’ll be ready when he gets back. I mean, I always get the Mongolian Beef, but you never know, I like to look things over, one of these days I might change my mind, try something new, but you know that saying, ‘don’t fix it if it ain’t broken.’ What are you going to have?”

“I like mine spicy. So I was thinking the chicken in garlic sauce with a little bit of spice to it.”

Justin’s eyes flicked over the menu. “Oooh, that does sound good. Brown or white rice?”

“Brown. Definitely.”

“I agree.” Justin closed his menu and set it down. “About the only time I get white rice is the basmati rice at the Indian restaurant. I just love the texture of it.”

“Me, too. Hey, you never told me, how did your interview go? Did you get it?”

A broad smile lit up Justin’s face. “I did. And the best part is, that I’ll get to spend the majority of my time with the guy who designs the accessible houses. He’s got a bunch of new projects starting soon, and he’s willing to let me work around my classes when they start up again so I’m really pleased. I start Monday.”

“How many hours a week?”

Justin's eyes narrowed and Trey realized his mistake. He held up his hands. "Not asking from a doctor's position, merely from a man who's happy you got the job and interested in the experience you'll be getting. A man who works long and awkward hours himself and is worried when he might get to see you again."

"Phew, for a minute I thought I was gonna have to throw my water in your face and storm out—wait, did you just say you were worried about when we might see each other again?"

"Yes. Yes, I did." Trey took a sip of his water and hoped Justin couldn't see his hands tremble.

"Me too," Justin said softly. "And now I'm really glad I didn't throw my water in your face."

"Well, that makes two of us," Trey said dryly. "Seriously, tell me more about what you'll get to do."

Justin talked until their food came and Trey interjected here and there with a question, drawing the conversation out even more. He had one more question to ask when Justin let out a delighted moan over his first bite. "Damn, this is good. I haven't been here in a couple of months actually and this is just so good I'd almost forgotten how good. Mmmm."

Damn this "not having sex in forever" if all it took was a throaty moan to have him stiffening in his pants. Trey spread his legs giving himself more room. "Glad you're enjoying it," he said. He reached for his hot green tea and took several long swallows in an attempt to alleviate the sudden dryness of his mouth.

Justin continued eating, completely oblivious to Trey's discomfort. Trey thought himself lucky that he didn't spill half his meal on his lap, considering how distracted Justin's moans of pleasure made him. The man just could not eat in silence. It seemed like every other bite he took had some sort of appreciative sound to accompany it. By the end of the meal, Trey's dick could have pounded nails, and he felt like he needed a cigarette, even though he didn't actually smoke.

"That was just delicious," Justin said with a smile. He sat back and patted his belly. "Hey, you didn't eat all your food. Now I feel like a pig."

Trey snorted. "Don't. There was a lot of garlic chicken, pretty sure my dish was twice the size of yours. Just means I'll have leftovers to eat between

surgeries the day after tomorrow. Not that the hospital cafeteria food is bad, it's actually pretty decent, but this will be a nice change of pace."

"Dessert?" Justin asked, his voice hopeful.

Trey about swallowed his tongue. He didn't think he could survive dessert if Justin continued making noises like he had throughout dinner, but at the same time he didn't want the evening to end either. "You mean besides fortune cookies?"

"Well, yeah. There's that cupcake place a couple of doors down."

"Hmm, cupcakes sound good."

"Cupcakes it is then."

They split the check and headed out to Cupcake Delights, their hands brushing against each other as they walked. Each time Justin's pinky tangled with his, Trey's heart skipped a beat. He felt like a teenage boy with his first crush and tried to will himself back under control.

When they opened the door the smell of vanilla and sugar hung in the air and Trey's mouth watered. "Oh man," he groaned. "It smells so good in here."

"I know, right?" Justin nudged his side. "Check out their flavors in the case, just about anything you could possibly want."

They moved forward and Trey took in all the different labels. There were too many he wanted to try, but he settled on a southern lemon cr me delight while Justin took the safe route and picked carrot cake.

"Don't worry, we can share." Justin winked at him before turning to order a milk to go with his cupcake.

Trey had intended to order a coffee, but the thought of ice-cold milk sounded amazing so he ordered one as well. They sat at one of the little tables along the side and the instant Justin took his first bite, Trey knew he had discovered a new form of torture. Because this time, along with a groan of delight, Justin now had a perfect frosting mustache.

It would only take a second to lean across the table, lick along Justin's upper lip, get a taste of the cream cheese icing and a taste of Justin himself. Without even realizing it, Trey found himself leaning closer just as Justin pulled back and licked the frosting off himself, with a giggle. "Sorry, all that frosting can get a bit messy."

He fumbled for a napkin, his ears turning that delightful shade of pink again. With a mental kick, Trey pushed back into his own seat, focused on his own cupcake and tried in vain to ignore Justin's obscene sounds and continuing frosting mustache appearances. He took a swig of his milk, the coolness of it a welcome sensation as it soothed its way down his throat. He wanted to roll the plastic bottle all over his face, let it cool his skin down as well.

In no time at all though, Justin finished and sat back with a smug grin on his face. "Best cupcakes ever, right?"

"Definitely." Trey couldn't agree more. The only problem now was the evening coming to an end. He glanced at his phone.

"Do you have to leave?"

"No, not really. Although I think they may want to close up," he said.

Justin looked around. "Oh, I had no idea we'd been here so long."

"Yeah." Trey grimaced. "I kinda lost track of time."

"Then we should get out of here. Come on, Trey." Justin latched onto his elbow and guided him toward the door.

Trey didn't bother to stop the grin from spreading across his face as they walked toward his car. "This is me," he said.

"Whew!" Justin let out a whistle as he walked around the silver BMW i3. "Nice car, Trey."

Trey shrugged. "My one indulgence."

Justin studied the car, leaned close and looked in the windows. "Well, it's a good indulgence and good for the environment."

"Well, I didn't want to buy one of those land yachts."

"Good for you," Justin said. He moved closer to Trey, lifting his hand and loosely tangling their fingers together. "I had a nice time. Maybe we can do it again?" His voice turned up at the end and Trey could hear the distinct hopefulness in it.

"Definitely."

Justin grinned at him and Trey bent down, kissing him chastely on the lips. "Good night, Justin."

"That's it?" Justin asked, his eyebrow quirked up cockily. He reached out and cupped the back of Trey's neck. "How about one more for the road? Whataya say, Trey?" he asked, his voice husky with desire.

Desire Trey had no interest in refusing. He let Justin pull him into another kiss and when Justin's tongue licked at the seam of his lips seeking entrance, Trey happily opened right up for him. Justin tasted of milk, sugar, cream, and vanilla and Trey couldn't get enough. He brought his hands up and buried them in Justin's hair, pleased he no longer sported a buzz cut so he had something to cling on to until Justin broke the kiss with a gasp.

"Now that's more like it. Good night, Trey." With a smile and a wave, Justin stepped away from the car and sauntered off across the street to his own car. Trey watched, waving when Justin started his car up and drove off.

Trey didn't get to sleep in like he had expected, and he had to cancel his rock climbing with a friend. Another resident called in sick, and he ended up going in to cover a surgery and handle their med students for the day. It made him cranky, and the med students cowered from him, making him feel even worse.

I had a great time, thx!

The text from Justin came through during his morning rounds. Trey grinned at his phone, his mood immediately lifting, and shoved it back in his pocket after a quick smiley face back, pointedly ignoring the interested looks the med students gave him. The texts continued throughout the day, just little tidbits of Justin's day, his random thoughts, each one amusing Trey and making his day fly by until finally, at home, he thumbed through the texts again and sent his own barrage of texts in return. More than just the quick emoticons or one word replies he had sent earlier.

They spent the next week texting back and forth because Trey's schedule kept him busy from the time he got up until the time he crashed either in the call room at the hospital or in his bed at home.

Justin must have gotten fed up with the lack of in person time because just as Trey sat down in the cafeteria with a tray full of food, he joined him at his table.

"Long time no see," Justin said brightly. His smile faltered a bit when Trey didn't say anything back. "I mean, I hope this is okay. I was at the coffee shop checking my schedule, and heard someone, well I saw your med student Jordan, and she said you all had just finished rounds and she thought you were grabbing something to eat before your first afternoon surgery—"

“It’s fine,” Trey replied. He smiled at Justin and reached over and squeezed his hand. “You just surprised me is all. A good surprise. Man, you’re a sight for sore eyes. I never really understood that phrase until now, but with you standing in front of me I get it. Sorry I’ve been so busy. One of the other residents has been sick this week, so I’ve had to pick up a lot of the slack. Meaning extra hours, less sleep—”

“Less food?” Justin nudged Trey’s lunch tray with food piled high on it.

“Yeah.” Trey laughed sheepishly. “I’m actually on call until tomorrow morning, so I figured I should stock up while I can. I’ll eat the hot stuff now, save the packaged stuff for later when they aren’t serving food.”

“Oh man, that sucks.” Justin took a sip of his milk. “I can imagine how hard it is to be a doctor. Being on call most of the time, working awful hours. And I’ve spent plenty of time in hospitals growing up, so I know, docs are available all hours of the night. They may not like it, might be pretty grumpy, but they’re available.”

“Nurses work harder,” Trey interjected.

“Definitely. They are the backbone of the hospital for sure. How long’s that resident been out?”

“A couple of days. Supposed to be back in the morning. I talked to him earlier and he sounds a lot better than he did. I may complain about the extra work, but frankly, I’d rather he stay home and not get all of us sick than come in and spread his germs around.”

Justin took a bite of his apple and Trey shoveled beef stew into his mouth. Conversation died for a few minutes while they ate and then Trey’s phone went off with a text from one of the floors. He frowned at it, and then hurriedly wiped his mouth. “Sorry, I gotta go. One of my patients...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Justin waved his hand. “I’ll clean this up, too. Grab your extra food and go take care of your patient.”

Trey gathered up his things, pushed his chair in and took two steps away from the table, suddenly feeling like the need for more. He turned back, bent down, and brushed a quick kiss over Justin’s lips. “I’ll call you as soon as I’m not swamped, okay?” He stroked a thumb over Justin’s cheek and before Justin could reply, he took off, his heart pounding in exhilaration.

The rest of his day went by in a haze, mostly because Trey floated through it. On Cloud Nine. Having Justin surprise him for lunch made his day, to say the least. He sent Justin a text as soon as he finished his last surgery of the day.

Thx 4 lunch. Enjoyed it. ;)

He pressed send before he could second guess himself, then promptly turned his phone off so he could catch some sleep in the on-call room before the ER got slammed as it was wont to do most nights.

That first lunch had seemingly lifted a barrier and afterward Justin frequently met him in the hospital cafeteria for a snack or a brief five minute chat. Lucky, really, because once his colleague came back, another one had a family emergency and soon almost four weeks had gone by since their dinner.

U free for a movie?

The text popped in just as Trey finished his last dictation. Fatigue had his energy lagging, but the text from Justin brightened his spirits.

YES.

Within a few texts back and forth Trey agreed to meet Justin at the theater closest to the hospital to see the latest action flick. Trey didn't really care about the movie, he just wanted to see Justin. And when he did, he wasted no time, just strode right up to him, cupped the back of his neck and drew him right into a kiss. It startled a laugh out of Justin and Trey took advantage of his open mouth, delved his tongue right in for a taste before pulling back and resting his forehead against Justin's. "Man, I've missed you. You realize it's been weeks since we had that dinner? I hate my damn schedule sometimes. And covering other people's shifts is the worst. How are you?"

"I'm good. A little tired, but good." Justin laughed. "I missed you, too."

"What've you been up to?" Trey asked. He draped his arm around Justin's shoulders and steered them toward the box office where he paid for two movie tickets and led Justin inside as he talked.

"...being an intern is going really well. I love it. This firm has done some really amazing work and I'm stoked that they're giving me a chance to work on some of it."

"That's cool."

"Very cool. Now, let me buy the snacks." Justin insisted, even going so far as to playfully nudge Trey in the side with his elbow when he tried to reach for his wallet. "Nope. You bought the tickets, I buy the treats."

“Okay. You’re the boss.”

Justin rolled his eyes, but bought popcorn, candy, and a drink for them. They chose seats in the middle and settled in, Justin putting the drink in the cup holder between them. “That way we can both reach it.” He handed Trey the bucket of popcorn and shifted until he could rest his head on Trey’s shoulder.

The movie started up and eventually Trey moved in order to put his arm around Justin. If he had been about ten years younger, they would have sat in the back and already been well on their way to their second orgasm by now. But being a grown-up had its advantages as well. He could actually enjoy the movie *and* being close to Justin. It gave him ideas, thoughts, images of Justin underneath him, over him, beside him, just near him.

Given Justin’s vocal pleasure during meals, Trey could imagine the sounds he would make in bed and he had to shift in his seat.

“You okay?” Justin whispered.

“Fine,” Trey answered back. “Just getting more comfortable.”

He moved the popcorn bucket closer to Justin and went through surgical instruments in his head until he had his libido under control and could concentrate on the movie again. The brushing of their hands in the popcorn bucket certainly didn’t help matters, but somehow Trey made it through the movie without sinking to his knees or pinning Justin to the seat with kisses.

When the movie finished, he walked Justin to his car. Justin leaned against the door, looking up at Trey. “Thanks for coming. I know you’ve been busy and I’ve been busy with my job and the texts and the calls have been fun, but...” he paused. He reached out and began to fiddle with one of the buttons on Trey’s shirt. “I just, I couldn’t stop thinking about dinner and how much I wanted to do it again.”

Then in a move that surprised Trey, Justin tucked his fingers between the buttons of Trey’s shirt and pulled him into a kiss, wrapping his other hand around Trey’s waist, pressing into the small of his back. Justin dominated the kiss, licking at the seam of Trey’s lips until Trey opened right up for him. His tongue delved into Trey’s mouth and their tongues tangled, danced together, tasting of popcorn and chocolate.

It didn’t take long for Trey to feel his blood rushing south, his cock hardening in his jeans and he grasped Justin’s hips, dragging him closer. Justin slid a thigh in between his legs and Trey broke the kiss with a gasp at the

delicious pressure against his cock. The sound only seemed to drive Justin on and he nibbled his way down Trey's neck, latching onto the skin right over his pulse and sucking.

Just when Trey began to worry about Justin leaving a mark, Justin bit him gently, licked the spot and moved back up to kiss him. The kiss turned languid, just a slow moving of tongues and lips until it came to a natural end, both of them panting and hands clenched in each other's clothing.

"Wow!" Trey's breath puffed out over Justin's lips.

"Yeah." Justin sounded equally overwhelmed.

"Well, I guess that alleviates my worries that this was one-sided."

Justin pinched Trey's side.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"For thinking this was one-sided, idiot." Justin tilted his head up and kissed him again. "It's not." He reached up and cupped the side of Trey's face. "I really like you. I just wish we could spend more time together."

Trey's heart tripped over itself at Justin's declaration and he had to school his features so a silly grin wouldn't spill all over them. He turned his head and kissed Justin's palm. "Me, too. But hopefully, things will get better."

"Hopefully." Justin smiled. "I should get going. Got a doctor's appointment in the morning."

"Everything okay?" Trey asked, a stab of worry slicing through him.

"Yeah, yeah, just a routine checkup is all. Nothing to worry about." Justin's voice sounded a little too bright, but Trey didn't want to push it, not this early on in whatever was between them.

"Okay."

"Good." Justin patted his cheek with a cold hand and turned to unlock his car. He gave Trey one final kiss. "Night, Trey, I enjoyed the movie."

"Night," Trey whispered.

He watched Justin drive off before heading for his own car and home, making a mental note to buy Justin a pair of gloves.

Trey subsisted on lunches and texts for the next two weeks, until he took matters into his own hands. Literally. He and Justin were on their way back to

the ER after lunch in the cafeteria when Trey spotted the supply closet door ajar. In a flash, he wrapped a hand around Justin's wrist and pulled him into the tiny room.

"Oh my God, what are you doing?" Justin laughed.

"Doing what just about every other doctor in this hospital has done at least once. Making out with my boyfriend in a supply closet. Now, no more talking. I've been so damn busy and I've missed you too much."

"Well, time's a wastin' then," Justin growled.

Their mouths met in a frantic kiss. Trey clutched at the back of Justin's shirt, dragging it to the side in order to bite and suck at Justin's neck. He hissed out a breath when Justin nipped at his earlobe and tweaked a nipple with his fingertips.

"Jesus, your hands," Trey groaned, digging his own nails into Justin's upper arms, holding him close.

He felt Justin's erection digging into his hip and his mouth watered with the need to drop and taste.

"Fuck, I wanna taste you," Trey complained, licking over the shell of Justin's ear. "This damn closet is too small."

"Maybe," Justin breathed out between kisses. "Maybe just our hands then."

His hands dropped to the waistband of Trey's scrubs, swiftly untying them.

"Damn, I didn't want our first time to be in a fucking closet," Trey grumbled, working at Justin's jeans with his own hands. "I just can't wait anymore. With Chris out, my schedule is total shit. I've no idea when I'll get enough time off to take my time and enjoy you like you should be enjoyed."

"Less talking, more doing," Justin ordered, slipping his hand into Trey's scrubs.

Trey swore he saw stars the instant Justin's hand wrapped around his hard shaft.

"Yesssss," he moaned.

He bit Justin's shoulder, shirt and all, in an effort to keep quiet. Trey thrust up into Justin's hand, seeking the friction that would send him over the edge.

"Just like that, honey," Justin encouraged him, stroking his hand up and down Trey's cock. He let go long enough to pull his own cock out and line

them up together, wrap his hand around both. “Come on, come for me,” he whispered into Trey’s ear.

Hearing those words, the husky arousal-filled command in Justin’s voice, combined with the sure strokes of his hand were more than enough to send Trey hurtling over the edge, crying out his orgasm into Justin’s shoulder. His come spilled out over Justin’s hand and seconds later he felt Justin’s cock jerk against his and Justin shudder through his own orgasm.

The two of them leaned against each other, breathing fast, supporting each other’s weight as they recovered. Justin pressed a kiss to Trey’s temple. “For a first time, that was pretty spectacular, supply closet be damned.”

Trey huffed out a laugh. “Next time I’m getting you in a bed.”

“Whatever you say, Trey.”

Minutes later, cleaned up and redressed, they escaped the closet and went their separate ways. Trey felt like one of those television doctors on a weekly drama and frankly, he couldn’t wait to try it again. And he got a chance, just a few days later.

“Not that I’m complaining about getting to see you,” Trey panted, mouthing at Justin’s neck in the on-call room. “But do you have time for this? With classes and work?”

“Just a quick appointment,” Justin gasped. He pulled Trey’s shirt aside and bit his collarbone.

“Been having a lot of those lately.” Trey didn’t want to ruin the moment, but he had noticed.

Justin pulled out of the kiss with a shrug. “It really is nothing. Besides, you’ve been busy with your biker gang.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Oh my God, it’s not a gang. We go dirt-biking on the weekends. I asked if you wanted to come. I’m the only single one and all the wives come and watch.”

“What do you mean you’re single? Or are you saying I’m like your wife? I should sit with the other good little girls and watch her man ride his big bad bike?”

“No,” Trey said petulantly. “I’ve changed my Facebook status to in a relationship.” About the only thing he’d had the time to do.

“Oh my God, you were calling me your wife. You totally were!” Justin laughed. “Okay. If it means that much to you, next time I’ll come. I thought you wanted me to ride.”

“Oh hell no, you’re not getting on a bike.”

Instantly, Justin tensed in Trey’s arms. “I’m not some fucking doll, you know. I don’t need to live in a fucking bubble. And hello, don’t think I didn’t notice you buzzed your hair again or that I didn’t see the brand new scab on your scalp that looked like it used to have stitches in it. You can get hurt just as easily as I can.”

“You have a heart condition!”

“And therein lies part of the problem. That’s all you see me as. My heart condition first, a man second.”

“No, I don’t!” Trey protested, tightening his hold on Justin as he pulled away, already hating the direction this conversation had taken. “I wouldn’t let anyone inexperienced on one of these bikes. That’s all I meant.”

“Really?” Justin asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“Really. I wouldn’t let anyone just jump right into a sport. You have to learn it, work yourself up to actually doing it, especially if it’s dangerous. So yes, really. I’m getting the feeling that you were handled ‘delicately’ growing up?”

Justin let out a long drawn out sigh. “Yeah. It’s made me overly aware of it now, I guess? I can get really defensive if I think someone is handling me with kid gloves. I’ve been living with this problem long enough that I know my limits and I’m not about to overstep them, because the consequences aren’t worth it. So, when someone acts like they know better than me it infuriates me—”

“As it should. One thing they tend to drum into us in med school is that ‘nobody knows your patient’s body better than the patient themselves.’”

“Huh. I’ve never heard anyone say that before.”

“Well, you’ve been seeing the wrong doctors then,” Trey said only half-joking. “I promise I won’t ever treat you with kid gloves. That said though, you need to promise me you’ll never do something you’re not comfortable doing just because I want to or because I’m doing it. I enjoy a lot of extreme sports. It’s kind of like stress relief for me. I’m not an adrenaline junkie, I don’t do

bungee jumping, or skydiving, or that thing where you jump off a building and have wings—”

“You mean base jumping?”

“Yeah, I’m not into that. But I do like to scuba dive, I like dirt bikes, I like snowboarding and skiing, and occasionally, I like to drag race. All stuff a person needs training in before doing it. And if you’re interested, I can show you how and where to get the training, but if you’re not, that’s okay too.”

A knock on the door startled both of them and effectively ended the conversation.

“Um, FYI, Dr. Tsang is looking for you,” Shane whispered loudly through the door.

“Thanks,” Trey said. He hung his head, feeling his face heat up. Disappointed, Trey kissed Justin on the cheek. “Guess we better go.”

“Wait.” Justin pressed a hand to his chest. “You go out first. I’ll give you a three-minute head start and then I’ll leave. Text me later?”

“Yeah.” Trey gave him another kiss and left the on-call room.

The conversation plagued him the rest of the day. He thought back over almost every interaction trying to see if he had ever given Justin cause to think he didn’t find him capable. He couldn’t find one.

The more he dwelled on their argument, the more he found himself getting angry. Justin just assumed he would be just like everyone else and hadn’t really given him the benefit of the doubt. So when Justin finally texted him that evening, Trey didn’t even know how to respond.

Sorry abt earlier. R we ok?

Trey stared at the text before tossing his phone aside and returning his attention to the game on television. They were fine. He should text Justin back. But deep down, he was still hurt.

“You’re being an idiot,” he muttered to himself after a moment, picking his phone back up. He thumbed open his phone and shot off a quick reply before tossing his phone off to the side again.

We r fine

A few minutes later his phone pinged again.

We shld talk

Trey's thumb hovered over the letters on the screen. His stomach sank like a stone. Those three words almost never ended well.

Tom @ lunch?

The apprehension in Trey's belly eased somewhat. If Justin wanted to talk at lunch, in the hospital cafeteria no less, then whatever he wanted to talk about probably would not be as dire as Trey thought.

Tom is good. :)

Another smiley face came through seconds later and Trey knew the conversation was over. Now all he had to do was try not to worry every second until lunchtime the next day.

He slept fitfully, cut himself several times shaving and managed to get shampoo in his eyes. By the time Trey arrived at work, his foul mood had only gotten worse and he barked at his med students all morning. When he finally let them go for lunch he even heard Jordan muttering something along the lines of "who pissed in his cornflakes?"

When he walked into the cafeteria and people scattered in his wake he could almost picture the black cloud surrounding him. It must have been obvious because Justin frowned the second he sat down.

"Hey," Trey said glumly.

"Bad day?"

Trey's shoulders slumped. "Look—"

"No, let me start." Justin never gave him a chance to reply just barreled right on. "I was out of line yesterday. I mean, I wasn't, but look, it's not that I ever thought you would try to run my life or control me or anything like that. It's just, I'm so used to people who are. That I kind of don't know how to act when people don't. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt, should have trusted that you aren't like everyone else, I'm sorry. You have every right to be angry at me—"

"I'm not angry."

"You're not?" Justin looked over at him with surprise.

"At first, yes, after you left I got kinda pissed. But then, the anger went away and I just felt hurt. For all the reasons you just said. I've never given you any reason to think I wouldn't treat you as an equal or treat you like you're made of glass, so when you lumped me in with everyone else, it hurt."

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry for being a grumpy bear and tripping over my words enough to make you think I would do that.”

Justin laughed. “You aren’t a grumpy bear and like I said, you didn’t do anything. If anything I’m an oversensitive shit. Am I forgiven?” he asked.

Trey hated the vulnerable tone in Justin’s voice and nodded his head immediately. He reached across the table and grabbed Justin’s hand. “Nothing to forgive.”

A huge smile lit up Justin’s face and his ears went pink. He ducked his head and speared some of his salad with his fork and shoved it into his mouth, chewing and continuing to smile at Trey like he hung the moon.

Trey walked Justin to the lobby where they made plans to meet up for dinner and possibly a club over the weekend.

“I have one of those dirt bike things Saturday morning. Do you want to come watch?” Trey bit his lip, trying not to get his hopes up.

Justin’s face fell. “Oh, damn. I really want to. I do.” He shifted where he stood, ran a hand over the back of his head. “But one of the partners has this thing due. I kinda promised him I would come in on Saturday morning and help him finish it up. I shouldn’t be more than a couple hours. How long does your bike thing last?”

Disappointment washed over Trey, but he schooled his features and gave Justin a smile. “No worries. Believe me, I totally understand work commitments. I’ll probably be done by lunch. That’ll give me time to get home, get some house stuff done, get cleaned up and meet you for dinner. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds great.” Justin smiled at him, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Trey wanted to press him for a reason, but his phone went off. He pulled it out and glanced at it. “Damn. I have to go.”

“Go. Text me on Saturday about the time and stuff.”

Justin leaned in and kissed Trey on the cheek and waved good-bye. Trey stood in the lobby, various people hurrying by and watched until he couldn’t see Justin anymore.

“He’s lying to me,” Trey said when Shane joined him in the dictation room later that day.

“Who?”

“Justin!”

“What?” Shane shook his head. “Start from the beginning. Pretend I don’t know anything, you know, because I don’t.”

“Justin Shaw. Heart patient. Been kinda dating him for a couple months now. I mean as much as we can given my insane schedule. Ring any bells?”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Cute patient that called you out for bullying your med students.” Shane rolled his eyes and made a gimme motion. “I didn’t mean *that* far back at the beginning. What do you mean, he’s lying to you?”

“Well, I noticed he’s been having appointments at the hospital. And then earlier he told me he had to meet with one of the architect partners he works with to help him finish up a project, but I could tell it was a cover story.”

“How? I mean, like, does he have a tell?” Shane sat back in his chair, flipping a pen between his fingers.

“No. Yes. *Ugh*. He wouldn’t quite look me in the eye and when he smiled? It was one of those fake smiles, you know that you give someone so they’ll just shut up? And he does this thing, where he runs his hand through his hair when he’s nervous. He did both.”

“Oh damn, that sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think he’s lying about?”

“Honestly?” Trey thought for a moment. “Maybe his condition has gotten worse? He’s been really sensitive about not being treated like he’s fragile lately.”

Shane looked up as someone walked past them and out the door before asking his next question. “Have you talked to him and by talk, I mean, directly, using specific language?”

“Not really.”

Rolling his eyes, Shane muttered to himself. “It’s a wonder you ever got a date, let alone managed to hold onto anyone for as long as you have.” He focused his attention on Trey. “Look, just ask him, point blank. Nonaccusatory

language, just say ‘hey, been noticing some extra doctor appointments among other things, is there something I should be concerned about?’ It’s as simple as that. I’m sure he’ll respond favorably to that.”

“I tried that. It won’t work. He’s had so many people controlling his life and his health that he just goes to DEFCON One when that happens and shuts down. It doesn’t help that every time I open my mouth about his health I stick my foot in it.”

“Probably because you’re going about it all wrong. When are you asking him? Like, what are you doing?”

“Well, yesterday we were in an on-call room... um... kissing. You know, when you interrupted us?” Trey felt his face flame up and Shane rolled his eyes before reaching over and flicking him in the forehead.

Shane shook his head and leaned closer. “Okay. This is what you’re going to do, and I swear if you fuck this up... Take him to dinner. Wine him, dine him, and when you’re all relaxed, tell him how much you care for him and then ask him. Do not let your impatience get the better of you and ask him the next time you have your tongue down his throat or your hand in his pants. You need to be dressed and serious for this. Got it?”

“Yes. I’m not completely stupid,” Trey protested.

“Are you two done?” Shaylene asked pointedly.

“Oh shit!” Shane almost fell off his chair and Trey dropped his head to the desk.

“You’re both crazy. Trey, Shane is right, just be honest. Shane, Trey isn’t an idiot, don’t treat him like one. Now both of you, this is a dictation room, not a confessional, if you don’t want the entire hospital gossiping about all this like a bunch of hens, I suggest you dictate. Good thing it was only me that walked in here. Forgot my earbuds.”

With a quirk of her eyebrow, she grabbed her earbuds from the corner seat and left the room.

“Shit, I didn’t hear her come in,” Shane said quietly.

“Me either. Fuck.” Trey’s heart pounded in his chest and he certainly hoped she had been the only one to hear everything.

Shane stood up and took a quick look around. “Okay, we are alone. For real this time.”

“And I’m dictating.” Trey slid open his phone, pulled up the first med record on the computer in front of him and started.

Trey made it through his pile of dictation in record time, clapped Shane on the shoulder and went out to make afternoon rounds. By the end of the day Trey felt pretty good about things. He shot a text off to Justin.

Good day. U?

Fifteen minutes later Justin replied.

Good day. Still on 4 Sat?

Yes

C U Then <3

Trey frowned. “At least I got a heart,” he mumbled. “Guess he’s not in the mood to talk.”

He tossed his phone to the side and flipped on the TV. He spent the night clearing out things on his DVR before heading to bed for a fitful, practically sleepless night.

The rest of the week went the same way. He tried engaging Justin in text conversations only to have them shut down nicely, but rather quickly. Justin skipped out on the other two lunches they had planned and by Friday, Trey knew something had to be wrong.

Shane and Shaylene cajoled him into going out with them and some of the other residents and having a few rounds. He sat morosely at their little round table, nursing his whiskey, while the others joked and laughed and carried on around him.

Shaylene threw an arm around his shoulders. “He’ll come around,” she said loudly into his ear.

“I don’t know. We’ve barely talked all week. He’s avoiding me.”

“You just need to talk to him!” She shouted back.

“I hope you’re right,” Trey replied, as much to her as to himself.

The group plied him with drinks the rest of the evening and Shaylene and Chris both managed to drag him out to the dance floor multiple times and sandwich him between them until finally he begged off and took a cab home.

“Ow,” Trey moaned, when his alarm went off the next morning. He pressed a hand to his forehead and winced. Too much booze, too much dancing, and—

“Fuck!” he shouted, wincing again. “Dirt bikes.” He groaned, glaring at the clock that blinked happily at him, letting him know if he didn’t move his ass he would be late.

Bracing his head, he managed to crawl out of the bed and grab some aspirin and some water before stepping into a hot steamy shower. Thirty minutes and some really greasy fried eggs and toast later, he felt almost human. He shot off a text to his teammates, making sure they had his gear and headed for the track.

Fortunately, his headache had been reduced to a dull roar by the time he arrived and checked in with his team.

“Hungover?” Tom slapped him on the back.

“Yes,” Trey answered through clenched teeth.

“Celebrating or...” Tom let it dangle.

“Or...”

“Sorry. Well, this should be good for you then. Work out some issues.”

Tom left him then and Trey checked over all his equipment before joining the rest of the group. He would be third in the lineup which would give him just enough time to slam down another dose of aspirin and hope to hell his headache would finally go away.

He watched the first ride before gearing up for his. The rumble of the bike between his thighs provided a familiar comfort, the barely leashed power sent adrenaline pumping through his body. By the end of his first ride his headache had disappeared and his mood had elevated.

“Great run!”

Tom clapped him on the shoulder and Trey grinned as he took off his helmet.

“Thanks, man. Looking forward to the next one already.”

He would only have about thirty minutes before his next ride, so he grabbed a quick protein bar and a bottle of water, before checking over his bike and gearing up to go again.

And so it went until his last ride finished and he coasted into the pit area with the rest of the riders. Beer flowed freely, but given the hangover he had

woken up with, he abstained, just enjoying the revelry and the company until he needed to leave to get ready to meet up with Justin.

At home, he fed Bob, scratched her behind the ears and dumped his washables in his laundry room, having left his leathers in the car to be taken to the cleaners. A hot shower and he felt like a new man. The exhilaration of the morning fought his nerves as he dressed. He refused to give in to the butterflies and just focused on the fact that he and Justin had a date. A real date again.

He headed off to the restaurant where they had agreed to meet. Chang's was in one of the hipper parts of town, an upscale area with trendy restaurants and clubs. Trey hoped maybe they would find their way to a club after. He would really like to take Justin dancing.

Trey arrived first and checked in for their reservation. Before he had a chance to go back and wait outside, a hand slid around his waist.

"Hey, Trey." Justin leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Hmm, you smell all nice and clean."

Trey's heart fluttered. Maybe he had been worried for nothing.

"Missed you this week," Justin murmured, nuzzling into Trey's neck.

A slight turn had Trey kissing the side of Justin's head. "Missed you too, babe. We should let them know you're here. Our table's probably ready."

He slid a hand down Justin's back until it rested just above the curve of his ass and gently guided him toward the host's stand.

"Good evening. All here?" The host greeted them with a smile.

"Yup."

"Follow me then."

Once seated, they both perused their menus, not even making small talk. Trey shifted uncomfortably in his chair until Justin reached across the table and took hold of his hand stroking his thumb over the back of it.

"I really did miss you this week," he said softly.

And Trey released the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding in the first place. The tightness in his chest loosened and for the first time in over a week comfort eased back into him.

"Me, too." He turned his hand over and laced their fingers together, grinning at Justin. "So, tell me about your week. How'd that thing go this morning?"

If Trey had not been watching so closely he would never have seen the flit of fear go through Justin or the way his eyes shuttered slightly, closing off a part of himself from Trey.

But then Justin put on a brave smile and the moment passed and Trey wanted to believe he had only imagined it. And with Justin grinning at him and rattling on excitedly about architecture, he decided to do just that. Tonight they would enjoy each other's company and tomorrow they could deal with the heavy stuff.

"...so then Rick, that's the partner, let me do some sketches of my own based on what we talked about with the client and he said they were so good that he couldn't believe I haven't even graduated yet! He said I have a real feel for translating what the client describes into the drawings. Can you believe it?"

"Hey, that's great news! We should celebrate!" Trey signaled the waiter. "We'd like a round of drinks, I'll have a Jack and Coke and Justin will have..."

"Rum and Coke, please."

"Make it a top shelf, though. We're celebrating."

"Ooh, what are you two celebrating? An anniversary?" The waiter winked at them.

Justin flushed and dropped his gaze. Trey could feel the discomfort coming off him and despite the lurch his heart gave; he smiled at the waiter and did his best to roll with the question.

"No, um, just a work thing, but it's worth celebrating."

"Well, all right then. I'll be right back with those drinks. And then if you're ready I'll take your order."

"What about your week?" Justin asked as soon as the waiter left.

"According to Jordan, I sufficiently terrorized my med students this week. In fact, I actually ended up apologizing to her and buying all of them coffee."

"Oh, wow. What happened?"

"Let's just say I wasn't in the greatest of moods this week."

"Sorry. It probably didn't help that I kind of ignored you after the supply closet thing."

"Well, you have been blowing hot and cold lately..."

“But I’m not now.” Justin’s grip on his hand tightened, with an almost desperate feel to it. “I do apologize. It’s just been an off week, but it’s better now and I’m so excited about my job—”

“You should be. I’m so proud of you!” Trey squeezed his hand back.

“Thanks. Do you think we could do a redo?”

“Redo?”

“You know, that thing in golf where they redo the shot?”

“Oh!” Trey laughed. “You mean a Mulligan. What do you want a Mulligan for?”

“For this week—it sucked for both of us.”

“Then we’ll have it. And next week will be better.”

“Good. Now, what should we eat?”

Trey laughed and let go of Justin’s hand so they could both concentrate on the menus.

The flirting and sexual subtext continued throughout the meal and by the time they finished Trey could barely remember what he had even been worried about.

“Let’s go to that club down the street. Um, I think it’s called J Street? It’s supposed to be pretty hot.” Justin said.

“Okay, lead on McDuff.”

Justin snorted and buried his head in Trey’s shoulder. “Oh my God, you are such a dork.”

Trey kissed the top of his head. “You love it.”

“I do,” Justin said. He leaned up and kissed Trey. “I really do.”

Trey pointedly ignored the wistful tone he could hear in Justin’s voice, determined to have a good night and ignore the multitude of little things poking at him demanding to be added up. Justin threaded their fingers together and tugged Trey down the street, a playful smile on his lips. Trey let the infectious smile take over and followed right along.

The club music could be heard a few hundred feet from the door and Trey cringed at what that would be doing to their hearing, but the idea of Justin’s

body grinding up against his made all worry disappear. In fact, it sent so much of his blood south he would have followed Justin anywhere.

Lucky for them, Justin knew one of the guys at the door and they had no trouble getting inside. He led them through the tight crowd straight to the dance floor where he crowded up against Trey's body, arms around his neck. Trey immediately dropped his hands down to hold onto Justin's hips, pulled him in close, felt his heat and hardness pressing against his thigh.

The music pulsed through him, guiding his movements. The tight press of sweaty bodies around him assailed his senses with the smell of male arousal and excitement. Justin moved against him, lips pressed to his neck, tongue tasting what surely had to be the slight sheen of salty sweat.

With a gasp, Trey yanked the collar of Justin's shirt aside so he could taste Justin for himself. He sucked at the join of his shoulder and neck, biting gently into the muscle, but sucking hard at the skin. He wanted to leave his mark. *Needed* to leave his mark. Because tonight felt different and Trey felt like he had to enjoy it to its fullest.

Hands drifted across his ass, Justin's teeth bit into his earlobe, his hard cock dragged across Trey's thigh. Trey gripped the nape of Justin's neck, guiding him into a kiss. He thrust his tongue into Justin's mouth, dominating the kiss, not even giving Justin a chance. And Justin clung to him, fingers digging into his ass, desperate in their effort to not let go.

"I know we just got here, but we should go. Back to your place," Justin shouted into his ear.

His own erection was making his jeans painfully tight, so Trey agreed, but not before crushing their mouths together again. He felt, more than heard, the delicious whimper Justin let escape into his mouth. And despite the pounding music and the erotic press of bodies around them, the world narrowed down to just the two of them. The languorous slide of their tongues, the desperate clutch of their hands, the frantic need to make each other scream in pleasure all drove Trey's desire higher and higher. And the hurried thrusts Justin made against his thigh made it clear Justin desired the same.

"Come on," Trey growled. "Let's get out of here." He broke the connection and it felt like he had severed a limb. Nevertheless, he grabbed Justin's hand and marched through the crowd, determined to get Justin back to his apartment and into his bed in the quickest way possible.

Trey took a deep breath when the cool outside air washed over him, cooling the sweat on his skin and pulling him out of the haze of arousal. He slid his hand around Justin's waist and drew him close, nuzzling into his temple. "You okay to walk back to my car?"

"Yeah, it's just back at the restaurant, right?"

"Right. Do we need to move your car?"

"I took a cab."

Pulling back, Trey focused on Justin who suddenly looked sheepish and hopeful all at the same time. He shrugged. "Um, I kinda hoped this is how the evening would go?"

Trey let out a growl at the vulnerable note in Justin's voice and tugged him close again. "Good." He held onto Justin for longer than necessary, something unspoken driving him to reassure him, to hold him, to protect him. He gave himself a mental shake and pulled back.

Without another word, they linked hands and headed back toward Trey's car. Trey's thoughts swirled around in his head in a confusing mishmash. His desire to protect Justin that was drawn out by the vulnerability he could hear in his voice warred with his knowledge that Justin obviously wanted to be independent. The boldness of Justin taking a cab in the hopes that he would be going home with Trey floored him.

"You confuse me," he said aloud.

"I do?"

Immediately, Trey winced at his lack of filter. "You are a plethora of contradictions. Vulnerable and independent. Bold and shy. Funny and cutting. Seductive and innocent. Fearful and brave." He stopped when they reached his car. He cupped Justin's face in his hands. "You make me want to puzzle you out until I've figured out every single aspect of you."

He joined their mouths in a gentle chaste kiss before getting Justin settled in the front seat and running around to the driver's side.

The drive to his apartment took about fifteen minutes. Fifteen long minutes of nothing but handholding that took every amount of restraint Trey had to keep him from reaching over the console and stripping Justin down and lavishing him with attention.

By the time he parked and they got up to his apartment and inside, his hands itched with the need to touch, caress, explore. Justin seemed to share his feelings because as soon as the door closed and locked behind them, Trey found himself pressed against it with a very determined Justin pressed against him.

“Off,” he muttered, tugging at Trey’s shirt, yanking it out of his pants and shoving it up to his armpits.

Before Trey had a chance to react, Justin’s mouth found one of his nipples and sucked. Hard.

“Oh, Jesus,” Trey gasped out. He dropped his keys on a nearby table and cupped his hands around Justin’s head, holding him in place. That’s when Justin used his teeth, nibbling at Trey’s skin, biting the little nub until Trey wanted to beg him to stop.

As if he somehow knew, Justin switched sides and gave the other one the same delicious torture until both were swollen and red and Trey didn’t know if he wanted it to stop or continue.

“Justin.” His voice sounded ragged, even to his own ears. “Bedroom.”

With what little strength he had left, he pushed Justin away from his chest and dragged him back toward the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothes in their wake. Once there, he managed to get Justin on the bed underneath him even though he had trouble deciding where to start. In the end, Justin’s pale skin proved too tempting and Trey licked a long line up from Justin’s navel to his pecs.

Licks turned to kisses turned to nibbles. Limbs entwined and fingers laced together, hands tightening their grips to be used as leverage. They moved as one, thrusting, pulling back and thrusting again, until Trey didn’t know where he ended and Justin began.

When Justin finally thrust inside him, Trey sought out his lips, wanting to give Justin every part of himself. Justin’s movements became frantic, he greedily sucked Trey’s tongue into his mouth, and his grip on Trey’s hand tightened desperately, as if Justin feared letting go. Trey clung back, hung on for all his worth, and rolled his hips to meet every single thrust. They chased their peak and one after another they reached it, names spilling out over lips as they gasped for breath and sought out the touch of the other.

Trey collapsed to the side and buried his face in Justin’s neck, breathing in the heady sent of male satisfaction, happiness, and pure Justin. Justin wrapped a hand around his neck, holding him close, whispered words for his ears only.

After a cursory clean off with one of their discarded shirts, Trey settled back down with his head on Justin's chest, pressing light kisses to skin already littered with pink marks from earlier. His ear pressed to skin, he could hear the murmur in Justin's heart and a surge of protectiveness warmed him from the inside out. He kissed right over Justin's heart. "I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Justin's hands stilled in his hair, but then seconds later resumed their lazy stroking and Trey drifted off to sleep, content and safe with where they stood.

Morning came and Trey stretched out his hand expecting to find his warm and sated boyfriend and found nothing but the cold empty expanse of sheets instead. Instantly, he sat up, alarmed.

"Justin?" he called out.

But he heard nothing in return. Trying to convince himself not to panic, Trey flung the covers off and stumbled out of bed, bending down and grabbing the first pair of underwear he saw. Tripping toward the door in an attempt to walk and put the underwear on at the same time, he called out again, "Justin?"

Still nothing. Trey's heart pounded, thinking the worst. He checked the bathroom first, relieved and terrified to find it empty. "Justin!" he called out again.

"Out here," came the muffled reply.

Relief flooded through Trey, making his knees weak and he practically collapsed against the wall. A hysterical laugh slipped out and he bent over, bracing his hands on his knees taking deep breaths.

"Oh my God, don't do that," he yelled, grabbing his shirt and jeans off the floor, dressing on his way down the hall, stopping short when he got to the kitchen.

Justin sat at the kitchen table with pamphlets and email confirmations spread out in front of him. "What is this?" he asked, quietly.

Trey's stomach dropped to the floor. "Um," he coughed and cleared his throat. "Information for a trip I've been thinking about taking."

"This isn't just information. These are tickets," Justin said, waving the airplane e-mail confirmation, his hand trembling. "This—" he said pointedly, shaking another e-mail, "—is a hotel. Were you even going to tell me you were going? And who are you going with?" His voice shook with rage and hurt and betrayal.

“No, no. No!” Trey protested, quickly walking forward and dropping to a squat in front of Justin, his hands on Justin’s thighs. “You. The trip was supposed to be a surprise for your graduation and what I know we’re both hoping will be a job offer. I thought it would be fun.”

“But you have a scuba lesson booked.”

Trey frowned. “Yeah, so?” Clearly he had missed something. Something vital because Justin shook his head, disappointment and something else clouding his eyes.

“I can’t,” Justin said simply.

“Can’t what? Scuba dive? That’s why I booked us a lesson, you, me, and two instructors. It’s no biggie. It’s low key and it’ll be fun.”

Justin shook his head again, this time clearly frustrated and trying to hide his fears. “What if something happens? What if I get down there and can’t breathe? What if I get down there and my heart—” His voice broke and he looked away. He shook his head. “Nope, I just can’t.”

Now Trey really felt lost. “Okay, first, that’s not going to happen. You haven’t had a flare up in years, there’s no reason why you can’t do this. Second, I’m going to be right there with you. Who better to have as your dive partner than a cardiothoracic surgeon? And third, both instructors are personal friends of mine. Not only are they certified divers, they’re both EMT firefighters. You couldn’t be in better hands. So, I don’t understand what the problem is. You’ll be fine unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“I’m not fine!” Justin shouted, startling both of them. “My heart, it’s not—” He stopped abruptly.

“Justin?” Trey asked, leaning closer, hands stroking Justin’s thighs. “What’s going on?”

Justin drew back, shaking his head. “We can’t do this anymore,” Justin said quietly, his voice shaky and vulnerable. “It’s not good for either of us.” His hands twisted together on the table, knuckles white.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Trey could not stop the frustration from bleeding through his words.

“This. Us. You. The sports, the scuba diving, the hiking, the whatever it is you do when you go out with the guys. I can’t keep up. I can never hope to keep up with you. I’ll only hold you back and eventually you’ll resent me and

hate me because I'm this weak heart patient that can barely get out of bed some mornings. And that will be the end."

Trey stood up, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't expect you to keep up. Jesus, Justin, I'm a doctor, you think I don't know and understand your limitations? I don't expect you to keep up. I don't *need* you to keep up. I have friends for the crazy sports I like to do. I want a partner, someone to share a life with."

"So, what? I'll just be the 'little woman' waiting at home for the 'big bad manly man' to come home?"

"No." Trey shook his head. He started to pace. He had no idea what was happening here or why things had started to spin so wildly out of control. And then, suddenly, everything fell into place, all the appointments, the increasing fatigue, the defensiveness and oversensitivity. He whirled around. "Are you getting worse? What aren't you telling me? What the hell is going on?"

"Nothing," Justin said and his face shut down. Everything about him locked down, and Trey almost took a step back with the shock of it.

"You're lying," he accused, clenching his jaw against the torrent of words that threatened to spill out.

Justin jutted his chin defiantly, just looking at Trey without speaking.

And that stabbed Trey right in his own heart because it told him exactly where he stood. "Wow," he breathed out, hands on his hips, head down, eyes on the floor. "I really thought we had something. I've been happier and had more fun these past few months than I ever have been and just—Wow. So that's it then?"

"Yes. That's it," Justin said stubbornly, but Trey could see his hands continuing to shake.

"After last night?"

"Last night was good-bye."

Trey felt sick to his stomach. He had worried this was coming, had felt it, had resolutely ignored it, refused to acknowledge the writing on the wall. And now it felt like a sucker punch to the gut. His chest ached, he felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. "What do you mean?" he rasped out, clearing his throat after.

"I mean, we need to stop seeing each other. I want to do all those things you do, but I can't, my body just won't let me." Justin's voice broke again. Justin

clenched his jaw and looked away, his body rigid, unapproachable. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple moving up and down. "So, I think we just need to stop before we end up hating each other."

When he looked back up, the fear and despair Trey saw in Justin's eyes felt like knives flaying off his skin. His legs felt like they were about to give out and he blindly searched for a chair behind him. Weakly, he sank down into it as Justin went on.

"I want you to do all the things you want to do. Snowboarding, bungee jumping, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, scuba diving, whatever crazy sport you're into right now. I don't want to be the one holding you back. I don't want to be the one sitting at the lodge drinking cocoa waiting for you to come back from a day of skiing. That's not fair to either of us. You deserve to have someone out there on the slopes with you. And I just can't." His lower lip trembled and unshed tears shined in his eyes, but the stubborn set of his jaw and the tense line of his shoulder spoke volumes and kept Trey in his seat.

"Justin," Trey said, prepared to plead his case, to stop this craziness from happening. But Justin held up his hand and forestalled any interruption before Trey could even get started.

"I'm weak. I'm holding you back. I can't do all those things and frankly, I can't sit by and just watch—it hurts too much. I just—I can't. So I'm doing the only thing I can do right now. Which is walk away. Maybe someday we can be friends again, but for now..." His voice trailed off sadly. He wrapped his arms around his waist, hugging himself and despite his anger and his hurt, Trey wanted to be the one to comfort him, pull him close and promise him everything would be okay. Except he couldn't because Justin didn't want him to.

"All the appointments lately, all those times you said you couldn't go out with me, all those times you said you were working? Were you even working? Or were you seeing your doctor?" Trey got up to pace again. "Oh my God, I've been such a fool. I've been planning this trip for weeks. Looking forward to it. I was going to give you the tickets when I took you out to dinner after your last final."

He stopped pacing and turned to face Justin, unable to keep his anger off his face. "You deliberately lied to me. Told me you were okay. Why would you... I don't understand... And now..."

"Now, it's none of your concern," Justin said stubbornly, his lip still trembling.

The finality in his voice made Trey shiver and it pissed him off because Justin wouldn't even give them a chance. Give *him* a chance.

“So you're just giving up then?” Trey asked bitterly. He shook his head. Hurt and anger and sadness curled inside him, nesting, carving his insides out and making themselves at home. It made him lash out, say the cruelest thing he could think of to cause Justin as much pain as he felt. “Now look who's thinking of himself as a heart patient first and not a man. You'll never be able to do those things with that kind of an attitude. I thought you were a fighter not a quitter. Guess I was wrong,” he snarled.

Shaking with anger and hurt, he brushed by the table so fast he knocked a chair over. He stalked toward the door, stopping with his fingers curled around the handle. “I guess I should be glad, you're saving me from yourself. You're right. Good for you for watching out for your heart. Too bad you didn't give me a chance to guard mine. I'd like you to leave now, please.”

He waited until Justin stood, never looking up as Justin walked toward him and stopped right in front of him. Justin raised a hand and Trey flinched away from him. With a resigned sigh, Justin clenched his hand and dropped it to his side. “For what it's worth, I'm sorry.”

Justin walked out the door and Trey shut it behind him and the sound echoed through the apartment like the final nail in a coffin. Trey clenched his shaking hand closed, swallowed hard over the lump of regret and hurt in his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself not to cry. He took several deep breaths in and out before finally opening his eyes and heading back down the hall toward his bedroom without looking back.

The weeks that followed proved to be some of the hardest weeks of Trey's life. He couldn't even wallow in his pain like he wanted. He had med students to teach, interns to herd, and patients to see. Life didn't stop just because his world had ended.

So he threw himself into his work, took on extra shifts, even agreed to help Dr. Tsang collect data for his latest research. He buried himself so deep both Shaylene and Shane ended up having to drag him out to dinner one night just to get him to eat.

“You can't just stick your head in the sand,” Shane said, around a mouthful of chips. “It sucks, you wallow, and you move on. Becoming a hermit isn't

healthy. That's why you have us to distract you. And pretending he doesn't exist won't make it better."

"I'm not—"

"You are," Shaylene agreed sharply. "Do you realize it's been almost two months since you stopped seeing him? You refuse to talk about him. You leave the room in a huff if either of us bring him up. You're hiding. Have you been anywhere besides the hospital, your apartment and the gym?"

"The grocery store," Trey retorted.

"Look, man, even your students are worried. Jordan, Claire, and Ana have all spoken to both of us on separate occasions, and you know for Claire to seek us out, it's bad."

Shane and Shaylene exchanged a look between them.

"Look, I'm fine. I'm helping Dr. Tsang out with his research—"

"You're not fine. You're running yourself ragged. Trey, you have to stop and deal at some point."

"I'm fine, Shane. I'm fine," Trey insisted.

"Bullshit. You're about as fine as congealed gravy." Shaylene rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"I'm fine," Trey insisted again.

"If by fine you mean fucked up, then yeah, I guess you're fine." Shane sat back against the booth, clearly annoyed with Trey.

"Fuck you. You've been riding my ass about him since the day I met him. What the fuck is your problem?" Trey asked angrily.

"Maybe I care about my friend and I see that he has the potential to have something really great and he's throwing it away."

"I'm not the one throwing it away." Trey took a sip of his beer. "He dumped me, remember?" Just thinking about it made his heart ache. He could hardly swallow the beer over the painful lump in his throat.

"Yeah, and you let him. Didn't even bother fighting for him. How do you think that made him feel?" Shaylene asked.

"Where the hell do you two get off? Why are you always on his side? It's like you're better friends with him than me. If you love him so much why don't

you go hang out with him. Put up with all his excuses, his hiding behind his condition. His... his... martyrdom.”

“Pot. Kettle,” Shane said, shaking his head. “And I’m not on his side. I’m your friend.”

“Could have fooled me,” Trey said, a bitter edge to his voice.

“Boys!” Shaylene slammed her hand down onto the table startling them both. “This is not what we came out here for. We came to get Trey out of the hole he’s buried himself in.”

“I’m not buried,” Trey muttered.

“Yes, you are!” Both of them practically shouted at him.

He took another swig of his beer, hating his so-called friends right now for dragging him out only to gang up on him. It made him feel cornered. Defensive. “No.” He shook his head, not wanting to deal with this, not wanting to face it. The anger, the pain, the disappointment. All of it, welled up inside him, threatening to burst out at any second.

“Trey—” Shaylene started.

“No!” Trey shouted, feeling the dam break. “How the fuck can you blame me? I had my fucking heart broken! I opened myself up to him, something I would normally never do. But I did it, let myself get vulnerable, let myself hope, and what the fuck did it get me? A heart even more broken than his. So excuse me if I want to bury my head in the sand, hide in my corner and lick my fucking wounds. I’ll be fine. Eventually. I just need time.” *Maybe.*

Shaylene glanced over at Shane before she spoke. “Time I can understand. We can give you that. But you’re not doing it alone. You have friends—”

“Yeah, buddy, we’ve got your back.” Shane slapped his hand down over Trey’s shoulder and squeezed. “Don’t shut us out. We can’t be there for you if you do.”

Trey swallowed hard and took another sip of his beer. He nodded at them, not trusting his voice. Shane’s hand patted his shoulder again, and Shaylene reached over and squeezed his thigh.

“Well, that’s sorted. Let’s get some food in this man.” Shaylene motioned for the waiter and ordered enough food to feed at least five people.

“We’re never gonna eat all that,” Shane complained.

“Nonsense. Trey hasn’t eaten right for weeks. Bet he’s hungrier than even he knows.”

By the end of the meal, Trey had to admit Shaylene had been right. They plowed through three different appetizers, several rounds of drinks, burgers all around, and a huge brownie Sundae.

“Oh my God,” Trey moaned. He slouched back in the booth. “I ate way too much,” he groaned. “I think I’m gonna die. You may have to roll me outta here.”

Shaylene chuckled softly as she glanced at the check and pulled out some bills. Shane followed suit, both of them contributing enough to cover Trey’s portion.

“Now, it’s home for you. I’ll drive. Say good night to Shaylene,” Shane ordered him gently.

Trey leaned over and kissed Shaylene on the cheek. “Good night, Shaylene.”

“Good night.” She kissed his cheek, swiping her thumb over it to wipe away the lipstick she had left behind. “Go home and get some rest, sweetheart.”

“I will. And thanks for this.”

“Anytime.”

Shane drove him home, got him up to his apartment and into his bed. When Shane made to leave, Trey grabbed his wrist. “I just wanted to say sorry and thanks.”

Flipping Trey a two-fingered, Cub Scout salute, Shane smiled. “What else are friends for? Go to sleep.”

Trey never even heard Shane let himself out.

Two days later, Trey raced up to the cardiac floor from the ER. “Justin Shaw?”

The desk clerk didn’t even look up at him. “Pod five.”

Spinning around, Trey looked into Pod five. Sure enough, Justin lay there in the bed, asleep, looking a lot worse for wear. Trey moved a few steps closer, his eyes never leaving Justin’s form. He took in the pale color, the sunken

cheeks, the dark circles under his eyes, the shiny sheen of sweat he could see on Justin's face, and the erratic rhythm on the heart monitor.

"Endocarditis," Dr. Tsang said, coming up behind Trey. "You asked me not to assign you to his case anymore..."

"Yeah, no, I—I, uh, heard his name and just wanted to check on him."

"Well, he's been better, but I've seen worse and so have you. He'll probably pull through just fine. I better run. Got an angio, are you scrubbing in for that?"

"What? Oh yeah, yeah. I'll be right down."

"Ok."

Dr. Tsang left, and Trey stood in Justin's doorway staring at him for several long minutes before shoving his hands in his pockets and heading down to the OR.

He held onto Dr. Tsang's words until the bottom dropped out of his world two nights later when he heard a code called on the cardiac floor. He raced upstairs in time to see the code team swarm into Justin's room. Trey hovered at the door, wondering if he should try to help or remain outside. Shane was prepping to intubate and when he saw Trey at the doorway, shouted for him, "Trey, get in here. You're the first cardiothoracic guy here."

Training took over and Trey jumped in. He had to forget who was lying on the table. He needed to keep his head since he was in charge of running the code. The most important code of his Goddamn life.

"When did we give the last epi?" he shouted, making sure his voice carried over the flurry of activity in the small room.

"Five minutes," a nurse shouted back.

"Push another," Trey ordered, grabbing a look at the cardiac rhythm strip off the crash cart. He frowned down at it, his mind racing as the team worked on Justin, the nurse doing compressions, Shane intubating Justin and giving him air, the nurse pushing meds. "Come on, Justin. You're a fighter. I know you are," he muttered.

You told him he was a quitter.

"How long?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes."

"Come on. Fight. Damn it. Fight!" Trey growled.

And just then, as if Justin had heard him, the heart monitor beeped.

“Got a pulse,” one of the nurses shouted.

Relief washed over Trey and his knees felt weak. Adrenaline still pumped through his body as they stabilized Justin and transferred him to the ICU. Trey didn't let himself collapse until he found himself in the doctor's lounge hours later. He sat down in a chair and put his head between his legs. He ran the whole code in his head over and over, trying to even out his breathing and get his own erratic heart rate to stabilize.

“You okay, buddy?” Shane asked, dropping a reassuring hand to the back of Trey's neck.

“No,” Trey choked out. The fear of losing Justin had been real. Was still real. “I almost lost him,” he whispered.

“I know. But you didn't. He's in good hands in the ICU. He's going to recover from his endocarditis and then the best heart surgeon on the planet is going to repair his damn valve so you two can make up and get your happily ever after.”

Trey laughed, a short bark of hysterical sound. “Happily ever after? This is exactly what he was afraid of. And it almost came true. Except, you know what? I think it hurt more because we're not together. His life was in my hands. I couldn't be the family member praying by the bedside. I had to be the one fixing his heart when he broke mine.” He looked over at Shane. “I don't know how to do this.”

Shane pulled him in close, pressing their foreheads against each other. “I know how you do this—with help. You. Me. Shaylene. We'll get you through this. And maybe, after that damn idiot's heart is repaired, we can see about getting him to repair yours. One day at a time though, bro, okay? One day at a time.”

Trey nodded, agreeing with Shane without a word of argument. Shane squeezed the back of his neck. “So today, you're going to go home, eat some dinner, and get some rest and then we'll do it all again tomorrow. The work part, not the code part. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good!” Shane slapped him on the back.

But Trey ignored Shane's orders and wandered down to the ICU and sat in Justin's room, listening to his heart monitor, until the night charge nurse forced

him into an on-call room to get some sleep. He left in the morning after rounds, begged off of surgery with Dr. Tsang, and headed right for the gym, working out until he was too exhausted to do more than crawl in a shower and collapse into bed.

Although he didn't beg off surgery again, he repeated the same routine almost every night until Justin was stable enough to be moved to the cardiac stepdown floor, then he made himself scarce. It wouldn't take long for the gossip mill to let Justin know exactly who saved his life and Trey couldn't be there for that. He couldn't see the rejection in Justin's eyes or worse, the "I told you so."

With Justin out of the ICU and spending more of his time awake, Trey found himself going home to sleep instead, or at least attempt to sleep. And when he did manage to fall asleep? Nightmares. Several times a week, all of them variations on a theme. Each one ending the same way.

"Code Blue. ICU. Code Blue. ICU." Trey heard the overhead paging system, dropped everything and ran down the hall right to Justin's room. The flurry of activity overwhelmed Trey and then he heard the heart monitor flatline.

"No pulse. I've got no pulse!" The activity stepped up, but Trey could see Justin sit up in the bed.

"You called me a quitter. Guess you were right. Good-bye, Trey."

"No!" Trey stretched out his hand, trying to reach Justin.

"Time of death, Zero four thirty-two."

"No! No! No!"

But then Justin sat up again. "It's your fault. You could have saved me, if only you had fought for me."

Trey closed his eyes, hating the accusatory look in Justin's eyes, the anger in his voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry," he pleaded. "Please. Please. Justin. Justin."

"Justin!" Trey shouted, sitting bolt upright in bed. Frantically, he looked around, slumping in relief when he realized he was at home in his own bed. "Fuck." He shuddered, raising a shaky hand and wiping the sweat off his face.

He grabbed his phone off his bedside table, hitting the button to see the time. "Four thirty in the morning." He tossed his phone in front of him on the bed and hung his head.

“Won’t be getting anymore sleep tonight. Might as well get up.”

After showering, he headed into the hospital and figuring it was early enough, he went straight to the cardiac floor. Except Justin’s room was empty. Panic set in and he spun around and asked the desk clerk, “Where’s Justin Shaw?”

“Oh, Dr. Tsang was here about thirty minutes ago and discharged him. We wanted to get him on his way before the day shift arrived.”

“At six in the morning? Who took him home?”

“He took a cab.”

“You let a heart patient get into a cab by himself?” Trey practically shouted at the desk clerk. “Where’s the charge nurse?”

“I’m right here, Dr. Walker. And yes. Dr. Tsang cleared the patient for discharge. The patient said he didn’t have a ride and asked us to call a cab. Our aide sat with him, got him safely into the cab and sent him on his way. Is there a problem? He’s not the first patient to leave here in a cab.”

Trey felt sick to his stomach. Justin really had nobody to be with him.

“Dr. Walker?” the charge nurse asked again.

“No, no, sorry. No problem.” He gave the desk clerk an apologetic glance. “Sorry for yelling at you.”

The desk clerk nodded and went back to whatever he had been working on.

“Is there anything else, Dr. Walker?”

“No. Thanks.”

Numb, Trey turned and left the ward, heading back downstairs to the doctor lounge outside of the OR.

“You look terrible, man,” Shane said, the moment Trey entered the room.

Trey rolled his eyes. Shane always looked like he stepped right out of some medical show on television. “Thanks,” he said dryly.

“Sorry. Been a rough month or so, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah it has been. Dr. Tsang discharged Justin this morning. He took a cab home.”

“Ouch. Sorry.” Shane paused and gave Trey a thoughtful look before continuing. “You know, he asked about you. I actually saw him late last night. Damn kid should have been asleep. Anyway, he kept asking questions about you.”

“What did you tell him?” Trey asked, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

“What do you think I told him? I answered his questions, confirmed that you ran the code, saved his life, and spent enough nights at his bedside that they put your name on the on-call room until he transferred upstairs. He wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

“Seriously? For saving his life!”

“I was just doing my job,” Trey mumbled.

“Maybe you should go talk to him. At least give him a chance to say thank you. You never know.”

When Trey remained silent, Shane went on, “He’s hurting just as much as you. You know this bout of endocarditis happened because he forgot to take his antibiotics before a routine dental cleaning. Kid has been taking meds for years and all of a sudden he forgets? Means he either has a death wish or he’s so messed up over you, he’s forgetting the most important shit ever. Remind you of anyone you know?” Shane raised an eyebrow pointedly.

Trey didn’t know what to say. The information about Justin forgetting his meds was currently blowing his mind. Justin was the most aware and attentive patient he had ever known. He licked his lips, trying desperately to get his mouth wet enough to speak. “He forgot his meds?”

“Yeah, I mean, from what I understand he took them, but like when he got to the office and they asked him. Not earlier like he’s supposed to. So yeah, not good. So they discharged him? Awful early.”

“Yeah. Dr. Tsang sometimes makes rounds about four a.m. So he’s ready for his first surgery at seven. They wanted to get the bed empty for the dayshift so...”

“But you have his number, right?” Shane asked.

“Yeah,” Trey said warily.

“You should call him.”

He clapped Trey on the shoulder and left shortly after, leaving Trey alone with his thoughts and regrets.

Two weeks later those regrets came back to haunt him with a vengeance. He and Shaylene had met up in the dictation room and had just finished making plans for dinner when Shane burst into the room.

“Dude, Justin is down in the ER. They’re prepping him for surgery!”

“What?” Trey’s heart thudded against his rib cage, his stomach dropping to the floor.

“Yes! I don’t know what happened, I only kind of overheard? But they’re prepping him for his valve repair right now.”

“Shit,” he groaned.

“Come on, you can finish your dictation later.”

Trey’s lunch threatened to make a vivid reappearance and blindly he saved his entry, outwardly doing his best to seem calm, when inwardly his freak-out was happening full force. “Justin Shaw?” he asked, as calmly as he could.

“Yes. Justin Shaw. *Your* Justin. Poor dude’s alone down there. No family, no girlfriend, boyfriend, nobody.” He gave Trey a pointed look.

“I-I,” Trey stammered, gathering his things as fast as he can, barreling out of the dictation room and sprinting for the elevator, Shane hot at his heels.

“Come on, come on. Come On!” he said impatiently, pushing the button numerous times with his finger. “Please, for once, be fast,” he pleaded.

“It’s coming. It’s coming,” Shane said, trying to reassure him.

“I hope so,” Trey replied. Surprisingly, the elevator complied and the bell dinged. “Yes, thank you,” Trey whispered, darting inside and pressing the button for the ground floor. The ride seemed to take forever and when the doors finally opened they ran out and right to the front desk. “Justin Shaw, has he been taken to surgery yet?”

The startled desk clerk gawked at him.

“Justin Shaw,” He enunciated firmly. “Has he been taken to surgery yet?”

The desk clerk’s eyes flicked to his badge, back up to Trey’s face and then to his computer screen. “Hold on one sec, Doc, I’ll find out for you.” His fingers flew over the keyboard as he typed. “Noooo—wait, yes. I’m not sure how long ago, his file is still active down here so it must not have been too long.”

“Which OR?” Trey demanded, resisting the urge to slap the counter.

“Easy, buddy,” Shane murmured at his side.

“Sorry, Dr. Walker, it doesn’t say. Just says ‘transferred to OR.’”

“Thanks.” Trey did slap the desk this time and ran off back to the elevator, frantically pressing the up button again, continually muttering “hurry up.” Shane skidded to a stop beside him, both of them rocking back on their heels, anxiously awaiting the elevator. When the elevator arrived this time, they had to wait for it to empty. He smiled tensely at the aide wheeling a gurney out into the hallway and fought the urge to glare at another aide right behind him with a wheelchair.

He punched the button for the OR and rocked back on his heels again, waiting for the doors to close. His mind raced. Justin had almost died during his bout of endocarditis, but other than peeking in on him a few times in the middle of the night when he had been sleeping, Trey had never gone to see him before or after the code. Respecting Justin’s wish for space. *Not that he cared about your wishes though*, a sad voice inside his head emphasized.

Trey clenched his fist. “I’m not going to do this right now,” he admonished himself, wishing the elevator doors would open and he could get away from his own traitorous thoughts.

“Not doing what?” Shane asked.

“If something happens to him,” Trey said, his voice shaky. He turned to look at Shane. “I’ve missed him. Really missed him. What if I never get the chance to tell him? You were right, I should have called him, gone to see him, done something and now—”

“Don’t think like that. It will be all right. You’ll see. Come on, we’re here.”

The elevator doors opened and Trey fought the urge to run down the hall and forced himself to make his way toward the OR desk at a brisk businesslike pace with Shane by his side. “Hi, Angie, I need a favor. Can you tell me if Justin Shaw is in a suite yet?”

Angie looked up at them, her left eyebrow complete with piercing slowly rose in interest before she glanced back down to her screen as she typed. “Justin Shaw, huh? The young man in for the valve repair. Yup, he’s in OR two, probably already prepped and under. Dr. Tsang is already scrubbing in, you might be able to catch him if you hurry.”

“Thanks,” Trey called over his shoulder, already running toward the OR, leaving Shane behind.

“You’re welcome. Good luck,” she yelled back and Trey swore he could actually hear her popping her gum as he ran down the hallway.

He skidded to a stop at the scrub sinks just in time to see Dr. Tsang disappear through the OR door, sterilized hands held up, dripping with water.

“Damn it!” Trey swore, turned around and shot off toward the stairs. By the time he reached the observation room, Dr. Tsang had already made the first opening incision and all Trey could do was sit and wait.

He slumped into one of the chairs, unable to tear his eyes off the still form on the operating table below. “Fuck,” he whispered. “Fuck,” he swore again, pounding his fist into his thigh, standing up and pacing. “Why did I wait so long?” he asked the empty room, turning to look through the glass, swallowing hard at the sight of Justin’s heart open to the air.

A wave of nausea rushed over him and he raced to the corner of the room, grabbing the trashcan. He swallowed convulsively, hating the bitter taste of bile in his mouth, but so happy he hadn’t actually eaten breakfast yet. Trey sat back down, put his head between his knees and tried to calm his breathing. He couldn’t afford to lose it right now, not with Justin down there on the table fighting for his life.

They both had to get through this so Trey could tell Justin what a colossal mistake it was being apart. A bitter laugh spilled out. “Oh my God I was such a fool,” Trey muttered. “I didn’t fight for us. I let him chase me away, let him think other stupid things were more important.” He stood up again and walked to the window, hand pressed to the glass. “So dumb, Justin. So dumb. Both of us. I let you walk right out of my life when I should have done everything in my power to make you stay. Because that’s what you do when you love someone.”

Love someone. “Oh shit.” He pressed even closer to the glass. “I’m an even bigger idiot that I thought. I’m in love with him. God, I really am an idiot.”

“Nah, just oblivious.”

Trey spun around to see Shane and Shaylene standing in the doorway.

“Shane told me about Justin. We figured you might want some company.” She slid into the chair behind him and reached out her hand toward him. “Dr. Tsang is the best, he’s done more of these mini-mitral repairs than anyone else.”

Trey knew that, but hearing her say it out loud somehow eased a bit of the tension in his chest. He sat down beside her and took her hand.

“Does he know?” she asked softly.

“That I love him?” Trey answered, his voice barely above a whisper, but still sounding too loud in the deathly quiet of the observation room.

“Yeah.”

“No,” he choked out. “He was already under by the time I made it up here. And I stupidly just figured it out myself.”

“Well, I always did know you were a little slow,” Shane said good-naturedly, elbowing him in the side.

Shaylene squeezed his hand. “You know, I bet he knew anyway. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, I think everyone knew but you.”

He shuddered. “I was. I was so stupid. I let him push me away. I should have fought, should have held on with all that I have. You know we fought over a vacation? A vacation I planned with scuba diving? I told you that, right?”

Shaylene nodded. “You know he can do a lot of that stuff. Or at least now he’ll be able to. He’ll just have to maybe take it slow, doesn’t mean he can’t join you, that you can’t both enjoy it.”

“He didn’t want to hold me back,” Trey confessed, his voice breaking, the heavy pressure of tears building behind his eyes. “He broke up with me. I thought things were going fine, I mean, there were little things here and there, but overall, things were fine. He blindsided me. Completely. Said it wasn’t working, that I would grow to resent him. Fuck, I was so stupid. I let him. He hurt me and I told him to leave.”

“But now you know better and once he wakes up you can tell him and he’ll know better too.”

“Like it’s that simple,” Trey scoffed.

“Hey.” Shaylene squeezed his hand hard enough to hurt making him turn toward her. “It is. You tell him what you just told me. That none of that other stuff matters, that only he matters, that you’re sorry it took almost losing him to realize it and then you spend the rest of your life proving to him just how much you love him. And if he’s not willing to risk it, then he’s an idiot.”

Her words sunk in and Trey felt the first kernel of hope. Maybe Shaylene had a point. Maybe what he needed to do was fight, to show Justin that he mattered and that Trey wouldn’t be letting him go so easily this time. That is, if he got the chance.

He stood up, Shaylene's hand still held tightly in his when he saw the flurry of activity below. Something had gone wrong. He couldn't hear, all he could do was watch in silence. He could see the monitor, see the irregular rhythm, knew Justin was coding. Trey let go of Shaylene's hand and walked closer to the glass, putting his hand on it. Shane moved to stand at his side, a silent, supportive presence.

"Come on, Justin. You can do this. You're not a quitter and if I have to spend the rest of my fucking life telling you that, I will, but don't you die on me. Don't you quit on me. Please," he begged.

Shaylene drew up beside him, wrapped her arm around his waist and pressed her cheek into his shoulder. He could hear her whispering. He risked glancing at her, saw her hand clasped around the Celtic cross she wore, her lips moving silently.

"Please, please, please," he whispered, over and over.

Dr. Tsang glanced up at the window and Trey could see the grim determination in his eyes. Dr. Tsang wouldn't let Justin go that easily. Trey watched as the surgical team worked frantically and Justin's heart rhythm normalized. Dr. Tsang gave him another quick glance before nodding at the team and continuing the surgery.

"Yes!" Shane exclaimed softly.

Trey slowly let out the breath he had been holding, but his hand remained clenched into a fist against the glass. Shaylene's continued whispers the only sound, while he watched Justin's still form in the room below.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Dr. Tsang looked up and gave him a nod and Trey's knees went weak. He collapsed into the closest chair and put his head down between his knees.

"Deep breaths," Shaylene said, her hand cool on the back of his neck. "Deep breaths," she repeated. She rubbed her other hand soothingly over his back. "He'll be right as rain in no time. You wait and see. He'll be fine."

Trey closed his eyes. He couldn't take the dancing spots, the tunneled vision, but closing his eyes brought unwelcome images—Justin coding, Justin on the operating table, chest open and vulnerable—so he opened his eyes again almost immediately.

"I was such a fool," he chastised himself again. "Such a Goddamn fool."

“Yes, you were. But now he’s out of the woods, and you are going to be the best damn boyfriend that man has ever had.”

“That’s if he’ll have me.”

“You won’t know unless you try. And you’re going to try, aren’t you?” Shaylene prodded gently.

“Yes.”

“Good. Now stop blubbering like a baby. Clean yourself up and go meet him in recovery.”

“You’re kind of good at this, you know that?” Trey asked, his voice watery.

“Don’t encourage her,” Shane said dryly.

“Shut it you.” Shaylene sent Shane a glare before turning back to Trey. “Nah. Just Southern.” Shaylene nudged his shoulder. “Go on.”

“Thanks.” Trey leaned over and kissed her cheek before doing as she asked.

Twenty minutes later, he sat by Justin’s bedside. Waiting. It would be at least another forty-five minutes before Justin woke up, but Trey didn’t plan on going anywhere. Not until Justin opened his eyes.

He stayed out of the nurses’ way when they came to check on Justin’s vitals. He considered himself lucky they didn’t ask him to leave.

“You know the only reason you’re being allowed to stay is because the nurses love you, and everyone is rooting for the two of you,” Dr. Tsang said dryly from the gap in the curtain.

Trey startled in the chair and made a move to stand up, but stopped when Dr. Tsang held up his hand. “I’m breaching protocol here, but you saw the surgery so you know most of it already. I repaired the valve and with some cardiac rehab, he’ll be able to live a mostly normal life. Definitely more normal than before. He’ll even be able to do some of those crazy things you like to do. Within reason. And without long-term blood thinners.”

Dr. Tsang paused and moved closer to the bed, pulling up Justin’s med record on his handheld device and checking over the recorded vitals. “He should be waking up soon. Don’t agitate him. Boy needs to recover. So whatever drama you were planning? Don’t.”

“I wasn’t—” Trey started, but Dr. Tsang interrupted him.

“We may be friends, I want the best for you in everything, but not at the expense of my patient. So no drama. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Trey said, chastened.

“Son?”

Trey looked back up at him.

“Take some advice? Whatever the problem was? Life is too short, and you’ve obviously been given a second chance. Don’t fuck it up.”

And with those parting words, Dr. Tsang left Justin’s bedside and Trey sitting behind with his mouth open in shock.

“Well, I guess our relationship wasn’t so secret after all,” he muttered to himself, slumping back in the chair, his eyes on Justin.

Before too long, he found his eyes slipping shut, the stress and lack of sleep the past few weeks catching up to him as he slipped off.

“Dr. Walker?” A voice sounded gently by his ear. “Dr. Walker?” The voice got louder this time accompanied by a little shake to his shoulder.

“What? What?” Trey sat up, rubbing his eyes, trying to remember exactly where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. When he realized he was in recovery, it all came rushing back to him. Immediately his eyes went to the bed only to see it had been emptied. His heart skipped a beat and he felt sick to his stomach.

“It’s okay. He’s been moved to a room. He woke up about an hour ago, already sitting up and having ice chips. Said not to wake you. But I thought maybe you would want to go up and be with him.”

Trey blinked his eyes, staring at the nurse, her brown eyes and smile full of kindness. He found her nametag. “Thanks, Kendra. Thanks. Um, where?”

She let out a soft laugh. “ICU number six. They’re expecting you.”

Stumbling out of the chair, Trey lurched for the door and would have fallen had she not grabbed his arm. “Why don’t you have some water first? When was the last time you ate?”

He let her direct him back behind the nurses’ station where she grabbed him a juice out of the fridge and opened it, shoving it into his hand. He drank it

greedily, only now realizing how thirsty he was. “Thanks,” he said, covering a burp with his hand.

Kendra rolled her eyes. “Still such a boy.”

“Sorry,” Trey said sheepishly.

“Here, have another. Go see him, and then promise me you’ll get some food, okay?”

He slugged down the second juice and wiped his mouth with a paper towel this time. “I promise. Thank you.” He chucked the little plastic cup toward the trash and with a thankful smile darted off toward the elevator.

Fortunately, the elevator came quickly and the ride up two floors was blessedly short. The doors opened with a ding and Trey stepped out, suddenly nervous, his heart in his throat. What if Justin didn’t want to see him? What if Justin threw him out? What if—

“Dr. Walker?” Amy, the charge nurse, smiled at him from the desk.

“Yes?” he said hoarsely.

“He’s awake. Why don’t you go on in?”

Trey gave her a weak smile and swallowed hard. He forced himself to walk in the direction of number six. It took him no time at all to arrive at the opening to Justin’s glassed in room. With a deep breath, he pushed the door open and Justin turned his head.

“Trey?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s me,” Trey assured him. He stepped further into the room.

“What are you doing here? I mean, I saw you before I left recovery. You were sleeping pretty soundly so I told them not to wake you. I assumed you needed the rest. Dr. Tsang said you watched the surgery. What—”

“I love you,” Trey blurted out. His eyes went wide and he almost clapped a hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tell you like that. I had this whole speech worked out in my head, I swear. It’s just, you coded. Twice. During surgery and a few weeks ago. I know Shane told you I was the one that ran the code a few weeks ago. I had no business doing it because I was too emotionally attached, but I couldn’t *not* do it. Because it was you, and I couldn’t let you die, couldn’t trust anyone else to keep you alive. And today, it happened again, and it made me realize just what I would lose if something happened to you. Well, I mean, I knew, but I didn’t know? Shit.”

Trey stopped, put his hands on his hips and hung his head in defeat. “This is coming out all wrong. I’m not going to let you push me away because you think it’s what’s best. I get a say in this, too. And I say, it doesn’t matter if you can’t scuba dive or go rock climbing or go to dirt bike rallies with me. It only matters that you’re with me. That we do whatever it is *we* do, together, because I love you, and that’s what matters.”

He let out a deep breath, afraid to look up and meet Justin’s eyes. Getting all that out there felt good, but also terrifying.

“Are you finished?” Justin asked.

Without looking up, Trey nodded. “Yeah. I said what I needed to say.” He held his breath, body tense.

“Trey? Look at me?”

His heart in his throat, Trey met Justin’s eyes and saw everything he needed to see. He took two steps and had Justin’s hand in his, their foreheads pressed together, his other hand wrapped around Justin’s neck.

“I love you,” Justin whispered. He brought his hand up and wrapped it around Trey’s neck, holding them together. “I should never have let you go. I was such a coward. My valve was going bad. I felt weaker, sicker and there you were so full of life and doing so many things I wanted to do; and all I could see was myself holding you back or worse, dying on you. And I just couldn’t do either. So I pushed you away when really what I wanted was to keep you close. Not only a coward, but an idiot.”

“No, no,” Trey argued until Justin silenced him with a kiss.

“Can I ask you something? It’s totally off topic, but...”

“Anything,” Trey said, stroking his thumb up and down Justin’s neck.

“Do you still have that vacation booked?”

“Yeah,” Trey answered, confused as to where this could be going. “I need to cancel everything.”

“Don’t—”

“I’m not going with someone else.”

“Damn right you’re not. Tell me about all the things we can do there.”

“Really?” Trey asked, almost afraid to hope.

“Really.”

“Okay. Okay. First, crystal clear water, like you can’t even imagine. I mean, you can see all the way down to the ocean floor, hundreds of feet below. So many different and colorful fish and some of the best seafood you’ve ever eaten. They have a spa there that does couples massages that will leave you feeling like a bowl of jelly and half drunk on endorphins. And their beds, oh man, king-size beds that are so comfortable it’s like sleeping on a cloud.” Trey felt his excitement growing.

“And the scuba diving?” Justin asked, the words swallowed up by a huge yawn.

“Yeah and the scuba,” Trey said with a fond smile. “I should go. Let you get some rest.”

Justin already looked half-asleep, but his fingers tighten around Trey’s. “Stay with me?” Justin asked.

Trey held Justin’s hand as he lay back down on the bed. He squeezed it. “Always.”

Justin closed his eyes, a small smile playing about his lips as he slid back to sleep. Trey tugged the chair closer to the bed so he could comfortably hold Justin’s hand. He bent forward and kissed Justin’s knuckles. “Never leaving you again,” he promised.

“Good,” Justin whispered in his sleep.

The End

Author Bio

The nickname “Queen of Happy Endings” is an apt one for Katherine Halle. She firmly believes that no matter what the obstacles, what the struggles, or how much angst is involved in the journey that the ending should always be a happy one.

Katherine’s love of the written word started at a very early age with repeated demands of “read to me” to any who would listen. It was only natural that writing would follow. As a child, she could often be found daydreaming, thinking up fanciful stories and writing them down. Now she does it on a laptop. Much faster.

Katherine’s favorite animal is her dog. She likes books, movies, and quirky TV shows such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. She is a closet foodie. She has lived in both Europe and the United States and loved both. When she’s not writing or plotting, Katherine enjoys spending her time listening to music, reading books by OTHER people, and being with her family.

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