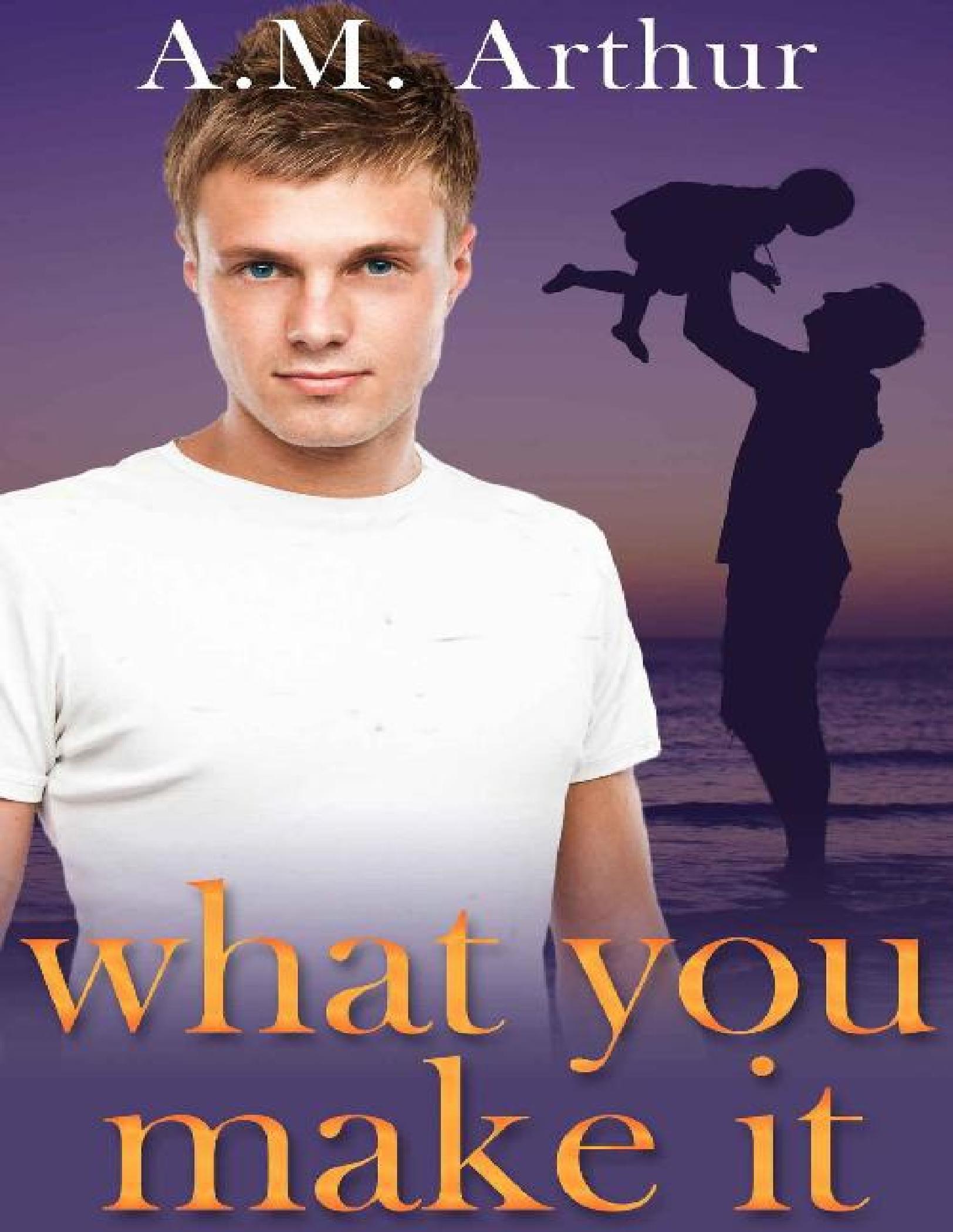


A.M. Arthur



what you  
make it

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# WHAT YOU MAKE IT

A Belonging Story

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A.M. ARTHUR

Briggs-King Books

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## Blurb

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What You Make It: A Belonging Story  
By A.M. Arthur

Can a Dom with a broken heart find what he needs with a single dad fourteen years his junior?

Micah Kelley's life turned upside down when he discovered he had an infant daughter he never knew existed. A college drop-out and single dad with no support from his parents, he turns to his older brother, with whom Micah has a strained relationship. Living with Ezra and his partner gives Micah the freedom to admit he's bisexual without the threat of their bigoted father's wrath, while starting over and looking for work.

After losing his husband and sub to cancer, David Milano is stuck in an endless cycle of meaningless hookups and emotionless scenes with men he has no desire to see twice. But after an explosive encounter with a bratty, blond twink at a bar, David realizes he has room in his heart to love again after twelve years of grieving. When his unforgettable hookup walks into David's office for an interview, David can't think of a single reason not to hire him. Too bad their sizzling chemistry didn't get the memo that Micah is now an employee and therefore off-limits.

Micah didn't get the memo either, and he's intrigued by David's style of BDSM. They begin a secret affair that gives Micah the freedom to explore new sides of himself, and it gives David a chance to open his heart again. But secrets have a way of coming out, and Micah has to put his daughter first. Always.

Even if it means losing the first person he's ever truly loved.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This book contains mild BDSM elements including restraints, blindfolds, and spanking. While the story uses characters from other interconnected series of mine, this can be read as a standalone.

WHAT YOU MAKE IT

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First Edition

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All characters and events in this book are purely fictional and have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names.

Cover art by Sloan J Designs

Briggs-King Books

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## Dear Reader

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When I first wrote *MAYBE THIS TIME* (Belonging #2) back in late 2013/early 2014, I didn't give a lot of thought to Ezra's little brother Micah. Not until the end of the book, when Ezra goes home for Micah's graduation party and things...don't go well. But Micah has stuck in my thoughts over the years, and I've always wanted to revisit the character in some way. I just didn't know how. Not until a Facebook DM conversation with the very talented EM Denning wherein an epic plot bunny was born. Some of it was silliness, but so much of it dealt with the heart of who these Belonging characters are and how they love and protect each other. And I fell desperately in love with the idea of Ezra and Micah being brothers again.

Thank you, EM, for hatching this story with me.

It took over a year before I wrote it, but returning to Ezra, Donner, Romy, Brendan, and the entire Walker clan was like snuggling up with my favorite afghan. I loved writing these characters again, giving them new challenges to face, and even giving Ezra some closure on the past he didn't realize he needed.

A special thank you to Annabelle Jacobs for beta reading this story for me and for pointing out two hilarious typos. I snorted water twice while going through your notes. Also mad props to Sloan J Designs for another lovely cover. I had no clue what I wanted when we started, but I absolutely adore the finished product.

Hugs and grilled cheese sandwiches for the members of my FB group Pot O Gold. I've teased you with this Super Secret Project for so long, and I hope you enjoy this new look into the lives of the men who live, love, and find happiness in my fictional version of Wilmington. Happy reading!

A.M. Arthur

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## Chapter 1

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**M**icah Kelley stood on the second-floor landing of the old brownstone and stared at the apartment door that seemed to dare him to actually knock. And he had to knock, because there was no bell, and from the lights he'd seen from the street someone was home. Maybe his brother, maybe his brother's boyfriend. He wasn't sure who he wanted to see if—*when*—he knocked. Micah had never been big on asking for help, but boy howdy, he needed some now.

Everything he had in the world was packed into his Tesla—everything except for the diaper bag on his shoulder and the squirming little person strapped to his chest. The squirming little person who'd become his entire world in less than a month.

He'd never been to Wilmington, Delaware, before and finding his brother's apartment hadn't been easy, even with GPS, but he was here. Now he just had to find his balls and knock. Ask for help, because he had nowhere else to go.

Fate decided for him; the apartment door flung open, and a familiar face froze in place, a tied garbage bag in his hand. Micah blinked at him, and his brother's boyfriend, Donner Davis, blinked back. It had been three-plus years since Micah last saw the man, but he remembered everything about him. Donner had stood up to Micah's dad about his treatment of Ezra in front of friends and family. Micah had loved Donner for that, and he loved him for loving his brother.

Donner tilted his head, his confusion obvious as he took in not only Micah, but also his little burden. "Micah?" he said.

"Hi," Micah replied, uncertain now that he was faced with this shit-or-get-off-the-pot moment. "Uh, is Ezra home?"

"Yeah, he, um, Ez? Door's for you."

"What?" Ezra's voice echoed from somewhere in the apartment. "No one rang the bell."

There was a bell?

"Ezra," Donner said. "Seriously, come here."

Micah bit his bottom lip and waited. Seconds passed, and then his big brother was standing just behind Donner. Tall, thin, white-blond hair, silver stud in his eyebrow, Ezra Kelley looked exactly the same as he had three years ago. The only difference was the stunned-stupid look on his face.

"Micah, you're here?" Ezra said. His shock melted into delight, and then his gaze went down. "I, uh, are you babysitting? What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?" Micah asked. "Please, it's been a really long week."

"Of course, come in. Welcome to our place."

Micah took in the open living space with its kitchen and two sofas facing a big TV and music

setup. It was a cross between ultra-modern and slightly lived-in, with a few homey features here and there. The TV was on but muted, and they all sort of stood there in the entry, Donner with his trash bag, Micah with a diaper bag.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Ezra said with an edge of laughter in his voice. “It’s been years. I swear to God, you somehow got taller.”

“I need help, Ezra.” Micah didn’t have the energy for small talk right now. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Okay. We’ll figure it out.” Ezra led him to one of the sofas. “First of all, who is this attached to your chest?”

Micah carefully lifted the sleepy infant out of the chest carrier and arranged her in his arms as he sat. “This is Brianna. My daughter.”

Ezra’s entire body did its interpretation of a spit-take. His long limbs jerked, and he kind of flopped onto the other end of the couch, his mouth wide open, eyes impossibly big. “Your who now?”

“It’s both a long and a short story.” Micah cracked a wide yawn that made Bree gurgle at him.

“You guys want me to put some coffee on?” Donner asked. Apparently, taking out the trash was on hold.

Micah had drunk so much coffee this past week he wasn’t sure he had regular blood anymore. “Yeah, please?” He yawned a second time.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go to bed and do this in the morning?” Ezra asked.

“Nah, Bree’s been sleeping for hours, so she’ll be awake a while yet. Coffee is fine.”

“Your brother’s a huge coffee snob,” Donner said, “so you know it’ll be good stuff.”

“Cool.” Bree started fussing, so he fished out her pacifier. She was so little he sometimes couldn’t believe she was real. “Say hi to Uncle Ezra.”

Ezra cleared his throat in an obvious way. “Uh, not to be rude or anything, but, uh…”

Micah traced a finger down her chubby, dusty-brown arm. “Her mom was black, Ez. It’s why I’m here. Dad cut me off, and we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“You’re shitting me.” Ezra went from confused to pissed in a heartbeat. “You have a newborn and that bastard cut you off? Why?”

He shot his big brother a withering glare. “Why do you think? Dad’s not only homophobic, he’s a racist prick. He wanted me to put her up for adoption, or he wouldn’t pay for my final semester’s room and board, so I left school.”

“Jesus, Micah, you only had one semester left before you graduated.”

Micah shrugged. “She’s my daughter.”

“Are you sure?”

“Dad didn’t believe me either, so he insisted on a DNA test. She’s mine.”

“She’s gorgeous,” Donner said from the other end of the couch. “May I hold her?”

“Sure.” Micah could use a break, after being her sole caregiver for the past week-plus. He stood and eased her into Donner’s muscled arms. Bree was only four months old and still small, but Donner held her like a guy with experience.

“So where’s her mom?” Ezra asked. “And for the record, I still can’t believe you’re a dad. You’re twenty-one for fuc—for freak’s sake.” He cut his eyes at the baby.

Grief only added to Micah’s incredible physical fatigue. “Her mom died two weeks ago, a few days after Christmas. Her name was Kenya. Her aunt contacted me about the baby about a week before Kenya died, so I was able to be with her in the hospital.” Watching a former

girlfriend and the mother of his child die...no, he hadn't dealt with that grief yet, because he'd been dealing with Bree.

"Jesus, I'm sorry." Ezra scooted across the cushion and slung his arm around Micah's shoulders. "That really sucks."

Micah leaned into his brother, grateful for the comfort. "Thanks. It did. A month ago, I didn't even know we had a kid, much less that Kenya was sick." The rich aroma of coffee filled the apartment, so much better than the stale coffee he'd guzzled at the hospital while sitting with Kenya and her aunt, getting to know his daughter. "Apparently, her doctors thought her frequent headaches were just part of being pregnant, but it turned out she had brain cancer."

"Holy shit. Uh, crap." Ezra blanched. "That's unbelievable."

Micah cracked a third yawn. "Jesus, I'm tired."

"I'll get you that coffee," Donner said. Instead of giving Bree back, though, he walked into the kitchen and moved around like a one-armed pro. Micah only knew Donner from infrequent phone calls, but Ezra trusted his partner implicitly, and Micah was too wrung out to question his ability to handle an infant and pour coffee.

"Okay, start at the beginning, maybe," Ezra said, once they all had mugs and Donner was seated on the other couch with a wide-eyed baby in his lap.

As much as he enjoyed his brother's side-hug, Micah was exhausted. He slumped against the soft sofa and studied Bree. She had her mom's smile. "I met Kenya my sophomore year in an accounting class. She was super smart with numbers, and she ended up tutoring me, and then we became friends. We started dating that summer, and the week before our junior year started, I invited her to Seattle to meet our parents."

Ezra flinched. "How did that go?"

"Dad was...abrupt. He wasn't directly rude to her like he was to Donner at my party, and Mom was really nice. But before we went back to school, Dad took me into his office and basically said he would never accept her as my girlfriend."

"Because she was black?" Donner asked, disgust obvious in his voice.

"Pretty much."

"Christ, but your dad is an intolerant prick."

Micah snorted.

"Don't I know it," Ezra replied.

Their dad, Patrick Kelley, had never accepted that Ezra was gay, and even though the family never talked about it, he'd sent Ezra to conversion therapy when Ezra was sixteen. Not long after, the therapist was arrested on multiple counts of sexual assault against his patients, and Micah had never had the courage to talk to Ezra about his experiences. But it had driven a huge wedge between Ezra and their dad, and Ezra had acted out by moving from Seattle to Delaware to be with a now-ex-boyfriend.

Ezra hadn't returned to Seattle again until Micah's high school graduation party three and a half years ago. Their parents had disowned Ezra not long after, but since Micah was eighteen, he'd kept in touch with his big brother, mostly through email and Instagram.

He was super proud of Ezra for owning not just a thriving coffee shop, but also a food truck extension of the shop. Ezra had set his own course and he was happy, healthy, and in love. Micah had one of the three things going for him; he hadn't had so much as a head cold in over two years.

"Things were tense between me and Kenya when our junior year started," Micah continued. "I did have feelings for her, and at one point I thought I loved her, but dad made it so freaking

hard. Constantly calling, asking if I'd met a suitable girlfriend, hinting he'd stop paying for my board if I kept dating Kenya. Eventually, during winter break that year, Kenya and I had a big fight, and we broke up. Went our separate ways. I had no idea she was pregnant. She never told me, but she also didn't return to school this past fall for senior year. We only had a few mutual friends, but no one knew where she went."

Micah sipped at the dark, rich coffee. Just the scent was perking him up, but it tasted even better. "Kenya was raised by her Aunt Brenda, along with some younger siblings and cousins, and she lost her scholarship when she chose to have our baby. Then Kenya got sick. When they realized she wasn't going to survive the cancer, Aunt Brenda called me. She had too many other young kids in the house and a fixed income, and she couldn't handle an infant."

"I'm impressed she trusted you enough to handed a baby over, considering you're practically a stranger," Donner said.

"I got to spend time with them in the hospital, and I absolutely fell in love with Bree. One of the last things Kenya said before she lost the ability to speak was that she wanted me to raise our kid. I guess she figured that because my family had money, Bree would want for nothing, and maybe if Mom had any say in things, she wouldn't be wanting."

"But Dad threw a fit?" Ezra asked.

"Yup. After the funeral, I drove us to Seattle to meet her grandparents. I guess I hoped that by seeing her, seeing their granddaughter in the flesh, they'd accept her." Micah smiled fondly at Bree. "Mom did. But all Dad saw was her dark skin and natural hair, and he lost it. So I did what you did. I left. I managed to get a few grand out of my account before he froze it, and I guess he forgot about the emergency credit card until yesterday, because I've been using it for gas, food, and motels this past week."

Ezra gaped at him. "You drove across the country with an infant in a week, all by yourself?"

"I didn't have a choice." His chest tightened with grief. "I'm all she's got, Ez, and you're all I've got. All I could think about was getting to you, and I knew flying was faster, but everything I have to my name is my car. The clothes and stuff in it."

"Why didn't you call? I could have flown out and driven with you."

"You have a business to run." Micah flushed, embarrassed to admit this now that he was here. "And a tiny part of me was scared you'd turn me down."

"What?" Ezra angled to face him more fully, slim blond eyebrows furrowed. "Why would think for a second I wouldn't want to help you?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "You're six years older than me, and you've got your own life out here. Friends and a business and, I mean, we talk but we aren't close. I guess I thought if I just showed up with your adorable little niece, you'd have a harder time turning me away."

"Well, we are not turning you away, are we Donner?"

"Heck no," Donner replied. "I'm in love with this cutie pie already. Where's your luggage and stuff? You guys can have the guest room."

Micah stared at his brother's boyfriend, stunned at how quickly the older man had taken them both in. "Are you positive? I can still afford a motel with the cash I have—"

"No way, the guest room. Right, Ezra? We help friends in need, and it won't be the first time we've had a noisy houseguest." Donner bounced Bree lightly and she burred. "A baby crying isn't the same as screaming nightmares, but we'll deal. You're family, dude and dudette."

"You two are absolutely staying here," Ezra said. "No question. Let's go get whatever you need from your car. The rest can wait until tomorrow."

"Don't you have work?"

“Nope, the shop is closed on Mondays, so you’ve got me all to yourself. We can get you settled, and I can get to know my niece, who I plan to hold once we’re back upstairs with your luggage.”

“If you can pry her from my grasp,” Donner replied. “Good luck with that.”

Micah wasn’t exactly sure what was happening, only that Ezra herded him out of the apartment and downstairs into the freezing January night. He’d been living out of the same suitcase for weeks, and most of what he had was in it, except for a few things he’d rescued from his old room at his parents’ house. And the box of things Aunt Brenda had sent along with him.

Standing by his impractical Tesla on a cold, icy street, overcome by emotion, Micah hauled his big brother into a hug. Gratitude, love, relief and exhaustion battled each other, and he clung to Ezra for a while, grateful Ezra simply held him back.

“We’ll figure this out,” Ezra said. “I promise.”

“I know. Thank you. Seriously, thank you.”

“I love you, little bro. Even though you’re smarter and taller than me.”

Micah let out a strangled bark of laughter, then released Ezra. “Can’t do anything about that. Seemed rude to say it upstairs, but I’m super impressed you and Donner are still together. He’s really the one, huh?”

“He’s the one. Donner is the best person I know, and he’s already excited to be an uncle. And trust me when I say that Bree will not want for uncles who will love and dote on her.”

“I just...I was so mad at Dad for the way he treated you guys, you know? But I didn’t do anything. I went to school, and I took my allowance, and I never thought he’d do to me what he did to you.”

“Fuck him. You’ve got me, dude, and you’ve got Donner. And once we introduce you to our friends, you’ll have more support than you know what to do with, because I’ve got great friends.”

“Damn, you’re still so modest.” They headed back to the brownstone, because it was crazy freaking cold outside. “Seriously, though, I’m only twenty-one, and I’ve got a baby. I’ve been a dad for less than a month. I have no idea what I’m doing, and I need your help.”

“You’ve got my help. Bree is adorable, and you’re my brother. Plus, Donner’s best friend has three older sisters who’ve given him a bunch of nieces and a nephew, so we know people with childcare experience. We’ll figure this out together.”

Micah decided to believe Ezra, because he didn’t have a choice. His entire life was in that suitcase, and he’d left a piece of his heart upstairs with Donner. Someone Micah didn’t really know, but he trusted the guy because Ezra loved him. And he’d have to learn to trust Ezra’s friends, because his own had pretty much dumped him when he left school to be a full-time dad.

He hauled his suitcase up the stairs, while Ezra managed the baby carrier and an extra bag of baby stuff Micah had hoarded for Bree. Her fussy cries greeted them at the door. Donner was walking around the living room, rocking her in his arms, but she wasn’t having it.

“Is she hungry?” Donner asked, his expression one of dumbfounded helplessness. “I’ve never really been around babies.”

“Maybe, it’s been a while.” Micah rolled his suitcase out of the way, then took his daughter from Donner. Patted her diaper, which didn’t feel too soggy. And it had been a few hours since that carrot baby food during their last pit spot. “What’s up, princess? You ready for your evening bottle?”

“Listen, I’m going to give Brendan a call and see if his sister still has the crib from when Aletia was born.”

“Good idea,” Ezra replied. To Micah, he said, “Is there anything major besides a crib that you need tonight? Formula, diapers?”

“No, we’re well stocked on that stuff,” Micah said. “Can you hold her while I make a bottle? It’s easier with two hands.”

“Absolutely, I can. Come here, sugar, come to Uncle Ezra.”

Micah took a moment to marvel at the sight of his flamboyant big brother holding his niece for the first time. They were a study in physical contrasts, but she also kind of looked like him in the jaw line and shape of her eyes. She continued to fuss, despite Ezra making funny noises and faces, while Donner made some calls in the bedroom. Once Micah had the bottle ready, he sat Ezra down and showed him how to feed her.

He’d only learned himself a few weeks ago, and now he was giving pointers on how to angle elbows. His entire life had been upended, and maybe, just maybe, he’d found a solid place to land for a while.

Donner came out of the bedroom and stopped short. He gazed at Ezra with so much adoration in his eyes that Micah’s heart lurched with jealousy. God, he wanted someone to look at him like that. Like he was the only person in the room, could do no wrong, and was the most beautiful creature on the planet. Micah didn’t know if Donner looked at Ezra that way all the time, or if it was because Ezra was bottle-feeding an infant, but goddamn, it was a precious look.

His brother was a very lucky man to have survived everything he had and built the life he’d now opened up to Micah and Bree.

“Brendan said he’d go pick up the crib and bring it over,” Donner said after a moment of openly admiring Ezra.

“Right now?” Micah asked. “It’s almost eight at night.” And way past Bree’s intended bedtime, but it wasn’t as if he’d had a bed beyond her carrier. He’d spent the last five nights sharing motel beds with her, Bree’s little body surrounded by pillows on all sides, not only to keep her still but to stop Micah from accidentally rolling over on her.

“Brendan is exactly that kind of guy,” Ezra said. “He will drop everything he’s doing if a friend needs a favor. Is Romy coming, too?”

“Probably. I gave Bren a rundown of everything, and I’m sure he told Romy all about it.”

Micah knew the names from previous conversations with Ezra. Romy was Brendan’s fiancée, and he also worked at the coffee shop. It would be nice to finally put faces to some of these folks.

“Romy and Brendan are good people,” Donner said. He crossed the living space and grabbed Micah’s suitcase. “Come on, man, I’ll get you set up.”

“Thank you.” Micah left Bree with Ezra, who seemed absolutely enamored of the bottle-slurping baby, and followed Donner to the closed door on the right. The room was small but tidy, with blue walls and simple decorations. A bed and night table, and a big dresser were the only pieces of furniture, and Micah wasn’t sure where he was going to fit a crib, but he’d figure it out.

“This is great, thanks,” Micah said.

“Listen, it’s probably going to take a while to get on your feet,” Donner replied, “so if the dresser doesn’t work, we can get rid of it.”

“You don’t have to get rid of your possessions to fit me into your life.”

Donner shrugged. “Neither of us are married to it. It’s a dresser from a thrift store.”

“We can rearrange the furniture if we have to, and the dresser top is wide enough to use as a changing table. It’s better than the bed or the floor.”

“We’ll see what’s what when Brendan gets here with the crib.”

“Okay.”

A surprised squawk from the living room dragged them out of the bedroom. Ezra had dropped the bottle and was holding Bree a little away from his chest. His shirt had a big splotch of white goo on it. “She barfed on me!” Ezra sounded so affronted that Micah started laughing.

“Babies do that,” Micah said. “Aunt Brenda told me it helps to burp them during the feeding, so it doesn’t come back up.”

“Now you tell me.”

“It’s formula, you’ll live,” Donner said as he used a dishtowel to wipe Bree’s face. Then he took the baby, so Ezra could clean himself up. Micah watched the ease with which the pair moved around each other, and another flare of jealousy lit in his chest. And not just how they acted with each other, but also with Bree.

For one brief instant, Micah felt like a spectator in their lives. As if he’d stepped into a sitcom featuring a gay couple and their newly-adopted baby, and Micah was the neighbor who’d dropped by for a visit.

That bubble burst when they all three smelled the soiled diaper.

“I’ve got it,” Micah said. The first few times he’d wiped up baby poop, he’d wanted to vomit. Now he barely noticed how gross it was.

“Can I watch?” Ezra asked. “I mean, I’ve never really done it before, and to be the very best possible guncle for this princess, I need to learn to change a diaper.”

“Guncle?”

“Gay uncle. This little one has no idea how fabulous her life is going to be with Guncle Ezra around.”

“Please don’t call yourself that,” Donner said.

“For whoever wants a diaper lesson, the party is this way,” Micah said. He grabbed the diaper bag, then accepted his stinky kid from Donner. They both ended up following him to the bedroom, where he laid out the changing mat on the dresser. It was a decent height for this, but might not work well when she got the hang of rolling.

Ezra pulled a face when Micah peeled back the diaper, but he paid attention to everything Micah did to clean her up and change her into a fresh diaper. “That looked...incredibly easy,” Ezra said.

“It isn’t all that hard, especially with practice. And a decent diaper helps. Aunt Brenda told me horror stories of when her own kids were young and how they’d shoot poop up their back, or it would squeeze out between their legs. Full-on bath time disasters.”

“Gross. Was she trying to torture you?”

“Nah.” Micah picked up the gurgling baby and held her near his chin. Inhaled her baby powder scent. “We had a lot of time to talk during Kenya’s final few days, when she was unconscious all the time. Brenda was a genuinely nice woman trying to help family, and she deeply regretted not being able to take care of Bree herself. And she wanted to get to know me, so she wouldn’t worry so much about me taking Bree to Seattle.”

“Where is Aunt Brenda from?” Donner asked.

“Sacramento. I promised to keep in touch, FaceTime and stuff, so Bree grows up knowing her Great-Aunt Brenda and all her cousins in California.”

“I think that’s pretty awesome.”

“She deserves to know both sides of her family.”

They returned to the living room, and Bree had nearly fallen asleep on Micah’s lap when someone knocked. Donner went to open the door, and a huge black man carrying a big, flat box

walked in, followed by a short, skinny white guy with shaggy, black hair. Micah stared at them, unsure who was who, because no one mentioned either of them was black, and his upper-class, white-ass self had just assumed Ezra's friends were all white, too.

"Hey, guys, thanks for coming so quickly," Donner said.

The noise woke Bree, so Micah didn't worry too much about standing. He shifted her to his left arm, so he could shake the hands of the newcomers.

"Micah Kelley," Ezra said, "meet Brendan Walker and Romy Myers."

"Hi," Micah replied. He was kind of intimidated by Brendan's size, but he had a gentle handshake and warm smile. "This is my daughter, Brianna. Bree."

"She's gorgeous," Romy said. "Look at those tiny fingers."

"Thank you. And thank you for bringing me a crib."

"Not even a problem. Ezra and Donner helped me out of a bad situation years ago, and I more than need to start repaying them for that."

Ezra slung his arm around Romy's narrow shoulders. "No one is keep score or taking payments, sugar, stop it."

"Want me to build this for you?" Brendan asked. "Shouldn't take long."

"Come on, I'll help you," Donner said. The pair hauled the box into Micah's room before Micah really had a chance to comment.

"They just sort of take over a situation, don't they?" Ezra said with a grin. "Probably why they've been best friends for over a decade."

"They really do," Romy replied. To Micah, he said, "So Donner said Brianna's mom passed away. I'm sorry, that's so sad."

"It is," Micah said. "I didn't even know I had a kid until last month, and I'm grateful to be here, and that Ezra and Donner are being so chill about two new roommates. Especially one that doesn't quite sleep through the night yet." Then again, they'd slept in strange motel beds for the last week, so maybe she'd settle into a better routine now that they were both in a more stable environment.

"Well, Brendan is great with kids. You should see him with his nieces and nephew. He's amazing, so he'd make a wonderful babysitter."

Ezra huffed. "He's got two perfectly capable babysitters right here."

"Yeah, but you work days, and Donner's schedule is always changing at the bar, so you never know if you'll need a pinch-hitter."

It wasn't as if Micah had a job to worry about, but he was too exhausted to unpack that problem tonight. "What about you, Romy?" Micah asked. "Any experience with kids?"

"None. I've never held a baby that small, not even Brendan's newest niece."

"Do you want to?"

Romy's round, black eyes popped wide. "Are you sure? What if drop her?"

"Come sit first." Micah waited until Romy had settled on a couch, then lowered Bree into his waiting arms. Romy stared at the sleepy baby like she might explode. "See? It only gets tricky when she wants to wriggle around."

Ezra snapped a picture on his phone. "I need to show this adorableness to Brendan. Back in a jiff."

Micah laughed, because he simply wasn't familiar with this joyous, bubbly side of his brother. Growing up, Ezra had been reserved and serious—at least, at home and around Micah he was. But with a six-year age gap, they really hadn't hung out or done much together, beyond family stuff. Micah was the pesky kid brother who worshipped Ezra, until he'd given up trying to

get Ezra's attention and stuck to his own friends. Then the whole thing with the conversion therapy happened—not that Micah had known exactly what was going on at the time—and Micah had resented Ezra for how much their mom had spoiled him afterward.

Micah had only been ten and kind of a brat, and it took him a lot of years to realize how badly Ezra had been hurt, and that Mom's attention was guilt-driven, and then Micah had felt like a selfish idiot.

*We need to talk about this stuff. Really talk.*

Brendan apparently needed to see for himself, because he and Donner both poked their heads out the bedroom door. Brendan's whole face went soft, and he did the same thing Donner had done earlier while Ezra held the baby. Maybe Brendan was even imagining Bree was his and Romy's.

And it kind of impressed Micah that neither of them had brought up the fact that Bree was obviously biracial. Maybe Donner had warned them on the phone?

*That's Dad talking. These guys accept us for exactly who we are.*

They accepted, because they all knew how it felt to be treated unfairly for something they couldn't change, be it size, the color of their skin, or the fact that they were all gay. This was why Micah had wanted to come here. He knew in his heart he'd find a safe place for him and Bree to start over.

He looked at Bree, who'd dozed off in Romy's arms, and for the first time in weeks, he was confident they'd both be all right.

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## Chapter 2

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Micah didn't get much sleep that night, and it wasn't just because he'd gotten used to having Bree in his bed, instead of a crib on the other side of the room. He didn't sleep well in strange places at first, because he'd had the same bedroom most of his life. His first few weeks away at college had been a nightmare fueled by coffee and Red Bull, until he'd relaxed and adapted. All those motel rooms? He probably had an ulcer from the copious amounts of liquid caffeine he'd imbibed to get here.

How long would it take to relax and adapt to this place? Would he be here long enough? As generous as Donner and Ezra were in saying they could stay as long as Micah needed, when did that get a limit? And how long did Micah want to stay? As much as he adored Bree, he was twenty-one, with no degree, no job, and no means to support himself beyond the two grand he'd gotten from the ATM. And he'd only gotten that much thanks to his dad's ties to Chase Bank and their higher-than-average daily withdrawal amount.

He stared at the ceiling as light from the single window slowly brightened the room. Bree had been sleeping for a few hours, and he fully expected her to wake at any moment. Unable to lay still any longer, he rolled out of bed and padded across the hardwood floor to peer into the crib. A crib lined with a folded flat sheet and a bath towel, because no one had thought about sheets for it last night. Bree slept soundly, her little lips slightly parted.

*How is this my life now?*

A month ago, he'd been on winter break, preparing for his final semester of college on a well-earned scholarship, with money and a place to live once he graduated. Now he was a single parent with nothing except an impractical Tesla. Maybe he should sell it and get a more sensible car? He loved that car, but he had a kid now. And if he got a super-cheap used car—safe, but cheap—he could pocket the rest. Help pay rent here, so Ezra didn't think he was mooching for himself and his kid.

A kid he couldn't take care of alone, so he'd fled across the country to his big brother's home. A man should be able to take care of his family—exactly like Ezra was doing. Ezra was taking care of Micah and Bree like a strong man should.

"How am I supposed to be strong for you?" he whispered. "Why did I think I'd be a good dad at all? I'm a kid."

The floorboards beyond his door creaked, suggesting someone else was up. A quick phone check told him it was barely after seven. His phone was the only thing Dad had yet to cut off, but he'd probably remember when the bill came in. Then Micah could get a TracFone or something.

Curious about the noise, Micah left his room, keeping the door mostly shut, but wide enough

that he'd hear if Bree cried. Ezra was puttering around in the kitchen wearing a pair of pajama pants and no shirt.

In January.

"How are you not cold?" Micah asked.

Ezra jumped, then spun around with the empty coffee carafe in his hand. "Christ, you scared me. Don't do that."

"Sorry." Micah crossed the small living space to the kitchen area. He hadn't really noticed yesterday, but it was a tiny kitchen squared off by a linoleum floor. Big island, but it only had one of those college-sized mini-fridges. And the bathroom was cramped, too, with a weird slanted ceiling. This wasn't a good apartment for three men and a baby.

"You don't look like you slept much."

"I didn't. New bed and all."

"Not the baby?" Ezra scratched at his bare chest. "Jesus, I can't get used to the idea of you being a dad."

"Join the club." He leaned against the island and watched Ezra fill the carafe with water. "You always get up early on your day off?"

"After three-plus years, my body is used to baker's hours. Can't sleep in anymore."

"Good thing you make great coffee then."

"Guess so. You hungry? We've always got cereal and there's usually stuff for boxed pancakes."

Micah shrugged. "A little hungry, I guess. Cereal is fine."

"Cool." Ezra pulled an impressive assortment of cereal boxes out of a cabinet, then produced two bowls, two spoons, and a carton of milk.

"I can pay for groceries."

"Okay." Ezra mixed corn flakes with Cap'n Crunch. "I mean, I honestly have no idea what you like to eat, but we've got stir fry stuff in the freezer and a lot of delivery places on speed dial. We're gourmet like that."

Micah snickered and grabbed the box of Cap'n Crunch. "I'm a college student, remember? I'm used to subsisting on pizza and chicken nuggets. I just want to help out around here, you know? Pull my weight."

Ezra paused with a spoonful of cereal near his mouth. "You guys being here isn't a burden. You're family, period."

"I know, I just..." He pushed the cereal box away. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Do what?"

"Raise a kid. Be a dad."

"Hey." Ezra put his spoon down and circled the island. Micah didn't fight the hug. "We're going to figure this shit out, okay? Maybe we weren't close before, but that will change. You aren't doing this alone, Micah, I promise."

It took a bit of work for Micah to hug Ezra back. He wasn't used to so much hugging. Bro hugs from friends that lasted a split second, sure. A hug from Mom when he came home to visit, yeah. But not these full-body, all-arms, chest-to-chest hugs that Ezra seemed to like. They were...nice.

"Thank you," Micah said. "I don't know what I'd have done if you weren't here to help me."

"Thankfully, I *am* here to help you." Ezra surprised him with a quick peck on the cheek, before releasing him. "Now, let's rewind a bit. Why don't you think you can be a good dad?"

"What do I have to offer her? I don't have a home of my own, I don't even have a job. I had

to quit school, Ezra. How am I going to provide for a baby when most days I feel like I'm still a kid myself."

Ezra studied him with the signature Kelley pale-blue eyes. "Do you wish Kenya had never asked her aunt to contact you about Brianna?"

"Sometimes. I didn't ask to be a dad."

"Dude, you stuck your dick in her, and that's kind of what happens when you don't use a condom."

Micah rolled his eyes. "We did use them, but I didn't always check to make sure it was intact when I dumped it. I guess one broke. And just because I made a baby doesn't mean I'll be a good dad. Look how our father turned out."

Ezra snorted. "Good point. But you're not our dad, and neither am I. We're both making our own paths, and that's a good thing. And you've been here for, like, twelve hours. You don't have to have all the answers yet. If, down the road, you truly don't think you're cut out to be a father, there are steps. But give yourself time, okay? You don't have to know everything right now."

"Yeah. I just...I knew Dad hated that I was dating Kenya, but to dismiss his own granddaughter like that? I should have known after what he did to you at my graduation party. Appearances really are more important than his kids."

"Looks like. Good thing he made two of us, then, so we can be here for each other from now on."

"I just wish Mom was stronger so she'd stand up for herself. She was so excited to meet Bree and so upset when Dad made us leave."

Ezra poked at his cereal. "Yeah, well, she chose him and his money, instead of her kids, and that's her choice. Right now, we're each other's family. You and me, and Donner and Romy and Brendan and Jaime and Alessandro and Shannon and—"

"Okay, okay." Micah made a time-out gesture. "I get it. I've been adopted into your tribe."

"Exactly. So give yourself time to breathe. You've been Bree's only caregiver for a solid week. Let us help. Take a nap, go shopping. Hell, go see a movie or three."

"I'd give almost anything for pizza and a beer."

"I'll see what I can come up with for lunch. Meanwhile, eat your soggy cereal, and we'll make a shopping list for anything you guys need."

"Sounds good."

It was the best bowl of Cap'N Crunch Micah had ever eaten.

DONNER HAD an evening shift at Pot O Gold, and even though Micah was nervous to leave her alone with the guy, Donner volunteered to babysit so Ezra could take Micah shopping. After a thorough inventory of everything Micah had for both himself and Bree, Ezra started a list. At the top was crib sheets, followed by "cute outfits." Donner also reported that Brendan had asked his sisters about formula, and they gave him a different name than the one Micah had.

After a long stay in a boutique baby store, where Ezra spent too much time and money buying cute outfits for a baby who'd outgrow them in a couple of months, they hit Target to get a few things for Micah. He had no clean laundry left, a week's worth of underwear to his name, and one pair of sneakers. Micah wasn't much of a clothes snob, so he let Ezra pick out some new things to supplement his meager wardrobe. He also needed shampoo and stuff, as he'd been living off motel samples. His own razor and deodorant were the only things he'd thought to take

from his bathroom at home.

Micah insisted on paying for everything with the cash he had on hand. Ezra didn't look happy, but the last thing Micah wanted was for a small-business owner to go into debt for him when Micah had the cash.

After an early lunch at Ezra's favorite pizza place—Meat Lover's plus a beer—they hit the grocery store. Mindful of the tiny fridge, Micah mostly picked snacks and jarred baby food, and they also got two cans of the suggested formula. When they returned to the apartment around one in the afternoon, two new faces were lounging in the living room with Romy and Donner.

"Hey, guys," Ezra said. He deposited a pile of reusable shopping bags by the island, then went to hug and cheek-kiss a tall, gangly guy with red lips. "I didn't expect to see you today."

"Romy called," the guy replied. "We both wanted to come meet your family."

"You two rock. Micah? This is Professor Jaime Winters and his partner, Alessandro Silva."

"Professor?" Micah parroted as he shook Jaime's hand.

"I'm not a scientist or anything," Jaime replied. "But I finally finished my Master's, and this semester I'm going to be teaching at a local community college."

"Wow, that's amazing. Congrats."

"Thanks."

Alessandro stepped over and shook. Despite his name, Micah got another tiny shock that the guy was obviously Hispanic, and that brought up a familiar well of shame. "Nice to meet you, man," Alessandro said. "You and Ezra look a lot alike. It's uncanny"

"Thanks?" Micah replied.

"It's a compliment," Ezra shot back. "Where's my girl?"

"Your girl?" Donner replied. "She's mine. And she's napping."

Micah couldn't help it. He peeked into his room simply to put his eyes on Bree. Sure enough, she was sleeping soundly in the crib. He left the door mostly shut and joined Ezra's friends in the kitchen, where everyone had dug into their purchases. Micah watched the quintet for a moment, awash in a new sense of being left out, but also glad Ezra had built this sort of family around him. The affection between the five men was genuine and easy.

Romy noticed him first. "Get over here and claim your stuff," he said. "You're part of the family now, Micah."

"Thank you," Micah said. "I just...I haven't even been here twenty-four hours, so it still feels weird. Like I'm interrupting you guys."

"Well, don't, sugar," Ezra said from the other side of the island. "This is your home. We need to get a key made for you, and then that's that. You're my brother, and you came to me for help, so expect all kinds of help from Bree's passel of gay uncles."

Micah flashed a grateful smile at Ezra, then looked down at Romy. Like, way down, because Romy was really short. "Ezra said you and Brendan are engaged?"

"Yup, since last fall," Romy replied. "It's hard to believe that in a few months, we'll have known each other for four years. Brendan, Ezra and Donner literally saved my life once, and I'm honored to get to know you, Micah. I mean it."

"Thanks. It's nice to feel like I have friends again. All mine pretty much bailed when they found out I quit school to take care of my kid."

"Well, fuck them. You're one of us now."

Micah shook Romy's hand, then pulled him into an upper body, bro-hug. "Appreciate it, man. So you guys set a date?"

"May twenty-ninth. It's our four-year anniversary."

“Of dating?”

Romy smiled. “Of when we first met. We worried it would be awkward, because it’s a Monday, but it works because the bakery is closed, and it’s Memorial Day. Not that we have a lot of family who will travel. I mean, these guys are all I have, and all of Brendan’s blood family lives in or around Wilmington.”

“You don’t have any blood family?”

“Nope. Growing up it was just me and my dad, and he died when I was a teenager. But I’m not really sad about it anymore, because I have amazing friends, and Brendan’s mother has pretty much adopted me. She’s the best and a fantastic cook.”

“Brendan’s working, I take it?”

“Yeah, but he gets off soon. Jaime gave me a ride here, but Brendan’s going to stop by and get me, and to see little Miss Bree. Bren’s in love.”

“I think we’re all in love,” Ezra said.

Too true.

Their group continued putting away the groceries. Donner made space in a lower cabinet for the extra baby stuff, like formula and bottles. Diapers and wipes went quietly into the bedroom dresser, while Ezra put both Micah’s laundry and all the new clothes into a hamper. The basement had laundry facilities, which Romy took responsibility to go down and start.

Apparently, Romy had lived here for a few months, so he knew his way around.

Micah was grateful for the help, because he hadn’t slept well last night, and he’d been running around shopping all day. Just when he hoped to sit and relax, Bree began wailing. Donner and Ezra bolted toward the bedroom before Micah could get his weary body off the couch. Jaime, who was curled up on the other couch with Alessandro, shot Micah a pointed grin.

Yeah, okay, so Bree had everyone wrapped around her tiny fingers. She was adorable. Everyone loved her.

*Everyone except her own grandfather. Assface.*

“Alessandro,” Micah said, “you co-own the café with Ezra, right?”

“I do,” Alessandro replied. “Going from working in a mail room to waiting tables to being a small-business owner happened super-fast for me, like, in a year’s time, but I couldn’t be happier.”

“Except when you’re itching to go to Pot O Gold and blow off steam,” Jaime said. “Then baker’s hours really suck.”

“As much as you guys talk about this bar, I hope to see it sometime,” Micah added. “And yes, I know it’s a gay bar by night, and that doesn’t bother me.”

“Then we’ll go. Maybe one night while Donner is working, so you can see his bar tricks. He is amazing with bottle flips and flair.”

“Sounds like a plan. Do you guys usually travel as a pack, though, because someone will need to watch Bree.”

Speaking of, Donner and Ezra exited the bedroom. Ezra had possession of the baby, who was grinning and grabbing at his face. “I will have you know,” Ezra said in a dramatic tone, “Donner successfully changed a diaper on his own.”

Donner bowed; Jaime and Romy applauded.

“I say he only gets points if it was a poop diaper,” Alessandro said.

Donner huffed and crossed his arms.

“Can I?” Micah asked as he stood. He hadn’t held his daughter in hours, and he missed her. Ezra eased her into his arms, and something inside of him settled. He hadn’t even realized he

missed her until he had her again, because he wasn't used to missing her. He brought her up and inhaled her familiar scent.

"I can't get over how adorable you are with her," Ezra said. "Seriously. I know you're young and you're scared, but Jesus, Micah. Your eyes say, 'I love you' every time you look at her. You are whipped, little brother."

Micah chuckled. "I guess so. Now I need to figure out what the hell to do with my life."

Ezra pulled a face and covered Bree's tiny ears with his hands. "Language."

"Oh God," Alessandro said with a bark of laughter. "Watching Ezra try to curb his cussing is going to be so much fun."

"Bite me, butthead." He dropped his hands and kissed the top of Bree's head. "When this little one is old enough, Uncle Ezra will teach her the fine art of proper swearing."

"And Uncle Ale will teach her how to cuss in Spanish," Alessandro said.

"Forget it, we're moving out," Micah said with fake outrage. "You are all nuts."

"Quick, block the door!" Ezra inserted himself between Micah and the apartment door, and then dropped down like a football player about to accept a hike. Alessandro bolted off the couch to stand directly in front of the door, while Donner circled Micah like a cat about to pounce.

On separate couches, Jaime and Romy dissolved into giggles, and Micah himself started laughing hard enough that Bree got upset. In nearly the same moment, someone knocked. Alessandro let a bemused Brendan into the apartment.

"Do I wanna ask?" Brendan said.

Romy bounced off the couch and practically jumped into the big man's arms. "Just go with it, Bren. Trust me."

"He's a thief," Ezra said, pointing at Micah. "He's trying to steal my niece! Stop him!"

Brendan gave Micah a confused look. Micah shrugged and tried to shush Bree.

Micah and Bree had found their tribe. A tribe of mismatched couples of various shapes, sizes, and ethnicities, but a tribe that accepted them. A tribe Micah could see himself in for a long damned time.

And that tribe looked a hell of a lot like family.

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## Chapter 3

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Micah spent the rest of the evening on his phone—which by some miracle still hadn't been disconnected—uploading his resume to as many job sites as he could. He had a copy saved in the Cloud, thanks to a previous class, and he only had to change the part about having a degree in engineering, since he hadn't graduated yet.

Ezra apologized more than once about not being able to offer Micah a job at Half-Dozen, which Micah totally understood. He didn't want to cost Ezra anything else, especially not his business being able to turn a profit. Donner, likewise, checked in, but Pot O Gold wasn't hiring.

Sometimes nepotism didn't work in his favor.

Oh well, Micah was determined to find a job and provide for his daughter. On Tuesday morning while Ezra was at work, Donner spent some time touring the city with Micah and Bree. Micah knew nothing about Wilmington, other than it was nicknamed the Corporate Capital of the World. As they headed into the financial district, corporate headquarters for Bank of America and other institutions rose in shiny, big buildings that reminded him a bit of Seattle. Just without the Space Needle and Mount Rainier.

They also had a zoo, which was cool. He couldn't wait until Bree was old enough to enjoy seeing the animals.

After lunch, Micah took a nap when Bree napped; he hadn't slept well last night, either. Ezra came home before Donner left for his evening shift, and Micah once again watched them move around and interact with a big pang of jealousy. But Ezra had worked damned hard for everything he had now, and Micah was still trying to stand up after being dealt a heavy blow.

A blow that still wasn't done pounding, because his phone didn't ring with a single call for a job interview.

The next day, Ezra didn't have to go in to open the shop, so he brought Micah with him when his shift started at ten. Romy, Alessandro, and a guy named Trace were working. Trace had rows of long, brown braids in his hair and was a lot less gaga over Bree than everyone else so far. But Micah didn't take it personally. Not everyone loved babies.

Ezra showed him around the café and nattered on proudly about their fair trade coffees and Alessandro's baked goods. He also introduced Micah and Bree to any regular customer who happened to come in. For the first time in his life, Micah felt well and truly seen by his big brother. And loved. Proud, even, which was weird, because Micah hadn't really accomplished all that much yet.

Except for a full-ride scholarship and Bree.

Bree might have been an oopsie, but he loved his daughter with every part of his soul, and

he'd do right by her somehow.

Micah spent several hours at the café, enjoying the company. He'd always been a social person on campus, attending parties and events, anything to be around people. Working here would have been ideal, it simply wasn't in the budget.

At the end of his shift, Trace stopped by the table where two teenage girls were cooing over Bree. He handed Micah a slip of paper with a name and number on it. "Listen, give my sister a call," Trace said. "She works for an urban planning group and word is their office assistant is about to turn in her two weeks, but nothing is official. Tell her I recommended you, so maybe you'll get to the top of the interview list to fill the position. It's full-time, nine-to-five, good pay."

"Oh, my God, thank you." Micah surprised himself by jumping out of his chair and hugging Trace. "Seriously, this is a fantastic lead. You have no idea."

"Paying it back, man. Ezra took a chance on hiring me, because I've got a record, and not a lot of people will hire guys like me. He did. I hope you get the job."

"Thank you so much." Micah bit back a curious question, because it wasn't his place to ask why Trace had been in jail. He was simply grateful for the opportunity. "I mean it."

"I know. Good luck."

After Trace left, Micah moved to a nearby empty table and immediately dialed the number Trace had given him, while keeping half-an-eye on Bree and those girls.

"April Johnson," a strong, female voice said.

"Hi, Ms. Johnson, I'm sorry to cold call you like this, but I got your name and number from your brother Trace," Micah said.

"Excellent, then I'm going to like this call, because Trace knows better than to give my business number out to just anyone. And you are?"

"My name is Micah Kelley, ma'am."

"Kelley. I don't suppose you're related to Trace's boss?"

"Yes, ma'am, Ezra is my older brother. You see, I've hit a bit of a rough patch, and I recently moved here to Wilmington from Seattle to live with him. I don't really know anyone, and I have to find a job to support myself and my daughter, and Trace said your company might have a position open soon."

"You'd be right. Lesley just put in her resignation about an hour ago, so we haven't advertised the position yet. I'd love to fill it sooner, rather than later, so she can show her replacement the ropes, so to speak. Can you email me a copy of your resume?"

"Absolutely." He wrote down the email address she gave him.

"Do you have experience in this type of work?"

"Yes, ma'am. For the last four summers, I worked at my father's company as an unpaid intern, so I know my way around an office and phone. I've completed all but one semester for a degree in engineering. I'm also a quick learner, so if there's something I don't know, I will teach myself."

"Are you going to be completing your final semester? I imagine spring classes are starting in a month or so."

He might as well be honest with the woman about his situation. "I will finish at some point, yes, but last month I found out I have an infant daughter. Her mother recently passed away, and I wasn't getting any help from my family in Seattle, so I had to leave a full-ride scholarship behind to care for my child. It's why getting a good job is so important to me. My brother is amazing, but I can't camp out in his guest room forever. My little girl deserves the world, and I want to

give it to her.”

“Just from hearing that, you sound like a wonderful young man.” Ms. Johnson cleared her throat hard. “Can you come in for an interview tomorrow? It will be with myself and my business partner Davidson Milano.”

Micah stored that name away in his head. “Yes, absolutely. Name the time and place. I have more than enough of Ezra’s friends available to babysit Bree.”

“I have a niece named Bree. Ten o’clock?”

“Perfect.” He scribbled down the address. “I really appreciate you giving me this chance, Ms. Johnson.”

“You are very welcome. I’ll see you in the morning, Micah.”

“Absolutely. Thank you again.”

As soon as Micah hung up, he leapt from his chair and silently pumped his fist into the air. Romy appeared next to him with a bus bin. “Good news?” he asked.

“I have a job interview!” He said it accidentally loud enough for the whole café to hear him, and the scattered patrons applauded.

Ezra launched himself out from behind the counter and swept him into a hug. “You are shitting me. That’s great! Where?”

Micah explained his lead from Trace and his call to Ms. Johnson. “I’ve got an interview tomorrow at ten, so I’ll need someone to watch Bree.”

“I’m not on the schedule tomorrow,” Romy said. “I mean, I’ve never taken care of an infant on my own.”

“It would only be for an hour or two, I’d imagine,” Micah replied, uncertain. Maybe Ezra had known him for three and a half years, but Romy was still a stranger to Micah and Bree.

“Donner has another night shift tomorrow,” Ezra said. “So he’ll be home, too. Would you feel better if two of them watch her?”

“Yes?”

“Hey, I’m not offended in the least,” Romy said with a grin. “And congrats on the interview. I’ll be right back, someone’s at the counter.”

Ezra watched Romy approach the counter, an odd bit of pride shining in his eyes. It gave Micah the courage to dig a little deeper into the bond they shared. “You know, the other day Romy mentioned you, Donner and Brendan saved his life.”

“We did.” Ezra’s eyes glistened. “It’s not my story to share, but Romy got himself into a really dangerous relationship, and we helped get him out. He lived with me and Donner while he got his feet under him. He and Brendan started dating not long after we opened this place. For the first year or so he worked here, Romy was terrified of the counter. He wanted to bus tables and keep his head down, but he’s opening up. Healing every single day.”

Micah watched Romy smile and take the customer’s order, and his heart ached for such a sweet person having ever been hurt. “I’m glad he had you guys.”

“Me too.” Ezra slung his arm across Micah’s shoulders. “So you’ll be a working man soon, huh?”

“I hope so.”

“Let’s go out tonight to celebrate. First drink is on me.”

“Yeah, okay. You finally going to show me this infamous Pot O Gold?”

Ezra quirked his eyebrow. “You wanna hit up a gay bar?”

“Why not? You like it, and Donner will be working. Or don’t you want to be seen at your favorite haunt with your baby brother?”

“Okay, now we’re totally going, but be warned. The regulars recognize new meat right away, so you will be flirted with.”

*Good.*

“I can handle myself.”

Ezra shrugged dramatically. “Okay, but if you end up with seventeen cocktail napkins with phone numbers on them stuffed into your back pocket, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He turned and flounced back to the front counter.

Micah laughed at his brother’s silliness. For all Ezra probably thought Micah was uptight, he’d been to gay bars in Seattle. He had gay friends at college. Hell, he’d even kissed two dudes at two different off-campus parties and...kind of liked it. This entire past semester, he’d started questioning himself more and more. Yes, he was attracted to girls, but he’d thought back to all the times in the locker room he’d peeked. All the times he’d noticed the shape of a guy’s shoulders or calves or pecs. Things he usually only noticed about chicks.

Maybe he wasn’t as straight as he’d always assumed, and going to Pot O Gold was a good chance to experiment in a safe environment. Ezra would keep an eye on him, of that he had no doubt. Ezra also wouldn’t be a dick if he decided to dance with a guy, or if he got hard from the friction.

He was twenty-one and had a kid, but Micah would be damned if he was clear about his own sexuality yet.

*Oh shit.*

Therein lay a brand-new problem: who was watching Bree tonight, if he and Ezra went out?

THE PROBLEM of babysitters for Bree was solved by Donner, who volunteered his stepsister Julie and her husband Vincent to watch Bree. Apparently, the pair was unable to have kids of their own, and while they’d been trying to adopt for years, it hadn’t happened for them yet. They did, however, now foster dogs who needed temporary housing, and since they currently had three in their two-story home, the couple agreed to watch Bree at the apartment.

Micah liked Julie and Vincent very much. They were older, in their thirties, and felt more responsible. Pretty much everyone Micah knew in Wilmington was older than him, but still mostly under thirty, and he just...liked the couple. He could trust Bree’s care to them for a couple of hours.

For the first time since before Christmas, Micah could be himself for a little while, instead of always trying to be Super Dad.

Still, saying goodbye to Bree for the night was hard, and Micah was a little down when he and Ezra left, bundled up in their winter coats. Apparently, Pot O Gold was only a three-block walk from Ezra’s place, so it wasn’t worth warming up a car. Still, Micah flinched against the January chill as they walked. Ezra’s friends were meeting them there, since the two couples were coming from different parts of the city.

They turned out of the residential area and onto a street of old brick buildings and various businesses. Many had gates over the doors and bars on the windows, but no graffiti or obvious decay. It was just...old. Quiet. Maybe a little sad. About halfway down the block, a few guys hung around on the sidewalk, most of them smoking. A rainbow sign that said Pot O Gold hung over the wooden door, and the vaguest thump of music made it through.

“Welcome,” Ezra said with a dramatic bow as he opened the door.

Micah liked the place instantly. A U-shaped bar on the right, booths on the left wall, and an open area full of pillars and bar rails. Directly ahead was a crowd of gyrating dancers, some of them shirtless, almost all male. The décor was homey and warm, instead of garish or cliché, and Micah instantly understood why Ezra liked coming here.

Jaime and Alessandro were already there, and the pair waved at them from a booth. After adding their coats to a long row of hooks near the door, he and Ezra joined them, sliding into the opposite side of the booth. “We figured we’d wait on you guys before we ordered,” Jaime said over the din of music, conversation and laughter.

“Romy texted about ten minutes ago that he and Bren were on their way,” Ezra replied. “So they should be here soon. Why don’t I get our drinks? Ale, whiskey sour, and a cola for Jaime?”

“You don’t drink?” Micah asked.

“Can’t,” Jaime replied. “When I was a teenager, I got really sick from heart disease and had to have a transplant. I can’t drink with my anti-rejection meds.”

Micah gaped at Jaime, who seemed the picture of health and had a loving partner. And he was going to be a freaking college professor! He had someone else’s heart?

“It’s a shock to a lot of people,” Jaime added, giving Ezra a curious look.

“Hey.” Ezra raised both hands in mock defense. “To be fair to me, I don’t gossip about every single aspect of our lives. I didn’t think it was my shit to share.”

“Well, I appreciate your unusual bout of discretion.” To Micah, Jaime said, “It also doesn’t bother me talking about it anymore. I used to hate bringing it up, and I really hated my scar. Now it’s just something I live with.”

“Double emphasis on the word *live*,” Alessandro said. He slung his arm across Jaime’s shoulders and kissed his cheek. Then he leaned in and whispered something that made Jaime’s fair skin flame red.

“Hey, Micah come with me to get the drinks,” Ezra said. “You can see my boyfriend in action.”

“Okay.” Micah slid out of the booth with Ezra, and they threaded their way to the bar. Donner was there with another brown-haired guy his age, and Micah did a double take. Not only was Donner wearing a green mesh shirt and tight black jeans, but he was also wearing black eyeliner. “Does he always wear liner?”

“Only at work,” Ezra replied. “I think it’s hot, but it’s also just a costume.”

“Gotcha.”

“The other bartender is Riley.”

They waited their turn to order, and Micah watched both bartenders. While Riley moved quickly and efficiently, Donner danced. He smiled, flipped bottles, did quick pours, shook like a champ, and basically put on a show. The guy probably got amazing tips for showing off like that. By the time they got to Donner, Romy and Brendan had apparently arrived and texted their drink orders to Ezra so he could get them all at once.

Micah ordered a basic rum and Coke. He hadn’t come out to get drunk, but he needed a prop and a little something to loosen up. He’d been strung tight for weeks, and tonight he had a few hours to relax. Maybe dance a little. Flirt if he felt like it.

As soon as they got back to the table with the drinks, Jaime allowed Alessandro about two sips of his before dragging his boyfriend to the dance floor.

“Jaime looooooves dancing,” Romy said. “The first time Ezra and I met them was here, and it was Jaime’s first time at a gay dance club. He was adorable.”

“We had a lot of fun that night, didn’t we, sugar?” Ezra asked.

“Started the best friendships of my life.” Romy got a little teary-eyed, and Brendan pulled him against his broad chest. The easy intimacy between the group was such a beautiful thing to see, especially coming from a college campus that, while it had an anti-harassment policy, gay couples simply weren’t so open and affectionate.

Ezra gulped down his margarita, and then joined his dancing friends.

“So do you guys like dancing?” Micah asked.

“Not really,” Brendan replied. “Never was much for it, but Romy loves it.”

“Knowing he’s here watching helps me feel safe out there again,” Romy added. “So I will probably be joining them. You want to dance?”

Micah tipped back more of his rum and Coke. “Why the hell not? I came here to let loose, right?”

“Great! Bren will guard our drinks, so don’t worry about leaving it behind. Unless you like dancing with a cup in your hand.”

“Nah, too easy to spill.” He gulped a bit more, pleased to actually taste the rum in it. Sometimes mixed drinks were super weak, but Donner hit the right balance. “Mmm, good stuff.”

“You do realize you’re as hot as your brother, and you’re going to get hit on.”

Micah shrugged. “I’ve been hit on by guys before. No big deal.”

“Okay then.” Romy took another sip of his drink, plopped a kiss on Brendan’s mouth, and then slid out of the booth. Micah followed, and they weaved toward the spot where their friends were gyrating with a fourth. He had no idea what Ezra and Donner’s rules were, but Ezra and Jaime were getting cozy with the new guy while Alessandro watched with open admiration.

*Huh.*

Whatever. It had been too long since Micah let go and danced, so he closed his eyes and allowed the beat of the music to enter his blood. To move in his muscles and command his body. Dancing bodies of all types surrounded him: muscular, slender, tall, short, bulky, hairy, bald. The room smelled like sweat, musky aftershave, and liquor, and Micah soaked it all in. Blurred the lines between reality and fantasy, and he simply moved.

Hands squeezed his waist, and Micah opened his eyes. A big, burly man in a black leather vest was keeping time with Micah’s thrusts and sways. Flashing lights glinted in his hair, which might have been auburn, but could easily be brown, he wasn’t sure. And he was definitely older than Micah, probably in his thirties, but something about him set Micah at ease. So he let the guy dance with him. And maybe it was the drink, maybe it was the dancing, but Micah’s dick stirred, and he didn’t fight it. He hadn’t had sex in months.

Not that he planned on having sex with a guy he just met in a bar, but friction was fun. He didn’t fight it when his partner moved in closer, those muscular arms looping more firmly around Micah’s waist. Fingers splayed above his ass. Micah left his own arms loose by his sides, effectively trapping the guy in place now, and he smirked.

The guy leaned in. “I’m David. You’re new.”

“Yup. Mike.” Old habit, giving an abbreviated version of his name to strangers in bars.

“You look familiar, but I know all the blond twinks in the place.”

Blond twink? Micah glanced beyond David’s shoulder and spotted Ezra watching them, his eyes silently asking if Micah was okay. He winked at Ezra, then gave David his full attention. “Know a lot of blond twinks with size fourteen feet?”

David’s eyebrows arched, and he looked directly at Micah’s crotch. Okay, so Micah’s dick wasn’t as big as his feet, but some guys still believed the myth, and it definitely got David’s attention. “Hmm, can’t say that I have. You in the mood to show off?”

“My feet?”

That got a short bark of laughter. “You are a slick one. I like it. Reminds me of someone I knew once.” Something in David’s eyes flickered before disappearing behind his humor and arousal. “Wouldn’t mind a look at those feet, but I was interested in something a little higher north.”

“My knees?”

David closed the last few inches of space between them. Micah was about two inches taller, but their crotches still rubbed together. David was obviously hard, and Micah was about half-mast. He’d danced like this at clubs before, with another erect guy, but he’d never gone further than dry humping and making out. And dear God, he’d kill for a blow job tonight.

“Oh, that,” Micah deadpanned.

“Yeah, that.” David pinned him with an intense look. “You into it?”

“Into what? Dancing cheek to cheek?”

“You are a wily one. I’d love to bend you over and spank that ass.”

Instead of disgusting him, an odd zing of arousal shot down Micah’s spine. He’d never given much thought to spanking in a sexual way, but the mental image, combined with David’s sexy smirk, kept him from pulling away, or even verbally reprimanding the older man. They were dancing in a room full of other people, so Micah allowed his inner flirt to come out and play.

He leaned a bit closer to David’s ear and said, “What would you do to my ass after you spanked it?”

“Hmm.” The tips of David’s fingers slid a fraction lower on Micah’s butt. “Play. I love to play.”

“Yeah? I’m fond of board games, myself.”

David’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a mouthy brat, you know that?”

“Well, I used to be a spoiled rich kid, so yeah. I guess I am.”

Throughout the entire exchange, they hadn’t stopped dancing. In fact, Micah was pretty sure they were doing more dry humping than dancing, but they hadn’t stopped moving. Not once. And his half-wood was now at full mast, and he didn’t give a shit he was humping a guy at least ten years older than him on a crowded dance floor.

“Used to be?” David asked.

“Long story, not the time.” And because Micah couldn’t resist winding the guy up, added, “You fond of spanking bratty, spoiled rich kids?”

“Fond of spanking guys who are into it. Spoiled brats just make it more fun. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Shit, you’re still a baby.” David aggressively rubbed his dick against Micah’s, hard enough his balls tightened. “I could show you so many things that’d blow your mind, but you seem way too innocent for that on a first date.”

Micah arched an eyebrow. “We’re on a date now?”

“Depends. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure.” Micah had never given himself a chance to truly explore his occasional attraction to guys, and something about David was seriously pushing his buttons. Maybe because Micah generally hung out with guys his own age, not older, bigger, put-together men like David. And tonight was about letting loose, right?

When David took his hand and led Micah toward the bar, Micah didn’t resist.

EZRA GAPPED at Micah's departing back, his own body losing the beat, despite the hottie sandwiched between him and Jaime. And despite the taut ass writhing against his groin.

His little brother had just gone off with a guy. And not just any guy, but Leather Vest David, who had a reputation for being a Dom, and who usually spent time at Rusty Nail, a leather bar for guys into harder stuff. Micah seemed completely at ease, but Ezra couldn't help tracking the pair to the bar—a bar from where Donner could now monitor the situation for him.

"Dude." Romy tapped his shoulder. "Is your brother bi or something?"

"I have no idea," Ezra replied. "I mean, he's never mentioned it. Maybe he isn't sure himself and he's exploring?"

"Yeah, well, there are less intense guys to explore with, you know?"

"I do." A tiny, protective part of Ezra wanted to march over there and demand to know what was happening. The rest of him—the part that trusted Micah to take care of himself, and that didn't want to act like a helicopter parent—stayed put. "But David has a solid reputation on consent and stuff, so Micah will be fine."

His phone buzzed with a text.

Donner: **Do you know who Micah is with?**

He texted back: **Yeah. I trust Micah to know what he's doing.**

Donner sent back a thumbs-up emoji.

Ezra sent a series of kissing lips, then pocketed his phone. He adored Donner for keeping an eye on Micah, even while working a hectic job. For it only being Wednesday night, the place was packed.

The last three days had been an incredible whirlwind for the pair of them, and Ezra still hadn't caught his breath. He was happy to help Micah get on his feet, happy for him and Bree to stay as long as they needed, but having a brother and infant dropped on their doorstep with no warning?

Yeah, still breathless.

But also grateful Micah had trusted him enough to come to Ezra for help. In some ways, it felt like the universe was giving them a second chance to establish a relationship and be brothers. Real brothers who depended on each other, hung out together, and shared common interests. Ezra knew so few things about Micah, and vice versa. Micah's complete comfort in a gay bar, dancing with a big guy like David, had kind of blown his mind.

He needed Micah to feel comfortable enough with Ezra to share important things. Was he bi? Pan? Closeted gay? Questioning? Ezra wanted to help Micah become his true self, whoever that guy was. Knowing himself would make Micah the best possible father for Bree.

Gah! His brain still exploded a little bit each time he remembered his baby brother was a dad. And then he felt a warm flush of pride for how his brother had stepped up to take care of his daughter. Micah hadn't wavered, hadn't run. He'd stayed to watch the mother of his child pass away, and then he'd taken responsibility for that little life.

"Hey, what's wrong?" the sexy sandwich filling asked. He and Jaime had both stopped dancing, because apparently Ezra had also stopped dancing.

What was his name again? Tony? Tommy? Shit.

"Nothing, sorry," Ezra replied. "I'm, uh, gonna get another drink. Be back in a flash."

He wove his way through the throng to Donner's side of the bar. Micah and David, he noted, were kind of cozy on Riley's side. Donner slid a margarita on the rocks to Ezra without him uttering a word, and they exchanged a silent, meaningful look. Ezra shrugged.

"David's good people," Donner said as he reached for a bottle in the well. "Never once had a

problem with him here.”

“I know, but he’s so old.”

Donner arched a brow. “He’s only a few years older than me, babe.”

“I meant compared to Micah’s age.” Ezra huffed, then sipped his drink.

“Micah came out to blow off steam. Let him blow off steam and don’t hover.”

“Yeah.” He took his glass back to the booth Brendan was still guarding and plunked down opposite him. The vantage point gave him a decent view of his brother and David, and Ezra couldn’t swear to it, but it looked like Micah was sitting on David’s lap.

“Okay, what did I miss?” Brendan asked. “You look mad.”

“Not mad. A little confused I guess, but it’ll pass.”

“Kay.”

Ezra loved how easily Brendan took people at face value, while Ezra tended to see the world through a lens of suspicion. But they’d had incredibly different childhoods that had shaped their view of the world and the people in it. Brendan had a big, loving family, and a warm, generous mom who’d accepted Brendan when he came out. Getting some of his sisters to accept Romy had been a little harder, but they’d eventually come around.

Meanwhile, Ezra had grown up in a cold house, with parents who rarely hugged, and instead of accepting him, they’d tried to change him. They’d ruined his trust in them, and then they disowned him. And maybe their decision to do that had given Ezra the seed money he’d needed to open Baker’s Half-Dozen three and a half years ago, but that didn’t erase old hurts. Not by a mile.

However, Ezra *did* have Half-Dozen. He also had Donner, their tight group of friends, and now he had his brother and niece.

His heart was full, and for the first time in a long while, he looked at his life and knew he was well and truly blessed.

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## Chapter 4

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Two new rum and Cokes went down easily, because Micah was parched, and he was also having fun teasing David. There wasn't a lot of room at the bar, so David had squeezed onto a stool, and Micah was perched on one of his thighs. David's ever-present wood pressed into Micah's backside, and he didn't mind at all.

He really didn't mind when David put a possessive hand over Micah's crotch and squeezed his erection. Another person's hand on his dick felt great, especially after such a long dry spell. After returning from Thanksgiving break, he'd spent all his free hours studying for some intense finals, and he had no idea what his grades were. He hadn't had a chance to log into the school's system to check, and now his laptop was in Seattle, because he forgot to pack it, and his password was on a sticky note in his abandoned dorm room.

Maybe he could call the university tomorrow?

"Hey, where'd you go, Mike?" David released his junk to pinch his thigh.

Micah jumped, then laughed. "Sorry, got lost in thought. I'm back."

"Good, because I like you paying attention to me. So what's your story, anyhow? In town visiting friends?"

"No, I just moved here from Seattle, actually."

"Sounds like a good story. Why'd you leave the glory of Seattle for dinky old Wilmington?"

Micah was so not unpacking that story in a bar with a near stranger. "I had to drop out of school for reasons that are personal, and I have family here who helped me."

David's smile dropped. "You in some kind of trouble?"

"No, nothing like that. Just...I needed a change, and I'd rather not talk about it."

"Fair enough." That big hand covered his dick again. "So, you interested in getting some help with this?"

Micah slipped back into flirt mode. "Why? You offering a hand job right here at the bar?"

David chuckled, a deep sound that rumbled into Micah's back. "Management frowns on public indecency, but they look the other way in the bathroom."

"Do they?" He had mixed feelings about a bathroom hookup in a bar.

"Or we could go to my place. Play a little."

"I make it a personal policy never to get spanked on a first date."

David laughed again, and Micah really liked that sound. "How about a kiss?" He mouthed at the side of Micah's neck, and the brush of his whiskered cheek made Micah's spine tingle with want.

He'd made out with guys, but not one so much older than him. And he knew Donner was

watching, probably texting reports to Ezra, and that annoyed him. Micah was a goddamn adult, and he didn't need his big brother suddenly giving a damn about his sex life. Micah twisted his upper body so he could brush his lips over David's earlobe before whispering, "Know of any dark corners we go make out in?"

"Fuck, yeah."

Leaving their drinks on the bar, David took his hand and led him to the back of the room, near a sign for the bathrooms. But instead of that direction, he went into a shadowy area between the bathrooms and the VJ booth, where the bright, flashing lights didn't quite penetrate. Two other pairs of guys were kissing and dry humping, and while it wasn't exactly private, it was far enough from prying eyes that Micah didn't protest David crowding him into the wall.

Didn't protest David's thick thigh pressing into his crotch, which pushed Micah's thigh against David's. Big hands cupped Micah's cheeks, and he relaxed for what he expected to be an aggressive kiss. Instead, David licked lightly over Micah's lips before slanting his head and kissing him. Not forceful, but also not passive, as if testing Micah's limits before taking more. Kissing harder, deeper.

Micah loved it. Loved being caged in by a guy who, while not taller, was thicker and broader, and he made Micah feel small for once. Protected. Wanted for more than his popularity or his money. And Micah kissed back, fingers tangled in the back of David's shirt, humping the thigh between his legs.

One of David's hands drifted to his throat and rested there, a gentle pressure that made Micah kiss him harder, determined now. Determined to do what, he wasn't completely sure. Coming would be nice, but creaming his jeans would also leave an embarrassing wet spot.

*Do I really care right now?*

David left his mouth to kiss along Micah's neck, his stubble waking up Micah's skin, leaving a delicious burn in its wake. "You taste so sweet," David said into his ear. "Bet your jizz tastes even sweeter."

Micah moaned softly, unashamed of the sound. No one could hear it over the loud music, anyway.

"You moan like that with just words, baby," David said. "Can't imagine how you'd moan with my tongue in your ass."

His hole clenched, and for the first time since acknowledging his attraction to guys, Micah imagined being touched there. Fingered, licked, maybe even fucked. He for sure wasn't ready to go that far tonight, especially not with someone he'd known for an hour, but dear God, he could see those things.

Micah cut off the dirty words by kissing David again, a harder clash of lips and teeth, and David gave as good as he got. Micah was so intent on the kiss he hadn't noticed the hand on his throat had slipped down to his waist until fingers tugged at his button fly. He also didn't stop David from slipping into his underwear to clasp his dick. His balls drew up at the new, firm pressure against his flesh, and Micah nearly bit David's tongue.

"This okay?" David asked. "Wanna get you off."

"Yeah. Need it." Micah tried to show him how much with his mouth, kissing him while David jacked him off in a tight grip. It only took a few tugs before Micah wrenched his mouth away, pressed his forehead against the side of David's neck, and shot into the guy's fist. His orgasm exploded down his spine on wave after wave and left him a panting, boneless mess.

"Holy shit," Micah whispered. He was shaking a little from the force of his release, and David wrapped his free arm around Micah's waist to keep him upright. Then he blew Micah's

mind a little by raising his hand to his mouth and licking a blob of Micah's come off his fingers.

"You're sweeter than I imagined," David said.

The sheer dirtiness of it made his dick twitch. No one had ever eaten his come like that before. "Wow."

"You're incredibly adorable after you come, too. Can you do yourself up? I don't want to get you too messy."

"Yeah."

As soon as Micah had himself tucked away and his fly shut, David kissed him again before stepping back. "Gonna wash my hands and take care of some business. Wait for me?"

Micah almost asked if David needed help with his business, but the big man walked toward the bathrooms before he could get his brain to function. He'd just gotten a hand job from a sexy guy in the back of a gay bar, and he felt amazing. Absolutely no regrets.

His phone rang. Ezra.

"Where did you disappear to?" Ezra asked. "We need to leave, or we'll be late."

"Late?" Were they going someplace else tonight? His orgasm-addled brain couldn't think properly.

"Yeah, the time we told Julie and Vincent we'd be home. Meet us by the front door, dude."

"Can I have five more minutes?" He wanted to talk to David again, maybe even exchange numbers.

"They're babysitting for free, Micah. I know you're having fun, but this is part of being a responsible parent."

Micah's spine snapped straight. "You're right, sorry. I'll be there in a sec." He hung up, annoyed at the interruption, but Ezra was right. His first duty now and always was to Bree, not to his hookups. And going into that bathroom, trying to figure out which stall David was in so he could get a phone number felt needy and embarrassing.

No. Maybe he'd see David around the club again sometime, but the last thing Micah needed while he looked for a job and got his life back in order was to date anyone, much less a guy at least ten years older than him who seemed like he was into kinky things.

He cast a forlorn look at the closed bathroom door, and then made his way toward the front of the club to meet his brother.

FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, Micah realized he had a serious problem: he had nothing to wear for a job interview. No place that sold a good suit and tie was open this early, and he had to be at the interview by ten. Donner graciously drove him and Bree to Kohls so he could pick out a decent pair of cotton pants, a button-down shirt, and a tie. He lucked into a pair of shiny shoes on the clearance rack.

He used the store's public restroom to change—after explaining to the nice woman at the Customer Service desk his problem and deadline—and tamed his hair with a bit of water. Micah actually looked professional and it boosted his confidence over the interview. He really, *really* wanted this job.

Donner drove him to the address, and Micah was crazy grateful, because he'd have gotten lost trying to navigate the city by himself. And he'd have probably been late. Donner dropped him off out front at nine-fifty and said to text when he needed to be picked up. Micah thanked him about a dozen times for being so amazing and supportive, which Donner brushed off.

Seriously, though, Micah couldn't have managed all this alone, especially with Bree along for the ride. Fortunately, she was a fan of car rides.

Micah took deep breaths on the elevator ride up to the fourth floor, which housed Milson Group. The doors opened to a nice lobby, with a receptionist desk and a sign with the different suite numbers for the six companies on this floor. A young man greeted him, and then pointed him down the left corridor to Suite B. The different suites had frosted glass walls and steel partitions, giving the floor a bright, open feeling that set him at ease.

The door to Suite B had a painted company emblem on the door. Micah wasn't sure if he should knock or not. The place felt like a doctor's office, which meant there was probably another receptionist inside. Or the office assistant's desk. He took a few more deep, cleansing breaths to calm his nerves, and then opened the door.

The wide, open concept office surprised him a little. Two big desks were pushed together in the middle of the room, each with a computer. Several other tables full of sketches, concepts, and 3-D models lined the far wall, and a third, smaller desk stood off to the right of the door.

The young woman at the small desk stood with a grin. "Welcome to Milson Group, my name is Lesley," she said. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes, I have an interview with Ms. Johnson," he replied.

"Oh, yes, you must be Micah. It's nice to meet you."

He shook her hand as he glanced around the office. "I'm a bit early."

"Early is never a bad thing, and it makes a good impression. April is in the ladies room, and Davidson stepped out for a moment, but he'll be back for your interview."

First name basis? That small thing relaxed him a bit more. He liked less formal workplaces. His dad's office had been uptight and demanded respect from all peons, so it was always "Mr. This" or "Miss That." But judging by the big space and few workspaces, it looked like a pretty intimate company.

"April and Davidson are great bosses," Lesley continued, as if tracking his train of thought. "Super informal, and they spend a lot of time on-site, especially with new, active projects, so you'll spend a lot of time on your phone with them."

"That's not a problem at all."

Lesley glanced around, then pitched her voice low. "And just to warn you, if you're even slightly homophobic, Davidson will smell it and not hire you. He's really open, and he does work for a lot of LGBT charities."

For some reason, the comment poked at Micah's subconscious, but he couldn't figure out why. "Absolutely not homophobic." While he hadn't come out to his brother yet, maybe Micah could try the word out on a stranger. "It'd be hypocritical of me, seeing as I'm bi."

Lesley grinned. "Excellent. Welcome to the family."

"Family?"

"I'm bi too, and I'm engaged to my girlfriend."

"Oh. Congratulations."

"Thanks. It's part of the reason I'm taking a new job. We want to adopt and that requires more money than I make here."

A flash of alarm shot through Micah. What if this job didn't pay enough for him to support Bree? Lesley must have seen something in his expression, because she said, "You make a good salary here, but adoption fees are shockingly high, so...yeah."

"Okay."

"Micah?" Ms. Johnson's familiar voice bounced around the room. She approached from the

right, her smile open and friendly. Tall, ashy-brown hair, pretty. Older than him by a good decade or more, but she didn't look at him like he was a kid. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise, Ms. Johnson," Micah said as he shook her slender hand.

"Please, call me April. My seventh-grade teacher was Ms. Johnson, and it gives me flashbacks to junior high."

"April, then."

"Come sit." She led him to one of the desks, then produced a slim file folder from the desk drawer. "I printed out your resume, which is impressive for someone so young."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Lesley, can you page Davidson for me? It's ten."

As if on cue, the office door swung open, and Micah's stomach dropped through the floor. His skin flushed all over.

The familiar, broad shape of last night's hookup filled the doorway, and for a moment, Micah's brain stopped working. Had David followed him here?

No, no fucking way that was the answer.

*Oh God, no. No, no, no, no.*

David was Davidson. The guy Micah had come to for a job, and he'd gotten one all right. Last night. And not the kind of job that would support him and Bree.

*I am so fucked.*

David blinked at him twice, and then entered the office, his expression perfectly schooled. Maybe too schooled, because he looked downright hostile for a split second.

"There you are," April said. "Come sit, so we can interview Micah."

"Of course," David replied, his rough voice tickling across Micah's skin. "My apologies. You must be Micah Kelley."

"I am." Micah stood to shake the same hand that had gotten him off last night, then sat again with wobbly legs.

David pulled another chair over and sat a bit farther away than April—but Micah still felt the man. Even outside the club with no leather vest, he had a presence that made you pay attention. And every cell in Micah's body was paying attention now.

"So let me tell you more about our company," April said. "We are urban planners who work exclusively on low-cost, low-income housing and business construction. We work with schools, churches, community centers, shelters, non-profits, you name it. It's something we're both passionate about, and you'd also be working closely not only with us, but also our clients. Do you feel comfortable doing that?"

"Absolutely, ma'am." Even though David would probably refuse to hire him, Micah wasn't going to blow this interview. If nothing else, it would be great practice for his next one.

The thought soured his stomach.

As the interview continued and Micah talked more about his office experience working for his father, that sour feeling turned to anger. Because Micah really was qualified for this job, the content interested him, and the commute from Ezra's place wouldn't be too bad. But how could they hire him when Micah had already fucked around with one of his potential new bosses?

David didn't contribute much, mostly answering if he was asked a direct question by April, and that was fine. Micah didn't like how his body reacted to David's voice, which was so much easier to hear in the quiet office than over the roaring dance music. Deep and smooth, like his father's favorite whiskey. And in this light, David's hair was definitely a deep auburn, and Micah could pick out a few faint freckles on his nose.

Their trio talked for a good forty-five minutes, with Lesley chiming in occasionally. Micah really liked April. She was warm, open, and very passionate about her work. Micah certainly appreciated that. David was polite but looked as if he'd rather be anywhere except there, and that kind of hurt.

"So do you have any other questions for us?" April asked.

"No," Micah replied. "You have been very forthcoming about what you do and what I'd be expected to do. I just want to say I really appreciate the opportunity, and I would love to come on board with your company."

"I'm speaking for myself when I say I'd love to have you, but I do need to chat with my business partner first. On a personal note, though, how's your daughter adapting to the move?"

David's eyebrows shot straight up before settling again.

Micah swallowed, a little surprised April hadn't mentioned Bree to David—or maybe in the shock of seeing Micah again, he'd simply forgotten. "She's doing well. My brother and his partner have been amazing, but I can't live off their charity forever." He looked directly into David's eyes and said, "I need to set a good example for my little girl."

"That's a commendable attitude," David said. "Do you mind if I ask how old?"

"She's four months. Brianna, but I call her Bree. Her mom was a fan of the singer."

"And her mother isn't in the picture?"

"She passed away. It's a complicated story and a little personal."

"Of course, I understand. My apologies."

"Well," April said, "let's get you back to little Bree. We'll call you later today with our decision." Her eyes danced with some foregone conclusion that she'd be hiring Micah, but Micah wasn't so sure.

Then again, he'd given an amazing interview, he was more than qualified, and the only real reason David had not to hire Micah was because he wanted to put his dick in Micah's ass. And he truly didn't see David admitting that to April.

Whatever. Micah would spend the rest of the day pounding pavement, asking for applications in person, just in case he'd blown this job.

He shook everyone's hand again on the way out, and he couldn't get downstairs fast enough. He detoured into a single-person bathroom and silently screamed out his frustration. Not only had he re-met last night's hookup, his body still responded to the guy who'd basically scowled his way through the interview. Maybe David was mad at him for ditching him without a word. Micah wouldn't blame him.

He would, however, blame the guy if he didn't get this job. He wouldn't do anything about it, but he'd totally blame David. Curse him, get pissed at him, and then he'd go about his life. Because Micah had to think of Bree, and Bree came before his own hurt feelings.

Once the fit passed, Micah left the bathroom. In the quiet lobby, he texted Donner he was ready to be picked up. When Donner asked how the interview had gone, Micah shrugged and said, "Fine. They'll call me today."

Donner seemed happy about that, but Micah wasn't so sure. He'd had no idea the David he'd hooked up with was Davidson Milano, and David had no reason to think the "Mike" he'd jacked off last night was his interviewee, Micah Kelley.

Life just continued to take big, fat dumps on Micah's head.

DAVID MILANO WAS NOT HIDING from his business partner. Nope. Not at all. Just because he kept manufacturing reasons not to be in their shared office space did not mean he was hiding from their inevitable conversation.

Except he kind of was.

His entire world had dropped away beneath him when he recognized his interviewee, Micah Kelley, as Mike from last night. Mike—no, not Mike, Micah—had seemed just as stunned, but he'd handled himself brilliantly. Getting this job obviously meant a great deal to the younger man.

Giving him the job would turn each workday into a nightmare for David. From the moment he'd laid eyes on Micah last night, writhing to music at Pot O Gold, he'd been struck by how much Micah had reminded him of Casey, and so he'd nudged his way into the group of friends. He knew Ezra, Alessandro and Jaime from the Pot; they'd all frequented the place for years. The first time he'd met Ezra, he'd been attracted to the tall, slinky blond, but Ezra hadn't been interested. No hard feelings.

And why the hell hadn't David connected the pair of dancing blonds as brothers?

He'd been too focused on how sexy Micah looked while dancing. How attracted David was to him from the word go, and how much of Casey he saw in Micah. And unlike his brother Ezra, Micah had been into him from the first moment David put his hands on the gyrating blond. And the sass?

*So fucking sexy.*

Micah had been a dream last night, and David had gone off like a rocket when he jerked himself in the bathroom after giving Micah an orgasm. But Micah had been gone when David returned, and that had punched him in the balls. He'd wanted to see "Mike" again, but he'd been blown off.

And then the object of last night's very sexy wet dream was sitting in David's office?

*The universe is laughing at me, giving me the kid and then taking him away.*

Because if Micah got the job, no way could they have a physical relationship—if Micah even wanted that, which wasn't likely given the way he'd ducked out last night without a goodbye. But it sounded as if Micah needed the job. He was only twenty-one and had a four-month-old at home.

David wasn't selfish enough to keep a well-paying, full-time job from a guy who obviously needed it, just so they could fuck around more.

So he gave up hiding and returned to their office around four to find April angrily stabbing away at her computer. "Did I miss something?" he asked.

"You, you big idiot. It's after four, and I promised Micah we'd call him about the interview." She hit save, then swiveled her chair toward him. "Give me one good reason we can't hire him for the job."

*I want to bend him over that desk, stick my tongue in his ass, and then fuck him until he can't walk for a day.*

David swallowed hard. "I can't really think of one. He has experience. He's well-spoken, well-educated. Friendly."

"Exactly. So why couldn't we have done this hours ago and saved the kid some agonizing?"

"Sorry, I just...got caught up. If you want Micah, hire him. I'll sign off on the paperwork."

"Thank you." She tilted her head at him. "Something else going on? You've been weird today."

April had been his first friend when he moved to Wilmington twelve years ago, and they'd

pursued Milson Group as a unit, because they both believed it in. Five years strong, this company was his first priority always, and he wouldn't risk its reputation by admitting he'd fucked around with the new office assistant. He also didn't want to risk Micah not getting the job by telling April about last night's fuck because of any implied impropriety on David's part.

*It won't happen again, so there's no sense in admitting it happened at all. Right?*

"It's just been a bad day, I'm sorry," David replied, trying for what he hoped was a sheepish expression. A tiny nugget of guilt settled in his gut; he hated lying by omission to his oldest friend.

"We all have bad days. Anything you want to talk about?"

"Nah, it's just stupid guy stuff. Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure."

April studied him a beat. "Okay. Do you want to call Micah with the good news, or should I?"

"You do it. Your brother found him, after all, so you do the honors."

Never more in his life had David wanted to strangle her screw-up brother Trace. But the business needed a new office assistant to replace Lesley, and now they had one. They had Micah "Sex-On-A-Stick" Kelley.

David just hoped the whole thing didn't blow up in his face.

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## Chapter 5

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Micah barely glanced up from his iPad when Ezra got home that afternoon, pretending to be engrossed by his book while Donner and Ezra started whispering in the kitchen. Bree was still down for a nap, and Micah had been twisted up inside ever since April Johnson called to offer him the job at Milson Group. On one hand, yay job! On the other...David.

After an early, mostly quiet dinner of spaghetti, Donner left for Street Feed scavenging with Brendan. Ezra had mentioned Street Feed to Micah in various emails. Apparently, the organization was more than ten years old now, after pausing for two years after the death of a founder. Donner, Brendan, and occasionally another guy named Jonas went through the city, scavenging perfectly useable food from Dumpsters behind restaurants and grocery stores on Thursday nights. On Friday, they got together at Romy and Brendan's place to cook, and that night, they distributed it to the homeless and hungry.

It was a crazy selfless thing to do, and Micah admired the guys involved.

Once he was alone with Erza, Micah braced for the inevitable conversation. Bree saved him by waking up, so Micah changed her diaper and then fed her jarred string beans.

Ezra waited until Bree was finished and stashed safely in the bouncy seat they'd borrowed from one of Brendan's sisters before saying, "For a guy who just landed a full-time job, you don't look very happy. Donner said you've been quiet all day."

Micah settled on the floor in front of Bree, mostly so he could give Ezra his back. "It's just been a long day. I didn't hear about the job until after four."

"Liar." Ezra sat on the opposite side of Bree, so Micah couldn't hide. "Look, I've been trying to give you space, because I don't want to be a pushy big brother, but did something happen at the Pot last night? I saw you go off with David."

Surprise jolted through him. "You know David?"

"Sure, all the regulars do. He hangs more at Rusty Nail, but I've seen him around the Pot for years. He even tried hitting on me once, a long time ago, but he's not my type."

"Oh." Micah's stomach soured. Had David only been interested because he looked so much like Ezra? Now that the fantasy had been fulfilled, he probably wasn't interested in Micah anymore, so maybe work wouldn't be awkward after all.

"You guys seemed into each other."

Micah shrugged. "We were."

"Has that happened before? You into a guy?"

"Yeah." He wiggled one of Bree's toes and she blew bubbles at him. "Look, you're only the second person I've said this to, but I'm bi."

“Cool. Wait, second person? You didn’t tell Dad, did you?”

“God no.” Micah shuddered. “No, I knew better than to let him get wind of it. I fooled around a bit in college, you know, mostly kissing and some dry humping, but last night...it felt different. More intense.”

“So how far did it go with David?”

“We made out a lot in a dark corner, and then he jerked me off.” Micah’s face flamed; he’d never talked about sex like this before, especially not with Ezra. But Ezra was watching him with an open, curious expression. No sign of judgment or condemnation. “I figured he’d want me to help him out, but instead he excused himself to take care of it in the bathroom. Then you called and I left without really saying goodbye.”

“Huh. Well, I’m sure we can find someone who knows his number, if you want to see him again. Do you want to see him again? He’s a little old for you, isn’t he?”

“The age thing isn’t a problem, and the universe seems to have it out for me lately, because I will be seeing him again. Frequently.”

Ezra’s eyebrows rose. “Really? Then why are you so down?”

“Because Hookup David is also Davidson Milano, aka, one of my new bosses at Milson Group.”

“Shut up. He is not.”

Micah dropped his face into both palms and groaned. “He is.”

“Oh wow. Okay.” Ezra scooted around and slung his arm across Micah’s back. “That’s awkward.”

“You think?” Micah looked up. “What are the fuc-freaking odds? When he walked into the office, I don’t know was more stunned, him or me. And then he barely said a word to me during the interview, and I genuinely expected to get a call saying I didn’t get the job, because awkward.”

Ezra tapped his chin with his index finger. “Maybe last night was a one-off for him, and he recognizes you’re exactly who he needs to for the job.”

“Maybe.” That explanation didn’t set well with Micah, though. “I thought we’d actually made a connection last night. I mean, we didn’t have any really deep conversations, but we did chat a little at the bar. Maybe I read too much into it.”

“If you hadn’t found out he’s your future boss today, would you have wanted to see him again?”

“Yes. It’s why I tried stalling last night, so I could give David my number, but then you said I had to be responsible for Bree, and you were right. So I left.”

“Oh, sugar, you should have said something.”

Micah shrugged. “Oh well. It is what it is, David will be my boss, so anything other than a workplace relationship is off-limits.”

“It’s probably just as well. David does have a reputation for being into the BDSM scene.”

“Yeah, I got that impression.” The mental image of David spanking his ass made Micah squirm—and not in a bad way.

Ezra narrowed his eyes. “That doesn’t turn you off?”

“Not really. I mean, I’ve never given any actual thought to spanking or whatever, but some of the things he said...I don’t know, they sounded kind of hot.”

“You’d really want a guy to tie you up and spank you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? Ez, I’ve never been this free before to explore my attraction to guys. At college, I had to keep it on the down-low, so word never got back to Dad. Here? I can test the

waters more, you know? And I felt something for David last night. I thought he felt something, too, but now it doesn't matter."

"It matters, Micah. Just because someone doesn't reciprocate your attraction, that doesn't mean your feelings don't matter anymore. One doesn't cancel the other out. And you're right, you do have a lot more freedom to explore both sides of being bi. You know none of us will judge you, even if it turns out you have a kinky side."

Micah studied his brother a moment and really saw him for the first time all week. He saw a twenty-seven-year-old man who'd been through horrible things, but who'd come out the other side stronger for it all. His pale blue eyes reflected a kind of peace with himself that Micah never thought he'd find for his own self but wanted. He wanted to know exactly who he was, what he needed, and to show it to the world, their opinions be damned.

Without thinking, he hugged Ezra tight and was grateful when Ezra hugged him back.

"You've got this, bro," Ezra whispered.

Micah pulled back just enough to meet Ezra's glimmering gaze. "Even though the idea of being spanked doesn't turn me off?"

"It's not for everyone, but we've all got kinks. And you never know which ones have the kinkier of kinks. You remember the other bartender? Riley? He and his partner are into some kinky shit. Physically, they're about as mismatched as you and David, but it works for them." Before Micah could ask, Ezra winked. "Except in their situation, Riley's the one doing the spanking."

Micah squeaked. He couldn't image laying a hand on another person, even for a sexual thrill. But the opposite? His dick twitched with interest. "How did you grow up to be such a great brother?"

Ezra shrugged. "I haven't always been. And I know it sounds cliché, but being with Donner made me a better person. More open-minded about some stuff. I see the world in a less selfish way now. And I want to make up for not being there when you were a kid. We were never close, and that was mostly my fault. I was in kindergarten when you were born, and I was very happy being an only child, so I resented you. You were the baby, so you got all the attention. Once you got older and wanted my attention, I punished you by ignoring you. I was a horrible brother, Micah, and I'm so sorry."

Micah's eyes burned at the naked emotion in Ezra's voice and expression. Ezra was opening up more than any other time in their lives, and Micah owed him the same. "I resented you, too, after the incident with Dr. Tanner. I was only ten, so I didn't fully understand what had happened to you, and I resented all the attention Mom lavished on you with food and gifts. I felt ignored, and I hated you, until I got older and got all the details. But by then you were on the other side of the country, and we never got a chance to really be brothers until now."

Ezra sniffled and wiped at his eyes. "I'm grateful we have that chance. And I'm grateful we can talk freely about this stuff. I mean, maybe not all the gory details, but you get what I mean."

"I do." Micah squeezed his wrist. "And if you do want to talk to me about that doctor, I'll listen."

"I know you will. To be honest, I've only ever talked about it in any detail twice. First time was Bryan, and he dumped me pretty quickly after. It made me relationship-shy for a long time."

"Until you met Donner."

"Yeah. He's only ever supported me, and he got so mad on my behalf. I think it was seeing someone finally sticking up for me, putting my needs first, that really made me fall in love with him."

“And then he stood up for you against Dad at my graduation party. That was pretty epic, by the way. Dad was pissed for days. And then I was pissed at them both for disowning you. I went to stay with a friend and didn’t talk to either of them for a week.”

Ezra blinked hard. “Really?”

“Yeah. Dad got me to come home by threatening my allowance, which always works to keep a kid in line. He said I was eighteen and free to contact you if I chose, but not to do it where they could see or overhear. It was pretty gross, but I needed their support to get through college.”

“You’d have made it work if you had lost their money.”

“Maybe.”

“Definitely. Look at you now. Cut off, but within five days of getting here you have a full-time job.”

Micah nodded. Bree squalled for attention, and Ezra eagerly lifted her out of the seat and onto his lap. “I need to figure out who’s going to watch her during the day,” Micah said. “It’s a pretty nine-to-five job in terms of office work, but April said I’d also have a work phone that I’m expected to answer if they call off-hours.”

“Ugh. Doesn’t sound child-friendly.”

“I did ask about that when she called to offer me the job, and April said they would only call if it was a client emergency, and those don’t happen often. She also seemed to imply it would be okay to bring Bree to work with me once in a while.”

“Okay, well, I’ve got Mondays handled,” Ezra said as he bounced Bree gently. “Romy’s off, too, so I’m sure he’ll pitch in.”

“But isn’t Monday, like, your only day off?”

“The great thing about being the boss is I can take time when I need to, or work half-shifts to get us through the breakfast rush. We can group chat about the other guys taking days, and Julie might even be interested.”

“And it would only be until my first paycheck. Once I have a steady income, I can contribute to rent, utilities and find Bree a proper daycare. Not that I wouldn’t love you guys spending time with her over a stranger, but don’t babies need social interaction with other babies?”

“Probably. We can make it work until you find a solution you like. Um, other than Brendan’s sisters, though, I don’t really have any friends with kids to refer you to for daycare options. I can ask around, though.”

“I’d appreciate it. I know I can look at online reviews and stuff, but I’d rather talk to someone with experience with the daycare, you know?”

“Absolutely.” Ezra raised Bree to kiss her cheek. “We can’t put you in the hands of just anyone, can we, princess?”

Micah grinned at his daughter and her perfectly smitten uncle. Maybe his love life was a bit of a mess, but that was okay. He had a job so he could provide for Bree, and that had been his goal this week. Whatever feelings he might have had for David needed to be buried deep down where they wouldn’t interfere with his job. Until he could support them and get his own place, Bree was all that mattered.

DAVID PROWLED RUSTY NAIL, saying hello to friends and acquaintances, and turning down offers from guys to buy him a drink. He’d already gotten a shot of Jack from his favorite spunky bartender Tori, and that was enough for now. Restless at home thanks to their new hire at work,

David had come out hoping to find someone to scratch an itch that had been fueled by last night's mistake, but no one appealed.

No one was a tall, lanky blond number with ice-blue eyes that promised a good time. And they'd had a good time, or so David had thought. Now last night's hookup was his new office assistant, and he needed to find someone to spank into an orgasm so he could get the image of doing it to Micah out of his damned head.

So far, no luck, so he slid onto a free stool and ordered another shot.

"So what's eating you tonight?" Tori asked as she pushed the glass over. Five-nothing, she was a tiny woman to work a bar, and with a young child to boot, but Tori wore her hair in colorful spikes and took shit from no one. She'd worked at Rusty Nail for years, wasn't much of a gossip, but did like to listen.

"Ever have a hookup where you feel like there might have been something there, but that person ditches you without so much as a goodbye?"

"Ouch, honey, and no. Never was a hookup kind of girl, and I've only been with my husband. This recent?"

"Last night." He stared at the amber liquid in his glass a moment before knocking it back. The familiar burn warmed his throat and stomach, but it didn't do anything for his mood. Part of him wanted to swing by a liquor store for his own bottle, go home, and get drunk. Except he had to work tomorrow, and he didn't want to show up to a client meeting hung-over.

Tori wiped down the bar in front of her. "Maybe it's a sign from the universe that it's time to settle your ass down, stop hooking up, and try to find a real guy to date."

"Maybe." Even though it had been twelve years, sometimes David's heart felt too tender to offer to another guy. It still hadn't fully healed from losing his first love. His first sub. His husband Casey.

*Maybe Casey is all I get. Maybe alone is better.*

Except he'd had a genuine connection with Micah, the kind he hadn't felt in years, especially with someone he'd just met, and he'd liked it. Liked flirting and tempting and pushing the guy's buttons. And Micah had teased and poked and responded so beautifully. Like a good sub who liked to top from the bottom. David had left that bathroom hoping to at least get a second date with Micah.

Now it was impossible.

After Tori fixed a few drinks for others, she returned to wiping the counter by him.

"You wanna know the fucking kicker?" David asked.

She rested on her elbows. "Hit me."

"Today, my business partner hired my hookup as our new office assistant."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope."

"Did she know you guys hooked up?"

"Hell no, and I don't plan on telling her." David nudged the shot glass toward her, and Tori poured him a third. "Not like it matters now. I will be the model boss. Last thing I need is a sexual harassment lawsuit if I say or do the wrong thing in front of Micah."

"Micah, huh? Cute name."

"Cute guy." He knocked back the third shot. "The universe has a pretty shitty sense of humor."

"I'll say. You know, maybe if you talk to your business partner, she can politely rescind the job offer?"

“No, we can’t do that. He needs the job more than I need a boyfriend.”

Micah had a four-month-old daughter. No way was David going to take this job away from a guy who obviously needed it. He had a hard time reconciling the sexy, eager boy he’d met last night with the somber father he’d interviewed this morning. But it showed him where Micah’s first loyalty was, and it was to his child.

As it should be.

Tori moved down the bar to pour a few more drinks to keep up with the Thursday night crowd. David contemplated a fourth shot, but even with his bulk, he knew his limits. Another one, on top of a light dinner, would make driving home a bad idea. And the bar wasn’t giving him anything in the way of a decent distraction, so he paid his tab and hit the sidewalk.

He circled the block a few times in the cold, mostly to make sure he was sober before getting in his car and driving home. Home wasn’t entirely accurate, though, since this was his fourth apartment since moving to Wilmington. The idea of buying a house, of settling down alone, didn’t appeal, so he rented and moved every few years, which meant he didn’t own much.

His current apartment had an open floorplan, which was common nowadays. He also rented furnished places, which saved time and energy when he moved, and he let himself into a fairly impersonal space. Probably why he trolled bars after work, instead of staying in. And even when he was home on weekends, he spent most of the time in his bedroom, streaming shows on his iPad. In some ways, he’d retreated from most of the world.

In other ways, he was still protecting a very bruised, not-quite-healed heart.

Nostalgia gripped his heart tonight, and instead of stripping down for bed, David pulled a small under-the-bed tub out and removed a scrapbook. Casey had enjoyed scrapbooking, and he’d created an album of their first year, up to and including their quick marriage at City Hall.

He turned the pages slowly, enjoying his trip into the past. Able to smile at the photos, when in previous years they’d brought tears. And in some ways, Casey and Micah resembled each other. Both tall and slender, but their faces weren’t the same, Casey’s hair a darker blond. Casey had been serious, while Micah bubbled with sarcasm and sass. Maybe David had seen the similarities because he was lonely. Well and truly lonely.

He traced his index finger around Casey’s smiling face in a picture from their weekend vacation to Rehoboth Beach. It had been their post-marriage splurge, since they couldn’t afford an official honeymoon. So many wonderful memories in those bound pages. Memories that made him happy, instead of sad. He’d loved everything about his life with Casey, even those hardest times near the end, and he could look back with joyful nostalgia, instead of anger and grief.

Casey seemed to smile up at him, his bright eyes encouraging David to be happy.

Maybe Micah Kelley wasn’t the person to make David happy, but damn it, he deserved a better life than this one. A life fuller than just work and bar-hopping. A life with someone he could love and who’d love him in return. Twelve years was long enough to grieve.

“Thanks, Casey,” he whispered. “You’ll always have a piece of my heart, but I think I’m ready to give the rest to someone new.”

Casey simply smiled.

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## Chapter 6

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**B**y the end of his first week as a full-time member of the work force, Micah was as in love with his job as he was frustrated by one of his bosses. Lesley was fun and bubbly, and she eased Micah into the job with a lot of humor. The biggest responsibility was handling communication, whether it was between April and David, or between them and their clients. It wasn't as simple as it sounded, but also not so complicated his head spun.

April was also a great person to work with, open about herself without crossing any professional lines. David, however, did his very best to avoid being alone with Micah ever, so they never got a chance to talk about last week. All Micah wanted to do was apologize for ditching him and reassure him it wasn't personal. That Micah had been interested, even though nothing could happen now.

On Friday, he went into work determined to have that conversation with David, only for Lesley to tell him David was working from home today. Lesley said it wasn't unusual, but to Micah it felt personal. So when April asked Lesley to run a finished 3-D model over to David's for any design tweaks he might want, Micah volunteered.

Lesley shrugged and put David's address into Micah's phone. Over the weekend, he'd traded in his Tesla for a studier four-door sedan that had netted him some money back. He put the model in the backseat, and then set out to find David's apartment building. Traffic was shitty, he had to slam on his brakes twice, and he made two wrong exits, but somehow the model made it without damage, and he rode the elevator up.

Nerves gripped his insides the moment he stood outside David's door. Doing this was incredibly bold, but if David was avoiding him, Micah would force the issue. Maybe once they addressed the hookup, they could put it behind them and make work less tense.

He rang the bell.

Only a few seconds passed before the door swung open. David's bland expression dipped into wide-eyed shock. Micah did not stare. Not at all.

More than the office suits or the black club vest, Micah loved this look: package-hugging sweatpants and a sleeveless black tee. It showed off toned arms and his tree-trunk legs, and the slightly rounded belly of someone who enjoyed pizza and hated stomach crunches.

*Fuck, he's hot. Why does he have to be so fucking hot?*

Micah hadn't realized he was attracted to bear-ish types. That's what they were called, right? Bears?

"Hi," Micah squeaked.

"What are you doing here?" David asked, more anger in his voice than Micah expected.

“April sent over a model for you to tweak.” He held it up, glad to have the prop between them, because now David looked as pissed as he sounded.

“And she asked you to bring it over?”

“No, she asked Lesley, but since you have refused to talk to me all week, I volunteered. Can I come in? Two minutes.”

David glared, then took a step back, giving Micah just enough room to go inside. Passing by the bigger man made his skin tingle, and Micah did not purposely sniff for his cologne. Nope.

The apartment was clean but boring, like someone had taken a page out of a furniture catalogue and dropped it into the living space. The only somewhat untidy area was a mass of papers and a laptop on the dining table. It seemed like a good place to put the model, and the sound of the door clicking shut made his pulse race.

Micah took a deep breath to steady his nerves before turning. David hadn’t moved from his spot by the door, arms now crossed. “I need to apologize for last Wednesday night,” Micah said.

Dark eyebrows dipped. “What about it? We both got off, end of story.”

“I’m sorry about how it ended. I planned to stick around and talk to you, maybe even get your number, but I had to go or I’d be late getting back and relieving the babysitter. As much as I enjoyed what we did, I have to put my daughter first.”

David’s angry expression smoothed out. “And you should put her first. Always. Thank you for the apology.”

He didn’t seem to have noticed the part where Micah said he’d wanted David’s number. And David wasn’t demanding he leave, so Micah took a chance on more conversation. “The universe sure has a shitty sense of humor, huh? I about crapped my pants when you walked into the interview last week.”

“Same.” David’s lips twitched. “I wanted to find Trace and throttled him for giving you the job lead, but at the same time, you’ve got a kid to support, so I can’t be mad at him for that. How’s she doing?”

“She’s great. She’s a baby, so mostly she eats, sleeps, poops and stares at nothing in particular.”

David chuckled. “Is it forward of me to ask to see a picture?”

“Of course not.” Micah loved that he wasn’t being shoved back out the door, and Bree was his favorite subject. He whipped out his phone and brought up the eleventy-billion pictures he had. “Here.”

David took the phone and scrolled through them, his expression growing more and more tender as he browsed the gallery. “She’s gorgeous. I can see a bit of you in her. The way she smiles.”

“Thanks. She looks a lot like her mom.”

“Since we’re out of the office, may I ask how her mother passed?”

Grief pulsed in Micah’s chest. “Brain cancer. She passed away not long after Christmas.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. We broke up before she knew she was pregnant, and for whatever reason, she didn’t tell me. Her aunt called me when they realized Kenya wasn’t going to make it much longer.”

“That couldn’t have been easy. Finding out you’re a dad and the mother of your child is dying.”

“It wasn’t.” Micah leaned his hip against the dining table. “I did love Kenya once, but I gave into pressure from my father to break up with her, because he’s a homophobic, racist dickwad,

and he threatened to cut me off.”

“Ah.” David leaned against the table next to Micah, tentative but openly curious. “I take it he wasn’t happy about his granddaughter being biracial?”

“He was livid. My mom adored Bree, but Dad...anyway, I took everything I could grab and hit the road. Drove from Seattle to here so I could stay with my brother and his partner.”

“Yeah, I know Ezra and Donner from the Pot and around town. They’re good people, and I’m glad you had them to fall back on. Being a single dad is hard on anyone, but especially someone so young.”

“And still figuring himself out. I’ve only recently been able to say out loud that I’m bi, and I really, really enjoyed our, uh, encounter.”

David smiled, a funny glint in his eyes. “So did I, sunshine.”

Micah’s belly wobbled at the nickname, so he pulled out a little more truth, because his body really liked being this close to David again. “I’ve never had such intense feelings with another guy before. So I meant what I said about wanting to get your number that night.”

“I believe you, and the feelings were mutual. It’s just too bad you’re now my employee, and us doing it again is all kinds of wrong.” David’s tone was too soft, too uncertain.

He shouldn’t push, but he couldn’t help it. After being ignored by David all week, all Micah wanted was his attention. He was hyper-aware of the man: his scent, his heat, his casually-dressed but crazy-sexy body. “I’m not looking for a boyfriend right now, because I do have my daughter to concentrate on, but I wouldn’t mind another mind-blowing orgasm.” Micah purposely didn’t say “with you,” so David had a conversational out.

All David had to say was “I hope you find someone to help you with that,” or even “Good luck, I have to get back to work,” and Micah would take the hint. He really would. But David simply stared at him, breathing a bit faster, cheeks starting to flush. Micah held his gaze, unwilling to cause further temptation by looking at David’s lips, or anywhere else on his body.

David had to do this.

“You’re trouble,” David said in a husky tone.

“I’m just trying to figure out who I am.”

David stood straight and angled to face him. With Micah slouched down, David towered over him in an appealing way. They were bare inches apart, but Micah didn’t move. Didn’t reach for what he wanted. He didn’t know David well, but from working at his company for the last five days, Micah didn’t imagine he was the type to fuck and fire. And right now, this wasn’t about his job. It was about the attraction simmering between them, the instinctive way Micah felt safe with David, and an intense desire to explore this new, scary, wonderful thing.

“We do anything, it stays out of the office,” David said. “Completely out. No looks, no flirting, nothing changes.”

“Understood.”

David rested one hand on Micah’s hip. “I shouldn’t have been such a prick to you all week.”

“I didn’t take it too personally, because I knew we needed to talk.”

“I’m glad we did.” David’s free hand landed on Micah’s other hip.

Micah’s pulse jumped as the heat of David’s hands seeped through his clothes. “Do you want me to leave?”

“I should want that, but I don’t.” David sighed, let go and took two long steps backward. “But we’re both on the clock, and I’m on a deadline.”

Damn it. True, they were on the clock, but still. Damn it.

“But,” David said with a downward leer, “if you came back tonight, I’d let you in.”

Micah's insides quivered with anticipation. "Okay. Ezra has so many friends, I doubt a babysitter will be a problem, and she'll be asleep anyway." Tonight, Donner and Brendan went out for Street Feed, and sometimes Ezra tagged along, but Ezra was also a princess about the cold, so convincing him to stay home so Micah could...it wasn't a date, exactly.

He frowned.

"Hey." David tapped his chin, and Micah looked up. "This isn't a booty call. I am attracted to you, Micah, and it's been a long time since I let myself indulge in real feelings for another guy. But if this is just you exploring the guy side of bi, then don't come over. Because us doing this, me fucking around with an employee, is a big breach of ethics. But it's a breach I think could be worth it."

Micah appreciated the blunt truth and the way David laid it all out on the table, but he needed to be clear on the boundaries. "So if I come over tonight, we're starting a purely sexual relationship that stays completely between us, and at work there is no sign of it?"

DAVID'S HEART sank a bit at the "purely sexual relationship" part, but if that's all Micah could offer him right now, he'd take it. He was so fucking lonely, and his body was singing simply from its proximity to Micah, and that meant something. Ignoring it wouldn't help either of them, and Micah had admitted to feeling something new. He was also a young father and not looking for a boyfriend.

But they could build on what they had, spend time together in private, and see if what they felt was worth exploring openly. Because, while April would murder him with her bare hands if she found out he was fucking the office assistant, David wanted to take a risk.

He wanted to feel something again, damn it.

"Yes," David replied. "That's what you want, right? Because earlier you said you weren't looking for a boyfriend."

"Right." Micah licked his lips, and the simple sight made David's balls tighten. He'd loved kissing Micah more than anything else they'd done last week. That mouth was pure temptation. But if David kissed him now, it wouldn't end there. Not with his bed less than fifteen feet away.

And a lot of fun could also be had on a dining room table.

"And if you decide not to come back tonight," David added, even as his heart sank at the idea, "no hard feelings. I don't want you to feel obligated."

"I don't feel that way." Micah's pale blue eyes shined with strength and desire. "But what exactly am I coming over for, besides sex? Ezra told me you're a Dom and into the scene, but I'm not so sure about some of the stuff I've seen online."

The image of Casey tied to the bed, spread for him, waiting to be spanked and used, flashed into David's mind, and he instantly super-imposed Micah onto the memory.

*Fuck yeah.*

"It's been a long time since I've really thought of myself as a Dom," David replied. "I play around with willing partners, and I go to a leather bar when I need to scratch an itch. Exclusive parties. But when I was in a relationship with my former sub, BDSM was something that brought us closer together. Neither of us was into anything too hardcore, but we both needed certain aspects of it. Casey needed to submit so he could let go and quiet the voices in his head. And I needed to be with someone who wholly trusted me to both mark him and take perfect care of him. Does that make sense?"

"It does." Micah visibly swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Casey was your sub?"

“And my husband.”

Micah’s hands jerked. “You were married?”

“Not for long. He passed away far too young, and I’ve missed him for a long damned time. But it’s time to move on and be happy again. I know he’d want that for me.”

“I’m sorry you lost him.”

“Thanks. Honestly, I rarely talk about him to anyone, because that was the life I left behind in Boston. This was supposed to be my fresh start, but leaving one city for another doesn’t erase the memories or the grief.”

Micah surprised him by walking over and hugging him tight. The long, lean body against his felt so right that David clung to him, inhaling his coconut scent, loving how well Micah fit in his arms.

“Of course, it doesn’t erase the grief,” Micah said. “I left behind a dead girlfriend, and parents who I thought loved me, and I still grieve for them. Moving here doesn’t change that. I’m sorry if me being here is making this harder on you.”

“Oh, you beautiful boy.” David pulled back so he could look into Micah’s damp eyes. “It’s exactly the opposite. I’ve known for a while that I need to move on with my life, but I hadn’t really found a good enough reason. And then you danced your way into my line of sight, and I found a *very* good reason. We don’t know each other well yet, and this is very new. But I know how I feel, and I want to see what this could be. I also won’t push you into anything you aren’t ready for.”

Micah trembled once. “I believe you. But my daughter always comes first.”

“Of course. I would never come between or do anything to harm that relationship, I promise.” David had never seen himself as a father or really thought about kids, especially not after Casey died. But Bree was adorable, and Micah was completely charmed by the little girl.

“Okay. Then barring lack of a babysitter, I’ll come back tonight. We’ll see where this goes.”

“Excellent.” David kissed Micah’s forehead, then stepped to the side. “You should get back to work. Lesley will think you got lost.”

“I almost did. This city is nuts, and I used to live in Seattle, so that’s saying something.”

“You get used to it. Text me when you’re on your way.”

“Okay.” Micah flashed him a tentative smile before leaving.

David stared at the closed apartment door, his thoughts ripping in two directions at once. On one hand, he was engaging in a sexual relationship with a young father who was only just discovering his identity, and it was both exciting and nerve-wracking. On the other hand, he was engaging in a sexual relationship with someone David felt a strong connection to, and that hadn’t happened in a long damned time.

Over the years, David had met a lot of scared, uncertain young men, still wading in the shallow end of their sexual identity. But he’d never been in the position of helping a man he was attracted to indulge in new, somewhat forbidden activities. Micah could be a beautiful sub, if he allowed himself to let go and embrace it. But was David truly ready to embrace the mantle of Dom again? To take on that role and open his heart to new love?

He had no idea.

MICAH SPENT the rest of the afternoon in a tangle of nervous anticipation. Lesley seemed to take it as him simply being eager for the weekend. TGIF and all, and that was a small part of it.

He was simply eager to get home and ask Ezra about babysitting tonight, so he could see David. And he tried hard not to think about David for the rest of the day, because whenever he pictured the man in that black sleeveless tee?

Woody temptation, and he didn't need that in the middle of the office.

But on the drive home from work, he allowed those thoughts to come out and play. He also re-examined the deal they'd made. How they'd defined their relationship. Micah was cool with just sex for now, and apparently so was David—even though they'd both acknowledged feelings. They weren't in positions to date, given David was his boss. And Micah had been in Wilmington for two weeks. He was still acclimating, and a boyfriend would only gum up the works.

Sex, though? Maybe a little of the kinky stuff? Micah could work that in without screwing anything else up.

He hoped.

Ezra was in the kitchen and, from the smell of it, cooking up a stir-fry. It was his favorite simple, go-to meal, and before Micah could comment, two new items crowding the not-large apartment caught his eyes. A playpen stood behind the couch that faced the TV, and a baby swing was on the floor behind the other couch, making it more visible from the kitchen. Bree seemed content to swing slowly, a pacifier in her mouth.

His heart pitter-pattered a bit when he saw her.

"Hey, working man," Ezra said, saluting with his favorite spatula.

"Hey." Micah leaned down to kiss Bree's forehead. "She good today?"

"The report was she got fussy mid-morning, but Brendan quieted her down pretty fast."

"Cool." Donner was always off from the Pot on Friday, so today's babysitting plan had been for Donner and Brendan to watch her at Brendan's house while they cooked today's Street Feed food. Ezra had picked her up after he got off at the café and brought her home, so he'd only had her for about two hours.

Micah watched Ezra scrape chopped minute steaks into the wok. They sizzled in a cloud of steam. Another lidded pot was probably the rice, so Micah busied himself getting bowls and forks for each of them. Ezra sometimes used chopsticks, but Micah had never gotten the hang of the damned things. They made his fingers cramp, anyway.

He also fetched them sodas and everything was ready on the island countertop when Ezra started serving them. Micah liked Ezra's stir-fries. He used a bit of Thai sweet chili sauce to give the food just enough heat and sweetness that it didn't overpower the other flavors.

"So, uh, what are you up to tonight?" Micah asked after he'd both eaten a few bites and complimented the chef.

Ezra's eyebrows jumped. "Figured on binging something on Netflix. You?"

"Well, I, um, was hoping to go out for a few hours."

"You wouldn't be so nervous if you'd planned on going out with Bree, so is this you trying to ask if I'll watch her?"

"Yeah." Micah's face heated. "I just hate asking for more favors, when you guys have been so great all week."

"Do you have a date?"

Those flames got hotter, and he looked down at his food when he said, "Yes."

"Dude, why are you embarrassed about having a date? You meet someone at work?"

"Something like that." And it wasn't technically a date. It also wasn't a booty call, so what the hell was it?

*Sex between consenting adults who both have feelings for each other we can't act on.*

That was hella depressing.

“Okay, I’m not going to be the nosy big brother and demand to know details,” Ezra said. “Just play safe, okay?”

“I will. Thank you.”

“You deserve to blow off steam, and it is Friday.”

“Yeah, I just...thank you. I mean it.”

Ezra smiled brightly. “I know.” He looked over at the baby swing. “You and me tonight, princess.”

She gurgled.

“I have probably maxed out my ration of thank you’s for the year, but thank you, Ez,” Micah said. “Not just for tonight, but for everything. If I hadn’t had you to rely on, God knows where I’d be. Maybe I’d have had to give Bree up, and I can’t imagine not being her dad. It’s so weird saying that, too, because I’d never given any real thought to kids as anything other than a nebulous, faraway maybe.”

“That makes sense, especially with guys your age. You’re concentrating on college, internships, and getting a full-time job once you graduate. Which you will do one day. We’ll make sure you get the credits and courses you need to complete your degree.” Ezra sighed. “I spent five years chasing something I never found, and my life has worked out. But you had a dream and a career path, and I won’t let you lose it if it’s still what you want.”

Micah pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off tears, as another pang of love for his brother filled his heart.

“Okay, no more goopy stuff,” Ezra said, waving his hands in the air with a dramatic flourish. “Eat, and then go get ready for your night out.”

“Yes, dad.”

Ezra blew a raspberry at him. Bree shrieked with laughter so he did it again. Micah laughed at the pair and finished his stir-fry, both excited and terrified of tonight’s non-date with David.

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## Chapter 7

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David prowled his apartment, nerves preventing him from sitting or even paying attention to the television. He realized too late they hadn't set a time for Micah's return, and as eight o'clock inched toward eight-thirty, he started to worry Micah wasn't coming. That he'd changed his mind completely about doing anything with David.

Uncertain exactly what Micah might be up for tonight, he'd gone back and forth about what to keep handy. In the end, he put a condom and a few lube packets under one pillow in his bedroom, and he'd left the rest of his toys in the nightstand drawer.

Hell, they might only swap blow jobs in the living room and that was that. David didn't really care, he just wanted to spend time with Micah off-the-clock. No longer boss and employee; now two guys who wanted to have sex with someone they were attracted to.

If Micah showed up.

At eight-forty-five, his doorbell rang. With sweaty palms, David opened the apartment door. Micah stood in the hall, cheeks adorably stained red from the cold, wrapped up in a familiar winter coat. His hands were deep in that coat's pockets, and he rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Hi," David said.

"Hey." Micah bit his lower lip, and that wasn't ten kinds of adorable or anything. "Am I too late?"

"Not at all." He stepped aside so Micah could enter, his entire body already keenly aware of the younger man's presence. "I'm glad you came. Take your coat?"

"Sure." As he undid his coat, he revealed too-tight jeans and a sky-blue Henley that matched his eyes.

David nearly fumbled the coat before managing to hang it in the closet. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Do you have beer?"

Curious by the request for alcohol, David pivoted and flashed a smile. "Nervous?"

"Yeah." Micah shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "I walked around the block three times, or I would have been here sooner."

"Got it. Please, have a seat." David went into the kitchen and fetched two beers from a six-pack. One each wouldn't hurt them, and if Micah was this nervous, they needed to talk before any touching happened. He popped both caps, then returned to the living room.

Micah stood by the wall, pretending to study a piece of generic art that came with the place. David had never found the oil print of a shadowy sailboat all that interesting, but Micah seemed

to like it. He accepted the beer with a shy smile. “Do you know who painted this?”

“No idea,” David replied. “It came with the apartment.”

“Oh.” He turned to face David. “So is anything here yours?”

“Not much. I move around a lot, and I like not having to bother with big stuff, so I prefer renting furnished apartments.”

“Why do you move so much?”

“Restless, I guess.” David took a long pull from his beer; Micah did the same. “My work’s here, so I stay local, but...I don’t know. Sooner or later, a place stops feeling like home.”

“Maybe it doesn’t feel like home, because there’s nothing here that says it is. Nothing personal to show me who you are. What you value.”

“Interesting point.” David winked. “Most of my personals are in the bedroom.”

Micah nearly did a spit-take with his beer. “I see.”

No other remarks about the comment. Interesting. “Please, come sit. Let’s talk a little about what we’re both expecting out of tonight.”

Relief flashed across his pretty face. “Yes, please.”

They settled on the couch, about a foot of space between them, and David did that deliberately. Too close to the object of his desire and he wouldn’t be able to think straight. “I’ve been having sex with men since I was sixteen,” David said, hoping a little truth would ease Micah’s fears. “My family has been fairly accepting of me over the years, but I do keep things like my proclivities toward tying my partner up to myself. I’ve had all kinds of sex, and I did have one threesome. I am completely comfortable with almost everything, and I acknowledge you’re still fairly new to this, so I want to go at your speed.”

Micah tilted his head. “Almost everything?”

David debated how much he should say, versus how much Micah probably knew from online porn. “BDSM is a big community with a wide variety of interests, and not every aspect is for every member. For example, I’m more into the BD than the SM. I enjoy restraining my partners, and I enjoy being in a position of dominance. To hold your orgasm in my hands, to hear you beg for it. To submit to my will.”

“What’s the SM then?”

“Sado-masochism. Receiving and inflicting pain. And while I enjoy giving a good spanking to guys who want it, I don’t like creating marks that take more than a few hours to fade, and I don’t like leaving bruises. With Casey, sometimes a spanking was punishment, but I don’t get off on another guy’s pain. That’s not my kink.”

“Okay, that’s sounds reasonable enough.”

“Does any of that appeal to you?”

Micah sipped his beer as his brain worked out the question. “I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“Then we won’t try anything radical until you are sure. Tonight can be just about sex. However far you want to go.”

That adorable blush crept across his cheeks. “That’s the thing. I’m not sure how far I’m ready to go yet.”

“And that’s completely acceptable. The only expectation I had for tonight was being able to kiss you again, and if that’s as far as it goes, I’m cool.” *I’ll have a horrible case of blue balls and need to jerk off after you leave, but I’ll be cool about it.*

Sometimes being responsible sucked, but David never wanted to push Micah too far, too fast, or break a limit they didn’t realize was there. He liked Micah too much to accidentally hurt or scare him.

“I believe you,” Micah said. “Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“How old are you?”

That was way less personal than he’d expected. “Thirty-five.”

Micah’s eyebrows shot into his hairline. “Seriously? Wow.”

His shock unnerved David a little, but thirty-five wasn’t that old. And okay, fourteen years was a generational age gap, but not un-surmountable. And Micah had a world-weariness about him that made the guy seem older than twenty-one.

*Becoming a father while still in college does that to people.*

“So,” David asked after a moment of silence, “am I too old, or are you too young?”

Micah chuckled, then chased the sound with more beer. “I don’t know. Neither, I guess.”

“Good answer.” David lightly clinked the neck of his bottle to Micah’s, then sipped. “Can I ask you a personal question now?”

“I guess so.”

“I know last week there was a lot of adrenaline and arousal going around,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “but when I commented on putting my tongue in your ass, you seemed into it.”

Micah’s eyes widened, but he didn’t respond because David hadn’t asked him anything yet.

David watched Micah’s expression carefully as he asked, “What are your thoughts on anal sex? And I ask, because it’s not an automatic given when two guys fuck. Not all couples do it, some hate it, some want it every day. And I don’t expect it from you, especially if it turns you off.”

When Micah started squirming, David dropped his gaze, pleasantly surprised to see a thick erection pressing against those tight jeans. So his young apprentice was definitely into this conversation; he seemed to have trouble voicing his desires. A serious conversation on a couch was a far cry from the flirtatious, mouthy brat he’d first met, and Micah seemed a bit out of his element.

“Hang out a second.” David put his beer on the coffee table and stood. “Alexa, play dance club music.”

The Echo whirred a moment. “Here’s a station you might like,” it replied.

The apartment filled with the familiar thumpa-thumpa that always got his blood pumping. He adjusted the volume so he didn’t piss off his neighbors, then offered his hand to Micah, whose dumbfounded expression was so endearing David nearly kissed him. “Dance with me.”

Micah joined him but kept hold of the beer. David could work with that. He led Micah to the larger space of the foyer so they didn’t bump into any furniture, and then he let go. As if he was right back in Pot O Gold, dancing in a sea of sweaty bodies. The scents were different, but the feeling he got from the music was the same. It took Micah a few seconds to engage, and then about a minute to really commit. David’s forming erection rubbed Micah’s hip in a familiar way, and then a lean thigh pressed into his crotch. Steady, rubbing pressure. At first, David simply nuzzled at Micah’s cheek and chin with his nose, followed by his lips, warming Micah up. Getting him out of his own head and back into the moment.

As one song bled into another, Micah loosened up by degrees. The air warmed around them. Perspiration prickled David’s skin and made Micah’s face glisten. He had a pale, porcelain complexion that blushed adorably, and David couldn’t help wondering how red his ass would get after a few swats.

David slid his hands from Micah’s hips so his fingertips squeezed just under the waistband of

his jeans. A tight belt kept them from going any farther, which was fine. He was testing the waters, not molesting the guy. And Micah's moves didn't stutter or stop; he danced on, still grinding into David's thigh.

Then Micah surprised him by licking from David's clavicle to his jaw, before nipping at his earlobe. "Feels easier to talk like this."

"Figured as much." David rubbed his cheek against Micah's, loving the faintest hint of blond stubble there. They weren't moving quite as quickly, despite the music. More like swaying in place now. "Kinda missed the feisty blond I met at the Pot. You seemed more sure of yourself then."

"Well, three rum and Cokes didn't hurt."

"True, but you've had half a beer and you're responding, so that's a good sign. I'd hate to think you only let me please you because you were drunk."

"Wasn't drunk. Just...looser. I can do hand jobs, it's just other stuff makes me nervous."

David tried to study Micah without losing his rhythm, because he didn't want to read the younger man wrong. Some men needed submission, because they didn't know how to ask for what they truly desired. They needed a Dom to guide them, not only in life, but also in the bedroom. Micah didn't strike him as a guy who needed to be led through his life.

The bedroom, though...the jury was still out, but David was leaning toward at least needing a safe place to explore this side of his sexuality. See how far his kinky side extended before Micah got uncomfortable. And David wanted to be the man who helped Micah spread his wings. Even if Micah flew away one day, David could do this for him for as long as Micah chose to be in his life.

"Why does other stuff make you nervous?" David asked. "Because you haven't done it yet?"

"Yes."

"But you want to?"

"Yes."

No hesitation in those yes's. "If I told you to take your shirt, shoes, socks and pants off, and to go into my bedroom wearing only your underwear, would you do it?"

"Yes."

David swallowed hard, entranced by Micah's easy submission and a little worried about pushing the kid too far, too fast. And curious how far Micah would let himself be pushed. "Then do it."

MICAH DIDN'T KNOW what compelled him to listen to David's audacious demand that he basically strip and go into his bedroom, but he did. He left his shoes and socks by the door, the latter inside the former. His shirt he folded and put on the couch's side table. He balked a moment at his jeans, because he was wearing briefs, but down they went. Purposely ignoring David, he folded those jeans, put them on top of the shirt, and walked toward the back of the apartment.

He had no idea which room was David's, but both doors stood open, and only one had a bed. The décor was as uninspired as the living room, and Micah's belly fluttered with anticipation. He'd walked mostly naked into another man's bedroom because of one fucking order. An order he'd felt in his spine, and he'd never had such a visceral reaction to another person. More than just his attraction to David, or his sense of personal safety around the other man, something in his voice said, "Obey."

And some need inside of Micah said, "Yes."

He stopped by the bed and turned. David still stood in the living room, but he was staring down the short hall, his entire body squared off, like a man about to salute. Instead of snapping one off, he took long, deliberate strides toward Micah. Micah's belly quivered at the power in the man approaching, and that power insisted he drop to his knees. But David hadn't told him to kneel, simply to enter this room, so he stayed still.

Stayed still as David stopped directly in front of him, and Micah hunched a bit so they were more eye to eye. Micah tried hard not to blink, but this was a completely different David than the one he thought he knew.

"Have you ever given a blow job?" David asked.

Micah swallowed hard. "Kind of."

"In this room, you'll answer my questions with 'yes, sir,' or 'no, sir.' Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Dear God, this shouldn't be as sexy as it was.

"Good. Have you ever received a blow job from a guy?"

"Yes, sir. Once at a frat party. We were both drunk and I don't remember a lot about it."

"Hmm. Do you want to blow me?"

Arousal spiked through Micah's bloodstream, and he deliberately looked down at David's crotch. The erection that had rubbed against his leg earlier still strained against those tight sweatpants. Oh yeah, he wanted to get down there and see what David was packing. He met David's eyes again, encouraged by the heat in his gaze. "Yes, sir."

David undid the drawstring, hooked fingers in the waistband of his sweats, and tugged them down to his knees. His dick stood out straight from his body, as if pointing right at Micah, and the sight of a naked cock had never made Micah's mouth water quite like this. Never made him *want*. But David hadn't told him to do anything yet, so Micah clenched both hands by his sides and held still, his own dick heavy with need.

"Try to use your lips to protect your teeth," David said in a husky, less-in-control tone. "Don't take too much too fast, or you'll choke. Use your hand at the base to control depth."

"Yes, sir." Micah had watched gay porn, so he was familiar with the mechanics, but he appreciated David's tips. Especially the teeth thing. He'd had a girl go down on him when he was seventeen who ended up making him go limp because she kept scratching his dick with her teeth.

David put both hands on Micah's shoulders and gently pushed. Micah lowered himself to his knees, turned on even more by the silent handling. Presented with a dick in front of his face for the first time, Micah took a moment to appreciate what nature gave the man. Long and thick, but not frighteningly so, and uncut like Micah. The glans leaked a bit of precome. Curious and eager, Micah flicked out his tongue to collect the fluid. Bitter, a little salty, not unlike his own come.

He raised his right hand and smoothed it up and down David's shaft, enjoying the gentle motions of the foreskin, the heat underneath, the way David's breath inhaled sharply when Micah pressed his thumb against the underside of the glans. That little spot Micah liked to play with while jerking off, and it did something for David, too.

"You look so beautiful on your knees for me," David said.

Micah grinned at the compliment, and as a silent thank you, sucked on the head of David's cock. David gasped, those hands on his shoulders sliding up to tangle in his hair. David guided Micah's head a tiny bit, putting more of his shaft into Micah's mouth. The taste of the man was as addictive as the sensation of David's dick gliding across his tongue. Gently thrusting without overtaking the act. Micah grabbed David's hip with his free hand, while the other held steady at

the root of David's dick, and when lips met fist, Micah gagged just a bit.

David pulled back, far enough so Micah could look up and see David's lusty, approving grin. "Good, very good, sunshine."

Micah beamed, then went down on him again.

DAVID'S BRAIN exploded a little bit over how quickly Micah figured out giving head, and over how much he seemed to enjoy it. This, like every other sexual act on the planet, wasn't something everyone enjoyed, but Micah went down on him like he'd been given his favorite ice cream cone to lick, suck, stroke, and nibble on. He seemed to enjoy gentle nips to David's foreskin, and David liked that a lot, too. It was playful. David loved a partner who could play during sex, instead of treating it like a "suck, fuck, thanks for the ride!" transaction.

Micah was learning and having fun at the same time, and after several long minutes of allowing Micah to explore, David very much wanted to return the favor. He tugged Micah off with two pulls on his hair. Micah looked up through a fan of blond eyelashes, his cheeks stained red, and was that annoyance in his eyes?

*My perfect, blond brat.*

"On the bed," David said.

Instead of questioning him, Micah elegantly rose to his feet, his hip deliberately brushing David's erection. "How do you want me to sit, sir?"

David nearly growled at the seductive tone in Micah's voice. "On your back, center of the bed." He shoved his own sweats all the way off, but didn't remove his tee just yet.

Micah followed orders, stretching his long, lean body out in the middle of David's bed, those black briefs hiding his ultimate destination. But David wanted to appreciate Micah's body first. He had the toned, muscular legs of an athlete, each with a scattering of blond hair on the thighs and calves. Micah laughed when David massaged both feet, appreciating their size. Micah hadn't been lying when he teased about having size fourteens. And there was something about feet that turned David on. Their size, shape, those ten toes.

As tempted as he was to suck on Micah's toes, he didn't want to scare the guy off of one of David's favorite kinks too fast, so he continued his massage up Micah's legs. Stroked that fine hair, familiarized himself with the size and shape of those muscles. He bypassed anything still covered in cotton to play on Micah's abdomen. Teasing his flat belly with fingers and tongue, licking around his navel.

Micah giggled at that, his body tensing and relaxing, probably fighting to stay still and let David explore, when he clearly wanted to do some touching of his own.

When David reached his pecs, he looked into Micah's wide eyes, and asked, "Has anyone ever bitten your nipples?"

Micah's nostrils flared. "No, sir."

"Excellent." He bit, lightly at first, and Micah's upper body jerked. "Feels good?"

"Oh, do it again. Please? Sir?"

The sir got Micah what he wanted. David spent several minutes on each nipple, biting and licking, amping Micah up until he thrashed beneath David. Never once did he grab at David, try to direct him, or interfere in any way, so David wasn't disappointed when Micah came in his underwear. David preferred his sub didn't come until given permission, but this was Micah's first intense sexual encounter with a man, and he needed to ease Micah into things.

"Oh, fuck," Micah panted. "Holy shit, I've never done that before."

David stretched out next to Micah, left hand bracing his head up, and his right palm-down over Micah's racing heart. "Done what?"

"Come without me or someone else touching my dick." He gazed at David with wonder in his eyes. "Wow."

The compliments rolled pleasantly over David's skin. "Some guys have crazy sensitive nipples."

"Guess that's me. It's like they were hard-wired directly to my dick. Fuck, but that felt good."

"Only good?" David pretended to pout.

Micah dragged him down for a hard kiss. "Amazing." Kiss. "Outstanding." Kiss. "Bigly, even."

David hooted laughter. "Please, don't use that word."

"Made you laugh, though."

"True." He studied Micah's grinning face, proud for having given him such an intense orgasm from a newly-discovered erogenous zone. "You don't like when things get too serious, do you?"

"Not really. Our house was always so serious growing up. Our parents expected me and Ezra to act a certain way, and when he moved here, those expectations amped up and landed on me. So when I'm with friends or on a date, I like to keep things light."

"It's why you felt more comfortable talking while we danced than simply sitting on the couch."

"Yeah." Micah nuzzled against David's shoulder. "This is another first for me, you know. Cuddling in bed after getting off. I like it. I mean, it could just be the endorphins..."

"Brat." David sat up and straddled his waist, then whipped off his tee. Micah's eyes widened, and David sat there, allowing the younger man to look his fill. David didn't have the fittest body anymore, and he'd stopped caring a few years ago. He'd always been tall, and the extra bulk had taken him from muscle top to almost-bear, which worked for him.

It must have worked for Micah, too, because he asked, "May I touch you, sir?"

"Touch anything you want."

A new flush spread across Micah's chest as he reached up. Pressed both open palms against David's pecs and ran his fingers through the wisps of auburn hair there. Micah's own chest was mostly smooth, with only a few stray hairs around his nipples, and a thin happy trail leading to what David hoped were similarly blond pubes. The differences in their body types was endlessly fascinating, and Micah mapped out David's with his hands. Feathering over his arms, tracing the shape of his collarbone.

"Can I ask you something?" Micah said.

David squeezed the hand currently stroking the side of his belly. "How about we make a deal? You don't have to ask permission to ask me a question when we aren't doing a scene. Just ask."

"Okay. Thank you. Is there anywhere you don't like being touched?"

"Hmm. Good question. The bottom of my feet are really ticklish. Growing up my older sister thought it was funny to sit on me and tickle me until I was sobbing, so not fun memories."

"How much older is your sister?"

"Ten years."

"Oh wow, and I thought six years between me and Ezra was a lot."

David shrugged one shoulder. "I was an unexpected oops. My parents were ecstatic, because

they'd been told Mom couldn't have more kids, but Gwen was used to being an only child and didn't like me much."

"Huh. Sounds like Ezra when I showed up." Micah's expression went thoughtful and, despite David's raging boner, he was enjoying this conversation.

"You guys weren't close growing up?"

"No. To be honest, since I moved here, this is as close as we've ever been. We finally have a chance to be brothers, and even though getting kicked out by my dad sucked, I'm glad to be here."

"I'm glad you're here, too."

Micah met his gaze. "Do you still talk to your parents?"

"Well, my father passed away right before I turned eighteen, but I still keep in touch with my mom and Gwen. I saw them both last year, actually. My nephew got married so I sprung for a short vacation to Boston to support them."

"Wow. It's weird to think you have a nephew old enough to get married, but I forgot Gwen was a decade older."

David chuckled. "It is kind of weird, but Terry is a great kid, and his wife is a knockout. Not sure if you're into their kind of music or not, but his wife Mercy is the sister of the best friend of Off Beat."

"Dude!" Micah sat up so quickly their chests collided. "You know someone who knows Off Beat?"

"In a six degrees of separation way, yes. I take it you're a fan?"

"I adore their music. I even got to see a live concert last summer when they toured in Seattle. The violinist? Even hotter in person, and I had fifth row seats."

"Lucky you." David loved learning this new thing about Micah and seeing the guy so excited about music. "Do you like live concerts?"

"Love 'em." He frowned. "I don't know when I'll be able to afford to see another one, but whatever. As long as I've still got my phone, I can listen to music."

"Why wouldn't you have your phone?"

Micah bit at his lower lip, a nervous gesture David had picked up on tonight. "When my dad kicked me out, he also cut me off. My bank account, my credit cards, all because I wasn't smart enough to get that stuff put into my own name and take his off when I turned eighteen. But Dad also never suggested it, so he probably liked knowing he had financial power over me. Anyway, the only thing I have that still works is my iPhone. But I won't be surprised if it gets cut off when the next bill is due."

"I'm sorry you went through all that. I truly am."

"Thanks. You know, sometimes I look at Ezra's friend Brendan, who has this big family of siblings, nieces, and nephews, and a mom who loves him, and they support him being gay. Not only gay, they support him marrying a white guy, so I bet Brendan's mom wouldn't bat an eye at Bree being biracial. It really makes me hate how bigoted and horrible my father is."

David shifted until his legs were wrapped around Micah's hips, leaving them in an embrace that wasn't quite a hug, but pretty damned close. "Your father is an asshole who doesn't deserve the two beautiful sons he has. He'll die a lonely old man, surrounded by money and not much else. You are going to live a full life, surrounded by friends and love, and you'll get to see Bree grow up and create a beautiful life for herself. And maybe you'll have more kids and see them grow, too."

Micah blinked hard, his eyes wet, a few beads of moisture gathering on those pale eyelashes.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“You’re very welcome. And they aren’t just words. I truly believe them.” David gathered Micah to his chest, and Micah pressed his face against David’s neck. They held each other for a little while, David so grateful to be able to comfort Micah. His erection had dimmed to a semi, and that was okay. Everything about tonight was getting Micah comfortable in his own skin, and that didn’t always mean sex.

Sometimes you needed just the right words, and David had apparently chosen well.

MICAH WAS NOT GOING to cry in front of David. Absolutely not.

Keeping his face hidden was working so far, and he used the pressure against his nose to center himself. Get his emotions back under control. Maybe David was the Dom here, but Micah was no weakling. And he’d cried enough tears over his situation, damn it.

David held him tight, and Micah soaked in his warmth and scent and the sound of his breathing. He’d never been held like this before, not by anyone. They fit together so perfectly, like puzzle pieces searching for their missing whole. It scared Micah a little. His life was already overly complicated by being a bi single dad. Add in a gay relationship with an older man who also liked to spank for fun?

No, this wasn’t the place to think about all that. This was about experiencing a physical relationship with David, about exploring whether or not Micah enjoyed or benefited from submitting.

Time to get their date back on track.

He nipped at the side of David’s chin. “Don’t suppose you’d be interested in blowing me back?”

David growled deep in his chest, and then pounced.

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## Chapter 8

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Goading David was fun.

He wrestled Micah onto his stomach, then used his broader form to keep him down. Even with David draped over his whole body, half-chub riding the crease of Micah's ass, and both hands trapped above his head, Micah felt safe. Perfectly safe, even while restrained.

David's hot breath fanned across Micah's neck. "Don't think I'm ready to suck your dick just yet. You did get off once already, after all."

Micah squirmed simply to feel the way David's body tensed. "I didn't mean to."

"Maybe, but you did. I wasn't going to punish you for coming without permission, because you aren't officially my sub, and this is your first time. But now I'm thinking you need a small punishment."

"Like what?"

"Like what, *sir*?"

Micah didn't amend his question. Their conversation had unleashed his inner brat, and he needed to keep things light. If that meant misbehaving, so be it.

"Hmm, you are being disobedient," David said. "I'm going to take a stab in the dark and say you've never worn a cock ring, have you?"

He knew what it was, but— "Uh, no. Sir."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, sir."

David released Micah's hands, then lifted his entire body up. "Roll over." Micah did, and David pressed his big body down onto Micah's, his full-erection pressing into Micah's soft dick. "You know what a cock ring does?"

Micah shook his head. He had an idea, but he loved David's voice, especially when he was aroused. It got all deep and husky.

"Keeps you erect longer, gives you an intense orgasm later. It can also help with premature ejaculation."

"Hey, that's never happened before!"

David pressed a finger over Micah's lips. "Shh. Listen. I want you hard with me for a while, not blasting off because I bite your nipples. It's all about control, Micah."

Micah nodded against David's finger that he understood.

"Good. Underwear off." David got up and scooted to the far side of the bed. Opened the bedside table.

Curiosity and nerves tangled together as Micah tugged his soiled briefs off. He wiped himself

down before tossing them to the floor. David's solid back was positively lickable, and since when had he thought of anyone, male or female, in terms of being lickable?

Oh yeah. Never. But David pushed all kinds of buttons Micah never knew were there, and it enthralled him as much as it scared him.

*I've never felt like this before, and I don't know what to do with it.*

All he really could do was listen to his body and its signals.

He reached for his soft dick, but as if reading his mind, David said, "Don't get yourself hard yet." Micah stopped, reclined on his hands, and waited for David to find what he needed.

David finally turned with a circle of black rubber in one hand. It looked innocuous enough, and Micah stared at it while David stared at his crotch. The intensity of David's stare should have embarrassed him, but it didn't, because beneath that intensity was a layer of hunger. David wanted him in a way no one had ever wanted him before, and it was breathtaking. No one else in the world existed but them.

"Lean back more and spread your legs," David said.

Micah widened the stance of both elbows and legs, baring all for the man who was so intent on Micah's body that he barely blinked. Micah's dick twitched with interest, but David's hand snapped out and he squeezed Micah's balls roughly enough that Micah yelped.

"No getting hard yet." David continued to grope his balls and it took Micah a moment to understand David was pushing his nuts through that rubber circle. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it wasn't entirely comfortable, either. Mostly it pinched until David had his dick through it, and the cock ring now circled all his tackle. It was snug and felt weird, but it wasn't painful.

"May I touch it, sir?" Micah asked.

"Sure. Now you can get hard."

Curious, Micah rubbed around the rubber circle. "How does it work?"

"Restricts blood flow out of the penis. You can get hard and stay hard for a long time, which is what I want. What's your curfew?"

"Don't have one, but I can't stay all night."

"Midnight?"

"Okay." It couldn't be that long after nine, which meant a lot of orgasm denial ahead of him—and many more things. Micah tugged on his dick, a little surprised he immediately started getting hard, considering the tightness of the ring. "Dude."

"See." David crawled between his spread legs. "How about that blow job?"

"Oh yeah." Off David's quirked eyebrow, Micah smirked and said, "Yes, sir."

"Brat."

"You secretly love it."

The amused sparkle in David's eyes agreed with him. Then David bent, took Micah into his mouth, and Micah forgot everything he thought he knew about blow jobs.

SEX WITH MICAH was more fun than David had hoped. Even after their serious conversation, they'd reverted to the roles of pupil and teacher. Brat and authority. Micah's total willingness to allow the cock ring showed more signs that he'd be an amazing sub one day, and David had to fight off the need to make Micah *his* sub.

*He has a child. Stop.*

Parents could be in the lifestyle; that wasn't his issue. His issue was Micah was a young parent with a young child, and David couldn't go around claiming him when Micah didn't seem

sure of what he wanted—out of life, or out of sex. Pressuring him into submission would only be harmful in the long run. Micah had to choose it for himself.

David would give him all the tools possible so Micah made an informed decision when it was time.

Starting with sucking his cock.

Micah had a beautiful cock. Long, not too thick, uncut, with trimmed dark-blond pubes. And with the help of the cock ring, his dick was delightfully flushed with blood, his balls nice and tight. He fit perfectly in David's mouth, giving him plenty of length to lick, nibble and stroke. He took his time exploring, repeating a motion if it got a loud gasp or sharp noise from his pupil. Licking Micah's balls made Micah squirm and push against David's face, asking for me, so David stayed there for a while. Played with the wrinkled skin, suckled each nut in turn. He was driving Micah out of his mind if the long litany of cuss words dropping from his lips meant anything.

David paused to look up. Micah had dropped from his elbows flat onto his back. His face and chest were stained red from exertion and arousal, and he'd never looked more debauched. Unburdened. Free to simply *feel*. David rubbed Micah's taint, using a bit of saliva to guide his way, and Micah's head snapped up. Those pale blue eyes shined with desire and trust, so David slid his finger farther, until it brushed Micah's hole.

Micah licked his lips, his head nodding yes ever so slightly. David rubbed his finger over that crinkled muscle, never enough to breach, only to feel it. Micah spread his legs wider in silent invitation, and under the intensity of Micah's gaze, David pushed. Pushed enough for Micah to feel the intrusion without actually entering him. Micah panted through parted lips, his flushed chest heaving, not an ounce of fear anywhere on his face.

David pulled his hand away to the tune of Micah's annoyed squawk and, curious now, David offered his forefinger to Micah. Micah's eyes flashed briefly wide as he understood, and then he sucked on that finger. Sucked like it was a cock, wetting it, spreading spit around, until David deemed it wet enough. He pressed his spit-slicked finger against Micah's virgin hole and pushed.

"Oh fuck," Micah said. "Yes, please. So good."

"Open for me. Bear down, sunshine."

That tight muscle relaxed enough for David to press the tip of his finger into Micah's willing ass. Micah canted his hips, taking a bit more of the finger, his face a study of pleasure and curiosity. Not a single hint of pain, so David pushed deeper, wiggling inside to the first knuckle. "Talk to me," David said.

"So good. I've never...oh God."

Micah's voice made him want to pull out, rubber up, and shove his dick into that beautiful, willing ass. But this was Micah's first time, and David would never, ever scare or hurt him.

"Need you looser," David said. "Grab the backs of your knees and pull them toward your chest."

He did, exposing his hole to David, and David watched the way his single finger fit inside Micah's body. David twisted his wrist, moving without deepening the penetration, simply to hear the sounds Micah made. Last week's comment about sticking his tongue in Micah's ass rushed to the forefront, and David's mouth nearly watered. He really, really wanted to taste Micah.

So he did, removing his finger and angling down to rub the flat of his tongue over Micah's hole. Micah let out a surprised shout, but he didn't protest, so David did his very best to drive Micah nuts with only his tongue. Micah writhed and thrashed, and he humped his ass down, silently demanding more, and David gave him everything he could. Licking, nudging, and

eventually, shoving the point of his tongue past that tight muscle. Into the essence of the man.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” Micah said. “Fuck, I love that!”

David grinned and continued his mission to get Micah as loose as possible. As pliant and lust-filled as possible. All he could think about was eventually getting his dick into that beautiful, pale ass—except they hadn’t talked about going that far yet, and David didn’t want to pressure Micah into anything. Especially not while Micah was drunk on pleasure and the unique sensation of a tongue in his ass. So responsive, so beautiful.

And so fucking fragile.

It was too soon to fuck Micah, but he could definitely keep playing, so David sat up and pushed his finger back in with little resistance. Micah groaned and thrust his hips; David fucked him with that single digit, slow and deliberate, until Micah was begging incoherently. David wasn’t ready to let him come yet, so he eased out and kissed his way from Micah’s groin to his neck.

Not all guys liked to kiss after one rimmed the other, so David planted a long lick on Micah’s neck, then pulled away.

“Wha—?” Micah sat up and flailed for David’s wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Mouthwash. I just had my tongue in your ass, sunshine.”

Micah’s gaze flickered to David’s mouth. “What if I’m curious?”

“Curious how you taste?”

“Yes, sir.”

David melted a bit. “You’re sure?”

“If I don’t like it, we can both go gargle.”

Taking Micah at his word, David slid down so half his body was draped over Micah’s, curled his right hand around the back of Micah’s head and pressed their mouths together. He allowed Micah to control the kiss, giving the younger man the freedom to press, lick and explore David’s lips, tongue and mouth. They kissed for a long time, until David was a little drunk with it.

Kissing Micah Kelley was absolutely his new favorite thing, and Micah didn’t seem to be in any hurry to stop. After a while, the kissing settled into cuddling, and Micah snuggled up close to his broader body. David adored how they fit together, and he pretended this was their normal. That they were a real couple who did this every night, and for a few brief minutes, the fantasy was real. So fucking real David ached for it to be true.

But it wasn’t, and it couldn’t be for so many reasons.

*I can’t get attached. I can’t fall for him.*

“Do you want to fuck me?” Micah whispered, his breath hot against David’s neck.

David shivered. “Very much so, but not tonight.”

“Why not?” Micah pulled David’s hand around to press it against his crack. “Felt great when you were touching me there.”

He couldn’t resist pushing his fingers into Micah’s crease and touching his still-damp hole. “Felt great touching you, but a dick is a far cry from a finger, and if we do that, it’s pre-planned after a conversation, not a decision made in the middle of sex.”

“But I want you to.” The soft whine in Micah’s voice was hell on David’s restraint, but he was the Dom here.

“I know you do, and believe me, I want to be inside you so badly. But not tonight and that’s final.”

Micah whined again and the little brat boldly clasped David’s erection. “I can’t wait to feel this in my ass.”

“How about you suck me off while I finger you some more?”

“Oh, yes, sir!”

David rolled onto his back and shoved two pillows behind his head. Micah flipped around so his ass was aimed at David’s upper half and straddled his body. After a moment of positioning, Micah sucked the head of David’s dick into his mouth, and David returned to plundering Micah’s very fine ass, alternating between fingers and tongue. Micah’s flushed cock leaked a steady stream of clear fluid, and David’s own release winked at him from close by.

“You can come after I do,” David said.

Micah made an agreeable noise around his mouthful of cock. David wanted to watch that beautiful pink mouth stretch around his girth, but he loved eating Micah out even more. They seemed to be in a race to make the other come, and David’s orgasm spiraled up fast.

“Gonna come,” David said. He expected Micah to pull off and use his hand, but Micah only sucked him harder. David squeezed Micah’s thighs as he blasted off, pleasure rocketing down his spine and out his dick. Micah drooled some out and made a mess, and he shocked David further by cleaning him up with long, deliberate licks, until David’s tackle was damp with spit and nothing else.

Micah turned around and presented his cock to David, his face red and glowing with excitement. “May I come now, please, sir?”

“Come here.” Micah knee-walked closer, until David could take Micah into his mouth and suck him off. Micah came with a tortured shout, his entire body spasming. David held him by the hips so he could drink every drop. As Micah softened, David helped him out of the cock ring, and then Micah sprawled on the bed next to him. Boneless, panting, and completely blissed out.

*I did that for him.*

“Holy fuck,” Micah whispered.

David knew better, but he pulled Micah against his chest anyway. Held him tight as Micah’s legs occasionally still twitched with the aftershocks of his orgasm. “Liked that, huh?”

“Fuck, yeah. Can I wear the cock ring again? This was epic.”

He laughed. “Sure. Think you have enough energy to rinse off with me?”

“Hmm, can you give me ten minutes? I can’t feel my legs.”

A flush of pride heated David’s chest, and he pressed a kiss to Micah’s lips. “We can wait a few, yeah.”

“Goodie.” Micah sighed. “I’m glad we did this tonight.”

“So am I.” David’s only regret was that he’d tasted something remarkable tonight. Better than the finest bourbon, more powerful than the strongest narcotic, he’d tasted true chemistry. The kind of connection he hadn’t felt since Casey died. A connection he never thought he’d find again.

And he couldn’t keep it.

Bitter tears stung his eyes, but David forced them away. They were for later, when he was alone again, and Micah had gone back to his family. To his daughter and first priority. This was a pit stop in Kinksville for Micah, not a full-time stay.

Not while David was still Micah’s boss.

MICAH DOZED in the heat of David’s arms, cozy and content in a way he’d never felt before. He wanted to stay in this bed forever, to have this with David always—but tonight had been an experiment for them both. To explore their chemistry and see if BDSM was a thing Micah liked

or needed. And so far, he definitely liked it. He liked giving control over to David and relying on him to get Micah off. To know what Micah needed, how far he could go. And they hadn't really gone that far yet, not even a single swat on the ass.

*I love his voice, and I love following his orders.*

David had been in perfect control, which, now that the haze of lust was fading, impressed Micah all over the place. Micah had practically begged David to fuck him, and David said no. Restrained himself when the temptation must have been crazy fierce, especially considering how much David had loved playing with Micah's ass.

*Rimming is heaven. Thank you for rimming.*

He'd never imagined having a tongue licking one of his most intimate areas would be such a fucking turn-on, just like he'd never imagined he could come from someone biting his nipples. David was showing him all kinds of things Micah never knew about his own body, and he loved it.

"Do you like to get rimmed?" Micah asked, the words slipping out before he realized.

"I do." David's voice rumbled in his chest and vibrated through Micah's hand where it rested on his left pec. "It's not something I share with hookups, so it's been a while. Casey used to love doing it to me."

Micah tried not to be jealous of Casey, since the man was long dead, and David mentioned him in a fond tone of voice, rather than wistful. Micah also wasn't sure if he wanted to try rimming David or not. Maybe he could finger David first and go from there? He just wasn't sure how to ask for it.

David lightly stroked Micah's hip. "You curious what rimming is like the other way around?"

"A little. I just...you're a top, right? I didn't figure tops liked their asses played with all that much."

"I mostly top, but I'll switch with the right guy, or if I'm in a certain mood."

The mental image of Micah bending David over and fucking him sent renewed interest to his spent dick.

"You interested in topping a guy, sunshine?" David asked when Micah didn't speak up.

"Maybe. I mean, the mechanics of fucking girls is pretty straightforward."

"The mechanics of fucking a guy are pretty similar. Biggest difference is asses need more stretching and lots of lube. They weren't designed for things to go in, just out."

Micah snorted. "I don't know, if God didn't mean for us to put stuff up our butts, why do we have prostates?"

David started laughing. "That's a good point. A very good point, indeed. You up for that shower now?"

"I think so."

His legs were still a little wobbly, but Micah managed walking into David's bathroom. They showered together in the spacious tub, and as much as Micah wanted to get their engines running again, he was going to become a pumpkin soon. He dressed slowly, trying to make their private time stretch out as much as possible.

"Think we can do this again before the weekend is over?" David asked by the front door, after they'd spent a long time kissing there.

"I don't know. I hate to keep asking for babysitting favors, since Ezra's friends have bent over backward to help watch Bree while I'm at work. I'd feel really guilty asking more than once a weekend, and I can't exactly bring her with me on a late-night hookup."

Except was this just a hookup? It didn't feel like one at all, and David wasn't looking at him like a man who'd forget his name the second he closed the door. This could be so much more, but Bree came first.

"I understand," David replied. "Your daughter is your priority, and maybe once she's in a proper daycare, you'll be willing to ask for more babysitting favors."

Micah frowned, uncertain what about that statement rubbed him wrong. Maybe the "proper daycare" thing. His friends weren't licensed caregivers, but they gave a damn, and they were giving up their free time to babysit the kid of someone they barely knew, because they were friends with Micah's brother. They *were* a proper fucking daycare, and he kept that angry thought to himself.

"I guess we'll see," Micah replied with an unexpected snap in his voice.

David's eyebrows rose. "We will. Drive safely, all right? I'll see you Monday."

The abrupt goodbye unsettled Micah, so he didn't reach for another kiss. Instead, he left.

He drove home with music blasting, hoping to drown out his tangled thoughts. Thoughts and feelings he didn't know what to do with, so he smashed them down and braced for an interrogation from Ezra when he let himself into the apartment. But the apartment was quiet, lit only by the nightlight in the bathroom.

Huh.

His bedroom door was ajar, and Micah went straight to the crib. Bree slept like an angel, her black hair sticking out like a halo. He knew how to condition her hair, but one day soon he'd need someone to teach him how to style it. Maybe one of Brendan's sisters, but he hated to keep imposing on that man's family. They'd already given him a crib.

"We'll figure it out, princess," he whispered. "It's you and me."

A tiny part of him wanted it to be "you, me and David," but that was a fantasy best left for bedtime dreaming. He needed this job at Milson Group, because without his degree, he'd have a hard time finding another job that paid well and had a benefits package, not to mention a 9-5 work schedule.

For the most part 9-5. This upcoming week was Lesley's last, and she would be there mostly to shadow Micah, so any on-call problems would be funneled to him from now on. Micah could handle that. He'd do anything to be a good dad and provide for Bree.

Once life was a little less unstable, he'd allow himself to long for a partner to warm his bed and brighten his life—even if that meant David getting bored with him and moving on. Dating someone else. It would hurt, but Micah would survive. Maybe his life would be poorer without David's desire focused on him. Maybe not.

Either way, Bree would be happy, healthy, and loved. Period.

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## Chapter 9

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On Saturday, Ezra opened at the café, so Micah put Bree in her carrier and spent a few hours driving around Wilmington and its surrounding suburbs, getting to know the area and its various mixing bowls of on/off ramps to different interstates and major roads. He was a little surprised by how hilly the area was, since someone once told him whatever parts of Delaware weren't coastal were all farmland. But the city was close to Pennsylvania and—fun historical fact—had actually been part of that state several centuries ago. All of Delaware had once been the Lower Counties before declaring independence from both Pennsylvania and the British crown.

Micah had always been a fan of American history and wouldn't have minded becoming a teacher, but his father wouldn't hear of it, so Micah had chosen another dream. Funny how that hadn't worked out, either.

Studying his new home would also help him when he needed to run errands for April or David, and he never wanted his bosses to regret hiring him.

Micah picked a Greek place for lunch, and several people stopped by his table to admire Bree. She adored the attention, so Micah snapped a photo, added a crown sticker, and then sent it to Ezra with the caption, "My Little Attention Queen."

Ezra sent back a gif of a man fanning himself, then fainting.

Bree was asleep by the time Micah returned to the apartment. Donner was watching a movie, so Micah put Bree in her crib and joined him. Bree's nap lasted about an hour before she cried. Donner volunteered to check, and Micah watched him go, perplexed that he hadn't asked Micah a single question about him going out last night. Ezra baffled him even more, because he hadn't even text-interrogated Micah.

Maybe he was waiting to pepper Micah with questions when he got home?

Except when Ezra came home at five with pizza for dinner, he didn't ask Micah a single thing about last night. Only about today. Micah went with it, but even after Donner left for work, nada. Ezra happily fed Bree her jar of pureed sweet potatoes, and they even put her to bed together. After, they sat down on opposite couches to watch TV. Two episodes of *Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives* passed before Micah couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, who is this guy here and where is my nosy brother?" Micah asked.

Ezra turned an owl expression his way. "What?"

"I guess I expected you to be curious about where I was, or who I went out with last night."

"Dude, I'm your brother, not your parent. You're a grown-ass man with a kid, and if you want to go out, you can go out. I mean, as long as you're not doing drugs or turning tricks, it's not my place to interrogate you about where you went, or who you were with."

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Three years ago, I would have been all over you for the gossip, but I’ve mellowed a bit since meeting Donner.”

“Then thank God for Donner.”

Ezra threw a pillow at his head. “Fuck off. It’s true, but still. Fuck off.”

Micah snorted. “I guess I should thank you for trusting me.”

“Nah. You earned that trust the second you gave up college to take care of your kid. I have mad respect for that. Lesser guys might have brushed off Aunt Brenda’s phone call altogether and decided fuck it. Or he’d have left Bree in California and gone back to college. You didn’t.”

“I couldn’t do those things.”

“Exactly. Ever wonder how Patrick Kelley’s sons both ended up so open-minded and accepting, when he’s such a judgmental asshole?”

“I think you win the prize for being open-minded way more than I do.”

Ezra twisted on his couch to face Micah. “Why do you say that?”

Micah shrugged, embarrassed to admit this. “Well, when I first got here, I just assumed all your friends were white, so I was really surprised when I met Brendan and Alessandro.”

“You thought a guy named Alessandro would be white?”

“I guess. I haven’t lost all of Dad’s programming yet.”

“You will. Give it time. You’ve only been out from under his thumb for a few weeks. And if it helps you feel like any less of a jerk, the first time I met Brendan, I was terrified of him before Donner told me who he was.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Not my finest moment. We just have to be aware and do better.” Ezra’s friendly smile twisted into a smirk. “So do you want to tell me about last night?”

Micah bit his lip and considered what he’d be okay sharing. “Got blown by a guy for the first time while totally sober.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It was...intense.”

“The best blow jobs are. You guys do anything else?”

The memory of David shoving his tongue into Micah’s ass made him blush. “Um, some stuff. All stuff I was totally cool with. It’s strange having all this freedom to be me and explore my sexuality without worrying someone’s going to find out and tell Dad.”

“As long as you play safe, explore away and Dad can go to hell.”

Micah couldn’t agree with Dad going to hell. Not completely. Ezra had been apart from the man for years, living his own life on an entirely different coast. Micah had only been free of him for a few weeks, and it would be a long time before he lost that innate sense of wanting to make his father proud of him. Good grades, good athletic performance, college scholarship, more good grades. None of that had been enough, but Micah had tried.

The last time Micah had felt any true sense of pride from his father had been his high school graduation party when Dad gave him his grandfather’s pocket watch. And then the entire thing went sideways, and Micah had resented his father for driving Ezra out of the house. Out of their lives.

“I didn’t keep the watch,” Micah said.

“Watch?” Ezra’s eyebrows dipped a beat. “Wait, the watch Dad gave you at graduation?”

“Yeah. I put it in a drawer in his study when I found out he’d disowned you. I don’t know if he ever noticed, but I didn’t want it. It’s rightfully yours.”

“Thank you. I got over the watch a long time ago, but you telling me means a lot. Now I guess it won’t get passed down to anyone but a pawn shop.”

“I don’t know, he hasn’t completely disinherited me yet. I keep expecting that letter you got, though.”

Ezra let out a long, exhausted sigh. “As much as it hurt to take that money, I don’t have a single regret. My life is better for having cut such a toxic man out of it. Yours will be, too.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

Micah decided to take his brother’s word for it. His new life here was only just beginning, and he still had a lot of big decisions to make. But he didn’t have to make them tonight. Tonight he could settle in with his big brother, binge-watch a cooking show, and be there when his baby girl needed him.

For tonight, that was enough.

DAVID WAS SO RESTLESS Saturday he ended up at Rusty Nail that night, slamming whiskey shots and sizing up every blond who entered the narrow bar. Unlike Pot O Gold, Rusty Nail didn’t have a dance floor. It had a long bar, booths along the wall, and lots of guys in leather gear looking for their next thrill. Once upon a time, David would have been one of those guys.

Tonight? He didn’t know what he wanted.

Tori poured his shots, and by the fourth, was sending him concerned looks that grated. He was a paying customer, not a child, and he’d been smart enough to take a Lyft here, so he wasn’t tempted to drink and drive home.

Everything about his Friday evening with Micah had been perfect, even the serious parts. He loved knowing Micah was comfortable enough with him to open up and share personal things. To let go and embrace what he enjoyed in bed. To give up control to David and allow him to bring them both to climax. Micah was the kind of guy David could fall in love with.

Fucking figures it could never happen.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Tori said as she poured two Snakebites for a customer next to David’s stool. “What’s got you falling into a shot glass? That assistant you can’t bonk?”

“I bonked him,” David said, the whiskey loosening his tongue beyond regular limits.

“Whoa.” She served the drinks and took cash to the register. When Tori returned, she took an order for a couple of beers on tap. Since David was right by the beer taps, she said, “Not go so well?”

“Went too fucking well.”

“Ah, I see.” Several minutes passed before Tori had a long enough break in the Saturday night crowd to ask, “You falling for a guy you can’t have?”

“Probably.” He debated a fifth shot but wanted to space them out a bit more so he didn’t get hammered too fast. “He’s kind of perfect but he needs this job more than I need a boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend. Sounds serious.”

“Nah, can’t be.” Better go for that fifth shot; he nudged his glass forward. Tori filled it. The whiskey didn’t burn as badly this time. “He’s young, still figuring himself out. I can help him explore some stuff, but it can’t be more than that.”

“I think you underestimate the power of attraction and overcoming obstacles.” Tori served the beers, then shouted down the bar, “Mike, I’m taking a smoke.” The other bartender gave her

a thumbs-up.

“You smoke?” David dumbly followed her when she beckoned. They went out the front to the sidewalk, where a few other guys were lingering with their cigarettes.

“Nope.” Tori picked a spot and leaned against the brick wall. “But Mike smokes, and if he can step outside for five minutes every few hours, so can I.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“Hopefully, you’ll like me even more after I give you some advice.”

“Go for it.” What did he have to lose from getting an outsider’s perspective on the problem?

“Do you know Elliott Quinn?”

David struggled to think of any Elliott’s, and it took him a moment. “Friend of Tag’s, right? Always came into the Pot with him and Boxer?”

“Yup, that’s the one.”

“Don’t see those guys around much.”

“Well, they are all settled down and in various stages of coupledness, so they don’t bar troll like they did in their twenties. None of us do. But did you hear the gossip when Elliott and Augustus first got together?”

David vaguely remembered it causing a stir, because Augustus Rhinehart was a local TV celebrity, and everyone had been shocked when he came out as gay at thirty-eight. But David had been hanging here more than the Pot around that time, so if anything else had gone down, he’d probably missed it. “Nothing remarkable that I recall, no.”

“Okay, so long story short, a year before they met, Elliott’s long-time boyfriend Doug cheated on him, and then Doug died in a car accident. Elliott never knew who Doug cheated on him with, and it came out after Ell and Auggie were together for a while that Auggie was the guy, only he didn’t know Doug wasn’t single, so Doug cheated on them both.”

“I…” David frowned as her words penetrated the slight fog from five shots of whiskey. “So you’re saying Augustus helped Doug cheat on Elliott, but he didn’t realize he was doing it?”

“Exactly.”

“And they’re still together?”

Tori nodded. “Remember what I said about overcoming obstacles? It didn’t happen right away, but once Augustus revealed the truth, Elliott sat on it and finally forgave Augustus. Their feelings for each other overcame something that could have destroyed them, and they’re so disgustingly happy together now.”

“Hmm. Not exactly the same situation as me and Micah.”

“No, but it proves that if the feelings are real and you both want it, you power through the exterior obstacles and make it work. But it *takes* work.”

“I remember.” Relationships, no matter how much you loved the other person, took work to maintain. He liked to think that he and Casey would have done the work and made it long-term. Fate didn’t give them a chance to find out. “It’s good advice, thanks.”

“No problem. You’ve been sulking at my bar more often than usual, and I want to see you happy again.”

“Thank you. Guess seeing my nephew get married brought out the part of me that really misses being with someone.”

“That makes perfect sense. And even if Micah isn’t the one, I hope you find a guy who’ll love you for who you are.”

“Me too.”

So fucking much.

MICAH WOKE Sunday morning to the announcement that their little quartet was attending Sunday dinner at Mama Walker's house. Dinner was at six, and since Ezra and Romy both opened at the café, they'd be home early enough to change and head over. Naturally, Micah spent the rest of the day making himself nuts, in between taking care of Bree. Donner had the day off, but he'd closed at the Pot last night, so he didn't get up until close to noon.

And despite Donner's reassurances that everyone would be polite and accepting, Micah still fretted until Ezra got home. Then Ezra tried to reassure him. "Look, the only one who's ever discreetly an asshole anymore is Ernie, but even he's mellowed over the years about our collective queerness."

"And the kids are all wonderfully open-minded," Donner added. "The girls are going to go nuts over Bree."

"Are they going to wear name tags?" Micah asked. "I'll never remember so many names at once."

"Don't worry, it took all of us time to learn everyone's name."

"It'll be fine, sugar," Ezra said. "Plus, Felicia is an amazing cook, and Kendra makes some mean sweet potato biscuits."

"Should I admit I've never had one?"

"No. Just allow yourself the new experience."

Micah's brain flashed to the new experience of being eaten out on Friday, and he bit the inside of his cheek. He'd thought about David off and on the past two days, wondering what David was up to, or if he missed Micah at all. But David's insistence that they keep things physical and out of work prevented Micah from even sending a "How are you?" text. Felt like crossing the line.

"Plus," Ezra said with bright grin, "we get to doll Bree up in one of those adorable dresses I bought her. Oooh, gimme!" He stole Bree from Micah's arms where she'd been silently sucking on her pacifier, and he took her into Micah's room.

"He's never letting you guys move out," Donner said softly.

Micah snickered. "We can always gift him one of those real-life dolls that look and act like actual babies."

"Oh God, those things are creepy."

"It was a thought." Micah liked the idea of staying as much as he liked the idea of his own place. Having live-in help was amazing, but Ezra and Donner would want their space back eventually. They tried to be quiet, but the bedroom walls were thin, so Micah had bought a white-noise machine to use whenever the pair had sex.

And they had sex a lot.

*Guess that's what chemistry does. It draws you to that person.*

Meeting the Walker clan wasn't as terrifying as Micah expected, because they showed up early enough that only Brendan, Romy, and Felicia were there. Felicia cooed over Bree, then returned to the kitchen. As each of Brendan's sisters and their respective husbands/kids arrived, Brendan made introductions. Micah only really managed to remember the names of the sisters and which one was Ernie, but there were just too many people.

Bree was, of course, a hit with pretty much everyone, especially Danica's two teenage daughters. "When Mom told us about you quitting college," the younger teen said to Micah, "she used the story as a PSA for why when we're ready to have sex, we should double down on

condoms and the pill.”

“It’s good advice,” Micah replied. “An unexpected baby flips your life upside down.”

“So are you dating anyone?” the older teen asked with bright, eager eyes.

“Um, not right now. Excuse us.” Micah fled with Bree to the dining room, where Brendan and Romy were setting a long table. “It’s exhausting being the center of attention.”

Romy snickered. “How do you think I felt the first time I came over? Ezra and Donner were here, but it’s still nerve-wracking. And I didn’t have the world’s cutest infant to draw them like bees to pollen.”

Despite the loud house, Bree dozed off by the time dinner was ready, so he put her down in the guest room crib. Apparently, the various grandchildren spent lots of nights with Grandma, which Micah loved. Neither of his own parents had been close with their parents, so Micah hadn’t really known his grandparents growing up.

At dinner, he sat between Ezra and Alannah, the only Walker sister with no kids. Her husband was apparently out of town on business. Micah was relieved to survive the meal without any direct interrogation from any of the other guests. Mostly they talked about their personal lives, work, and anything interesting the kids had done that past week. Ezra chatted a bit about the café, where the oldest teen Kendra was now apprenticing on Saturday mornings.

*Huh.*

Micah relaxed and enjoyed himself, and he loved his first sweet potato biscuit. The food was amazing, and it was probably the noisiest, warmest meal he’d ever shared. Dinner at home—no, dinner in Seattle had been quiet, proper, and not for gossiping. He’d never sat around a big table full of family who loved each other, made jokes and used one fork for the entire meal, instead of three.

*I could get used to being included in these gatherings.*

Dessert was an even less formal affair, with folks eating slices of pie and drinking coffee anywhere in the house they chose. Micah stayed at the table simply because Ezra and Donner did, too. Alannah got up, though, and after a few bites of delicious cherry pie, her vacated seat was filled by Brendan’s sister Monique.

“Your baby girl is precious,” she said.

“Thank you,” Micah replied. “She gets most of that from her mother.”

“I can tell. Not that you aren’t adorable, mind you. It looks like you’re taking good care of her hair.”

“Thanks. Her great-aunt taught me what to do and what conditioners to use.”

“As she gets older, if you need help with styling, you come to me or one of my sisters, you hear?”

“I will, ma’am, and I appreciate it. Your kids are beautiful, too. Your whole family has been really kind.”

“Well, Donner and Ezra are family through Brendan, so now you and Bree are, too. Bren also mentioned you needed help finding a good daycare for her?”

“Yes. I’m not from around here, and Ezra’s friends have been amazing with helping me out this past week while I started a new job. Ez says he loves watching her on Mondays when the café is closed, but I can’t rely on his friends forever. Honestly, I feel bad even relying on them for another week.”

Monique flashed him a grin. “Then I have a proposal for you. I know we just met, but I am a stay-at-home mom. While Hailey and Shana are in school, it’s just me and little Darius in the house, so I would love to watch that angel for you during the week.”

“You would?”

“I would. I’ve watched kids for friends and neighbors before, and I’m far cheaper than any daycare.”

“Are you watching any other kids right now?”

“Not at the moment, so it’ll be just Darius and Bree and remain just the two of them until Darius is in preschool next year.”

Micah wasn’t sure about giving Bree over to a perfect stranger, but wasn’t that what he’d done last week when Ezra’s friends watched her? Wouldn’t he do that with a daycare provider, anyway? Plus, Monique was someone Brendan trusted and would vouch for, and he really wanted Bree growing up knowing both halves of her whole. Embracing all parts of herself.

“What’s the fee?” Micah asked. He could feel Ezra’s eyes staring at the side of his head.

“A hundred dollars a week.”

“That’s it?” Most daycares were at least twice that a week.

She smiled again. “Like I said, I don’t work outside the house, and Ernie has a good job. I use the fee to pay for basics like diapers and wipes and snacks, so I can keep a stock at the house. The one thing I will ask you to provide is the formula while she’s still on it.”

“Of course, I can do that. Are you sure you want to watch her?”

“I am positive. You might not be a brother, but you’re part of the Walker clan now. God gave me a blessing when He gave me my husband and kids, and I love being able to bless folks back with a little bit of love.”

“I honestly don’t know what to say. Is tomorrow too soon? I mean, the café is closed, and Ezra is already planning to watch her. He might even still some Mondays, so it wouldn’t always be five days a week.”

“Since she’s taken care of for tomorrow, how about we set up to start Tuesday? You can stop over at the house tomorrow night, see the place for yourself, before you fully commit.”

Micah’s heart squeezed with gratitude. “That sounds great.” He put her address and number into his phone, and she disappeared into the living room.

“Well, that just happened,” Ezra said.

“Right?” He twisted in his chair to find Ezra and Donner both grinning at him. “Was that the point of inviting me over tonight?”

“Not the point, but definitely the grand finale. Brendan talked to her a few days ago, so she discussed it with her husband, and they both agreed.”

“And it wasn’t lip-service,” Brendan said, appearing through the dining room’s archway to the kitchen. “Monique really does do this for other people in need. I hope you don’t mind me talking to her.”

“Not at all,” Micah replied. “I genuinely like the idea of Bree being around a family all day, rather than being an anonymous face in a big daycare center, you know? Thank you.”

“Not a problem, man.”

Micah finally ate the rest of his pie, keenly aware of being the only single adult—Felicia aside—in the house. Everything in the universe was lining up to be perfect for Bree, so maybe, just maybe, the universe could stop fucking around with his personal life, and give Micah someone to love—and to love him in return.

*Please.*

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## Chapter 10

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Work on Monday was less awkward than Micah anticipated. David was the picture of professionalism, and half his day was spent outside the office, anyway. With it being Lesley's last week, Micah was the point man for all phone calls, appointment reminders, and organization, and he loved it. After work, he drove out to Monique and Ernie's home, spent some time with their kids, and decided this was a good place for Bree during the day. And it wasn't too far out of his commute route, so he could drop her off on his way in and pick her up on the way home.

When he picked Bree up Tuesday evening, his little girl was smiling, freshly-diapered, and happy. Monique's two girls loved his baby, and he found them both equally adorable. Especially little Shana, who was deaf, and didn't let it deter her for a moment. In fact, Micah's entire week went really well, except for his sexy dreams about David and his inability to do anything about it.

On Friday, he tried to subtly ask David if he was free that night, but David seemed distracted all day. Micah decided to stop being subtle, and he texted the request. David texted back he was busy this weekend. The brush-off stung more than Micah expected. He craved David's touches, his kisses, his dominance; David obviously didn't crave him back.

Micah nursed his hurt feelings on Friday evening, while both Donner and Ezra went out for Street Feed, by eating ice cream and watching bad science fiction movies. He happily spent Saturday with Bree. Being away from her during the week was still hard, after spending most of his waking hours with his girl, but he enjoyed weekend time with her. She never seemed upset or fussy when he picked her up from Monique, but he sometimes felt guilty for having to work and leave her with someone else.

Probably something all working parents dealt with.

That night, though, he was restless and annoyed by David's brush-off. Ezra dragged him those few blocks to Pot O Gold, while Romy and Brendan babysat Bree, and the Kelley brothers were a hit. A big hit, but Micah couldn't stop comparing every guy who wanted to get with him to David. Too tall, too short, too skinny, too hairy, not enough hair. David was under his skin, and Micah kind of hated it, because the asshole had blown him off this weekend.

So he got drunk.

Really drunk.

Micah had vague memories of vomiting into a toilet, before waking up with a massive headache, a mouth that tasted like death, and abs sore from retching. He was also, he realized from the angle of the sun, not in his room or his bed. That scared him into sitting up too fast. He

cried out as his head screamed in protest, and then shoved his face back into the pillow.

Where the hell?

“Micah?”

Ezra’s voice. Thank God. Micah groaned out a response.

“Oh good, you aren’t dead.”

He couldn’t even summon up the energy to flip Ezra off.

“Thank you for not barfing in my bed.”

*In where now?*

It took Micah a moment to realize he was in Ezra and Donner’s room, which meant they must have slept in Micah’s room. With Bree.

“Fuuuuuck, I fucked up,” Micah said.

“No, you just got really, really wasted and kept babbling about ass kisses or ass kissing, or something.” The bed creaked, as he assumed Ezra sat. “Think you can make it to the shower?”

“How’s Bree?”

“She’s with Donner, she’s fine. Probably misses her daddy, though, so let’s get you feeling and smelling human again, huh?”

Micah really didn’t deserve his big brother, but he let Ezra get him upright and across the apartment to the small bathroom. The shower helped his head a bit, as did a few aspirin chased down with some coconut water. His stomach still hurt, so he nibbled on dry crackers while the three of them watched TV, Bree on Donner’s lap. Micah really wanted a cuddle, but he waited until he was less likely to drop her before Donner gave her up.

Bree laughed at him and grabbed his face; Micah kissed her nose.

“I’m gonna run out for a few,” Donner said.

Not subtle, but Micah appreciated it. Once Donner was gone, Ezra plunked down next to Micah, fixed him with a firm stare, and said, “Talk.”

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall—”

Ezra smacked him on the thigh. “What was last night about? David?”

“Yeah.” Micah slumped against the couch cushion, careful to keep Bree balanced. “He’s who I saw last Friday night.”

“I figured.”

“We had a great time. The sex was amazing, and we had real chemistry, Ez. And he knows I’m not looking for a commitment, and that Bree comes first, but we did agree to keep seeing each other. We kept things completely professional at work this week, like we agreed. And then this weekend, he totally blew me off, and it hurts.”

“Want me to have him killed? I know people.”

Ezra’s perfectly deadpan expression made Micah snort—and then his head pounded harder. “Oh shit, don’t make me laugh.”

“Language.”

“Ugh. I just don’t like being blown off.”

“Plain old blown, then?”

Micah poked Ezra in the chest. “Who doesn’t like being blown?”

“David good at it?”

*Amazing at it.* “So not telling.”

Ezra huffed. “Do I at least get to call him and cuss him out for making my little brother feel bad? I will totally do it.”

“I know you will, but no. I’m an adult, and I can handle rejection.” His stomach rumbled, and

Micah grimaced. “Okay, I didn’t handle it well last night. Lesson very much learned. No one-night-stand is worth this kind of hangover, not even two orgasms in three hours.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Oh. *Yeah*. And still not telling.”

“Man, you and Donner are so boring when it comes to talking about your sex lives.”

“Maybe you just overshare.”

“Romy says that all the time.”

“Yeah, well, maybe he’s on to something.”

Ezra squawked. “Bitch, please.”

Micah covered Bree’s ears with his hands. “Dude.”

“Sorry. So, how awkward is it going to be on Monday? Seeing David again?”

“I don’t know. Honestly, it’ll be exactly the same as it was last week. Boss and employee, since it’s obviously all he wants.” Micah played with the ends of Bree’s hair. “I’m doing all of this for her, right? I learned some things about myself with David, and I’ll take those things into any new relationship I find in the future, so I don’t have any regrets.”

*Except losing a guy who made me feel more alive than anyone else ever has.*

“Oh great,” Ezra grumped. “Now not only are you taller than me, but you’re more mature, too.”

“Well, duh.”

The jokes and camaraderie soothed some of Micah’s bad feelings over being blown off. Seeing him again tomorrow would hurt, but whatever. David had missed out on a good thing, and maybe Micah wasn’t sure if or when he’d feel comfortable enough with a guy to consider anal sex, but he’d learned he was interested in the act. He was very much into men and women, and he was young. Still figuring things out.

So why did his heart feel like it had been punched and bruised by an invisible fist?

Sometime after dinner that night, his phone lit up with David’s name. He was reading on one of the couches while Ezra did business stuff on his tablet, and Micah stared at the name for several seconds before sending the call to voice mail. Bree was asleep in their room, and he really didn’t feel like having this conversation in front of his brother—whatever the conversation might be.

He also ignored Ezra and any significant looks he might be tossing Micah’s way as he listened to the message David left. “*Please call me back, Micah, I need to explain this weekend.*”

That’s it.

Nothing else. No apology or urgency in his voice, just one calm sentence.

Micah deleted the message and went back to reading his book, hopeful this story, at least, had a happy ending.

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## Chapter 11

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Micah used his key to the company office for the first time Monday morning, his stomach a tangle of nerves—not only because it was his first day without Lesley to guide him, but because he’d have to face David. He flipped on the lights, a little surprised at being the first to arrive, but he was also ten minutes early. He’d been terrified of being late and making a bad impression, and he’d texted Monique ahead of time so she knew she’d be getting Bree a bit early this morning.

Hailey and Shana hadn’t left for school yet, and they’d been excited to see the baby.

He booted up his computer and checked today’s schedule. April and David had a client meeting here in the office at one, so he brought up those files to see what materials he could prepare in advance. April arrived a few minutes later in a bit of a frazzle, a takeout coffee balanced with a whole stack of papers Micah leapt up to help her put down on her own desk.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah, we just need to juggle some meetings around,” she replied as she took off her coat and scarf. “David had to go out of town abruptly for a family emergency, and he won’t be back until late this afternoon.”

Micah blinked hard. A family emergency out of town? No wonder he hadn’t made any plans with Micah. And now Micah was the jerk for not calling him back. “Is his family doing okay?”

“They are now.” April seemed to debate how much personal information she should tell their office assistant. “David wouldn’t be coming home so soon if the danger hadn’t passed.”

“Okay. Well, if you talk to him, pass along my condolences?” Jesus, that sounded wimpy. He really should call the man himself, but he was on the clock.

“I will. And can you call Paula to reschedule today’s meeting? See if we can’t slot it in tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

*I suck, I suck, I suck.*

Micah threw himself into changing the week’s schedule to accommodate today’s lack of a business partner. April probably could have managed the meeting alone, but after watching the pair work together for the last two weeks, April and David truly did operate as a single unit. Bouncing ideas off each other, solving problems, finding solutions.

He picked up sandwiches from a nearby deli for lunch. The floor had a communal break room, and he sat at the only empty table, simply because he wasn’t feeling sociable. He’d been getting to know some of the other assistants on the floor, but the invisible thundercloud over his head kept people away. His phone taunted him to call David. Or at the very least, text the man.

He'd had a crisis this weekend, after all.

Settling on a polite text, it took him most of his lunch break to compose a simple: **I hope everything goes well with your family. –Mike**

Ten minutes after he was back in the office, David pinged him: **Thank you. We'll talk tonight. Seven pm. My place.**

Well, that was...bossy. And the bossiness was kind of hot. **Okay. Tonight.**

Micah grinned. Not because he expected to get laid, but maybe they could talk and things between them weren't over after all.

DAVID FACE-PLANTED in his bed as soon as he got home. He hated flying, but he was also grateful that he lived so close to Philadelphia and its airport. It didn't take long to get back and forth from Philly to Boston, but David hated everything about airplanes and airports. Pushy, rushing people. Small, tight rows of seats. And he wasn't exactly rolling in the kind of cash that could afford the wider space of first class.

When Gwen called Friday evening to say her husband Kevin was in the ER following a heart attack, David had reacted out of instinct. They weren't close, but David adored Terry and Mercy, and he knew his sister wasn't good in a crisis. He'd gone online, gotten the first flight out he could, and then he'd hit the road with a duffel bag. It hadn't even occurred to him he'd blown Micah off until late Saturday, when Kevin was declared stable. No major muscle damage, but Gwen now had the leverage to get him to finally give up smoking.

David had called April on Sunday to tell her he was staying an extra day, to help get Kevin settled at home and make sure Gwen could deal with the prescriptions and new dietary restrictions. Then he'd spent an hour staring at his phone, working up the courage to call Micah and explain. He knew Micah was pissed at him. Deep in his bones, he knew it, and David didn't blame him.

Going to voice mail hadn't bothered him, but Micah's continued silence had—until today's text exchange. And as tired as David was from this weekend's stress, he hadn't wanted to put off talking to Micah. He needed to soothe any remaining anger, maybe even get a long, comforting hug from the guy. He'd genuinely missed Micah, after having gotten used to seeing him all week long.

He needed his Micah fix.

*I'm so screwed.*

His rumbling stomach woke him from an unexpected nap, but that wasn't the only sound—knocking. Hell, he'd slept right up to seven o'clock, and he was starving, the candy bar he'd scarfed down at Logan International Airport long gone. He trudged to the front door with no real energy, but when he saw Micah outside his door, smiling, cheeks red from late January cold, joy zinged through him.

"Hey, come in," David said.

"You look like shit." Micah handed over his coat and scarf. "Did I wake you? There's a crease on your face."

David hung the coat, then rubbed at his cheeks. "Yeah, I didn't mean to fall asleep." His stomach grumbled again, and he tried to remember what he had in this fridge. "Listen, you mind if I throw a frozen pizza in the oven? I haven't eaten in ages."

"Sure, go ahead. One thing first?"

“Yeah?”

Micah wrapped his slender arms around David’s shoulders and hugged him tight. A full-body hug that said, “I’ve got you” and “I’m glad to see you” all at once. David squeezed him back, grateful for this without having to ask for it. “Missed you,” Micah whispered.

“Same. I feel better now, though.”

“I’m glad.” Micah released him, still smiling. “Go make your pizza.”

“Want a beer?”

“Sure.”

David threw a spinach and garlic pizza into the oven to cook. It was a specialty, European-style thin crust, and so much better than the popular pizza brands. Got two beers and un-capped them. Micah was sprawled in the center of the couch, all long limbs and cheerful grins, as if he’d already won some sort of argument.

“What’s your favorite pizza?” Micah asked.

David handed over one beer, then sat on Micah’s left, close without touching. “Pretty fond of the one I just put in the freezer. Thin crust with spinach and garlic.”

“Ew, you put spinach on pizza?”

“Just for that remark, you’re going to eat a piece when it’s done.”

Micah smirked. “Are you going to tie me down and force-feed me?”

“Tempting, but no. I thought you were all about trying new things?”

“Okay, fine, I’ll try it. Any other favorite? Local? Chain?”

David considered his answer for a moment, a little thrown that they were talking about pizza, rather than this past weekend. “There’s a place on Market Street called DiMeo’s that makes the absolute best Neapolitan pizza. I’ll have to order them for lunch one day, let you try it for yourself.”

“Sounds like a deal. I couldn’t tell you a local place I like, because I’ve only been here for a month. Back in Seattle, there was this great place called MOD Pizza, where you picked all your own toppings, and they cooked it in this big, wood-fired oven. I went there with my friends a lot back in high school.” Micah’s expression flattened.

David took a guess on why. “You don’t like remembering Seattle, do you?”

“It’s not that I don’t like to remember. I just get so fucking sad when I do, thinking about how superficial all my friendships were, and how easily we drifted apart. That the one person I could turn to when I really needed help was someone I barely knew.”

“I’m glad you had family you could rely on. I mean it.”

“Thanks.” Micah fiddled with his beer. “April didn’t tell me much, just that you had a family crisis this weekend.”

Ah, the elephant in the room. “My brother-in-law had a heart attack, and my sister...she isn’t a weak person, but she isn’t who you’d want in charge of a crisis, and I didn’t want my nephew to have to run point over his own father’s illness.”

“So you dropped everything to help your family.” Instead of being bratty about it and making it about him, Micah sounded genuinely impressed.

“I did. I imagine you would, too.”

“I’m not so sure I’d give a real shit if my dad had a heart attack, but if my mom got sick? Home in a heartbeat.”

David took a long pull from his beer, uncertain he believed Micah’s comment about his father. As pissed as Micah was at the man, no one genuinely knew how they’d react to bad news until it happened.

“So how’s your brother-in-law doing now?” Micah asked.

“Home and resting, thanks for asking. He’s a freight worker and not used to lazing around, so recovery won’t be easy. But Terry and Mercy are there, and Kevin’s own parents are flying in tomorrow to visit for a while.”

“It’s good he’s got people to help him.”

“Yeah, it is, and I’m glad to come home to my life here. Micah, I truly did not mean to blow you off this weekend. From the instant I got the call from Gwen, all I could do was focus on that problem and how I could solve it. It’s part of who I am.”

“I know, and I’m not mad anymore. I was furious on Saturday, and I ended up going out with Ezra, tying one on, and I had a hell of a hangover yesterday, so that was probably my celestial punishment for not giving you the benefit of the doubt. Everything I know about you says you’re a good guy, so I was a jerk for ignoring your phone call.”

“I don’t blame you for ignoring me. I suppose I could have mentioned the heart attack in my message, but I wanted to hear your voice. Tell you myself.”

“Understandable.” Micah finally took a pull from his beer. “So, are we going to have another, uh, private bedroom appointment this Friday?”

“Absolutely, as long as you still want to.”

Micah arched one blond eyebrow, put his beer on the coffee table, and gracefully moved to straddle David’s waist, knees rest on the cushions on either side of David’s hips. He took David’s beer away, then threaded his fingers through David’s hair. The position woke David’s cock up quickly, and he wasn’t at all surprised to feel the swell of Micah’s erection pressing into his.

“Don’t tease if you don’t mean it.” David slid both hands around to squeeze Micah’s pert butt. “I dreamed about this ass last night. Licking it. Fucking it.”

Micah licked his lips, leaving them wet and inviting. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” David wiggled his middle finger past jeans and belt, into the top of Micah’s crease. “Hmm. Can’t seem to reach.”

On a gulp of air, Micah undid his belt and loosened his fly. It gave David enough room to shove his hand into Micah’s briefs. Glide his finger down that hot crease to Micah’s hole. A virgin hole he couldn’t wait to fill, but was Micah truly ready, or simply offering this to keep David interested?

“You don’t have to prove anything by doing this,” David said. “As much as I want to fuck you, it needs to be for the right reason.”

“Is the right reason because I want to? Because I want feel you inside me? To know what it’s like? I’d so much rather experience this with someone I trust, than with some random hookup.”

David’s chest fluttered with an unnamed emotion from Micah’s stated trust in him, and he believed Micah. David trusted him, too, and he teased Micah’s hole with the pad of his finger. Micah’s face and neck flushed, and David considered nipping at that exposed flesh—until the kitchen timer dinged, and he noticed the spicy fragrance of his pizza.

“Saved by the bell?” Micah asked.

“Or cursed by it.” David unhappily withdrew his hand, but it was that or burn the pizza, and he was still hungry. “Up and at ‘em, sweet cheeks.”

Micah huffed, but got up as asked and fixed his jeans. “You’re giving up a chance to fuck me for food?”

“Yup.”

“Just for that, I’m not trying your pizza.”

“Wanna bet?” David stood, ducked, and had Micah over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry before the slimmer man could fight back. Micah took his revenge by smacking David firmly on the ass; David returned the favor as he carried Micah into the kitchen.

He dumped Micah onto the counter and left him there while he first washed his hands, and then took the pizza stone out of the oven. Cut the smallish pizza into six wedges. The steaming cheese burned his fingertips, but he didn’t mind. His mouth watered at the scent of garlic and spices, and he got two plates out of the cupboard.

Micah grabbed a plate before David could put a slice on it and looked at the back. Whistled. “Damn, I didn’t take you for a brand snob.”

“I’m not. They were Casey’s.”

“You’ve had the same plates for over ten years?”

David pulled the plate close enough to dump pizza on it. “They’re perfectly useful plates. No sense is getting rid of ‘em and buying new ones. Plus, they were one of the few personal things I brought with me from Boston and take whenever I move.”

“Huh.” Micah blew across his pizza slice, perfectly content on his countertop perch. “So you do keep sentimental things that show who you are.”

“I guess.” David bit into the tip of his slice, not caring it singed his tongue a little. He was hungry, damn it. “They’re just plates.”

“Plates you shared with your husband. I think it’s sweet.” Nothing in Micah’s tone was teasing or taunting, so David took the compliment. Micah sniffed at his food. “I mean, it smells okay.”

“Tastes even better. Just one bite and you’ll be a believer.”

“Hmm.” Micah did try a small bite and chewed thoughtfully, his expression just bland enough that David couldn’t guess his thoughts. And then Micah took a second, bigger bite. “Okay, this is acceptable and I concede. Spinach on pizza is not of the devil.”

David laughed out loud. “So glad to have expanded your palate.”

They ate quietly for a few moments, and David proudly handed Micah a second slice when he asked. “So,” Micah said, “besides your plates and clothes, what else to you schlep from apartment to apartment?”

“They aren’t always apartments. Sometimes I rent condos.”

“Pedant.”

“I have a scrapbook and a photo album. Some photos of me as a kid, some family and school pictures. Wedding pictures.”

“Would you ever let me see your scrapbook?”

“Maybe.” If things got serious between them, he would. But he showed so few people those pictures, especially the wedding photos. Of all his friends and acquaintances here in Wilmington, only April had seen the whole book. Except this thing with Micah wasn’t supposed to get serious.

Was it?

Whenever David was around Micah, he wanted more than just sex, but in his head, he knew that was a huge problem. And Micah constantly gave off mixed signals. If this had just been about sex, he wouldn’t have been so pissy about David’s sudden disappearance over the weekend, right?

“So it’s too late to sign up for spring classes,” David said, “but have you looked into finishing your degree in the fall?”

Micah fumbled his pizza, and yeah, that had been a left field question. “I mean, I’ve

considered it, but I haven't looked into anything specific. I'd need my transcripts, local colleges, what credits their engineering degree requires, how much I'd have to do to complete it. I don't know, sometimes I'm not sure I want to do it anymore."

"Tell me why."

"I've always liked finding out how things work, and I picked engineering because it was one of five degrees acceptable to my dad."

David nearly choked on his pizza. "Your father told you which degrees you could get?"

"Yeah." Micah's shoulders slumped. "I hate how much I allowed his money to control my life choices up until now. But I grew up rich. I was used to owning a Tesla and buying Michael Kors, and eating at the best places. And I was pretty arrogant, so I guess it isn't all that surprising I don't have any friends left in Seattle."

David regretted opening this can of worms, because he hated seeing Micah upset. "You can't help your upbringing any more than you can help being tall and adorable. A lot of people are raised a certain way, and when they're your age, they really start to see the world through their own lens, rather than the one their parents gave them. I told you I met Casey in college, right? And that he introduced me to BDSM?"

"Yeah."

"Casey grew up in a tiny, conservative village in Vermont, and he had so much self-hatred going into freshman year because of his attraction to men. Then his roommate took him to a club in Boston, and the rest is history."

Micah stared at him with arched eyebrows.

"My point is, you don't have to have your whole life figured out by twenty-one. Hell, some people don't have their lives together at thirty, forty, even sixty. You don't want to do engineering? Don't. You've gotta have gen-ed credits that will transfer. Look at local schools. Look into scholarships, grants, and loans. Or look into trade schools. The one thing that isn't stressed enough to high school students is the need for trade workers. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics, those kinds of jobs."

Micah pulled a face. "Not sure plumber is on my list of dream jobs."

David chuckled and went for a third slice of pizza. "I'm just throwing options out there."

"I know, and I appreciate it. I just need to make the right choice, because whatever I do, it's going to affect Bree's life, too."

"That's true." David stared at his food a beat, then took a chance. "Could I maybe meet your daughter sometime?"

"Sure." Micah's expression went from startled to...tender? "Um, I'm not sure it's appropriate to invite you to Ezra's apartment."

"What if we meet in a neutral place? A late dinner after work one day? Or Saturday afternoon in a coffee shop?"

"Saturday could work. But we're still on for Friday night?"

"Absolutely." As much as David wanted inside Micah, he was exhausted from the weekend, and all the carbs from the pizza were making him sleepy. And the next time he had Micah Kelley in his bed, it would be for several hours. "Thank you for coming over tonight so we could talk. It means a lot to me."

"Same." Micah put his plate in the sink. "And I really should get back. I told Ez I'd only be gone for an hour."

"Sure, of course." David walked Micah to the front door and got his coat from the closet. "Drive safe. It's a little icy out there."

“I will.” Once he was wrapped up in his coat and scarf, Micah planted a firm kiss on his mouth. “See you tomorrow, boss.”

“Yeah.”

David shut the door and leaned against it, both exhausted and excited. Tonight he had fixed something he’d accidentally damaged, and he was overjoyed Micah was giving him another chance. He also had to be careful with his heart, because as he’d pointed out to Micah himself, Micah was still young, still finding his path forward, his true calling. And that might not be in Wilmington or with David. And if Micah decided his and Bree’s future was elsewhere, David had to be prepared to let them go without Micah taking David’s heart with him, too.

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## Chapter 12

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Ezra impressed Micah by not pressing him for information about his Monday night outing, and he further impressed Micah by giving him space that week. Micah's obvious good mood probably clued him in that things were back on track with David, and Micah wanted to protect that for a little while longer. Keep it safe from outside scrutiny.

The only thing Micah had said was a very vague, "Did you know spinach tastes good on pizza?" on the way out the door Tuesday morning.

Friday night loomed like a most-anticipated music event for two, and Micah—after a bit of internet research and online shopping—did a little self-prep in the shower after dinner. David was expecting him around eight. Romy was over to play video games with Ezra and watch Bree. Micah paced like a lunatic, until Ezra finally snapped, "Just go over early, I don't think he'll mind. You're driving me nuts."

"I'm sorry, I'm nervous," Micah replied.

Ezra paused the game to give him his full attention. "Nervous why? Taking a big step?"

"Yeah. The biggest."

"You sure it's what you want?"

Micah recalled the way David's finger had rubbed his hole on Monday, and how much he'd wanted that to be David's dick. "Yeah, it's what I want."

Romy watched them both with wide, curious eyes, but didn't interrupt or ask for an explanation. Micah wasn't sure how much Ezra had told, or would tell Romy once Micah left, and he didn't care too much. Romy didn't strike him as a gossip.

"Then be safe," Ezra said.

"I will. I trust him."

Romy quirked a brow.

Micah got his coat and keys, and he left early. Driving around the building a few times calmed him enough to walk to the elevator without jittering too much. Never in his life had he anticipated knocking on a man's door with the expectation of getting fucked in the ass, but here he was. And he couldn't wait for the experience.

David answered the door in familiar tight sweats and a blue sleeveless tee. The guy must run warm, because the apartment was way too cool for Micah to have been comfortable without sleeves. Micah hung up his own coat and scarf this time, a bit more familiar with the routine now, and David offered him a beer.

Micah didn't need the liquid courage this time, but it had become something of a tradition for them to share a beer here. After a long pull, Micah asked, "So how hard was it this week to stop

yourself from dragging me into the bathroom and kissing me senseless?”

David laughed. “Damned hard. Why do you think I was running my own errands as often as possible?”

“At least you were also right about DiMeo’s having amazing pizza.”

“Told ya so.” David had ordered a pie for their office trio on Thursday, and Micah had worshipped every bite. So far, David was spot-on about food. “You’re a bit early.”

“I know, but I was driving my brother nuts waiting.”

“Eager, huh?”

“Hell, yes.” Micah used his slightly superior height to crowd David against the wall by the television. Pressed their bodies together, pleased to find David already hard. “Hmm, someone else is eager.”

“Been dreaming about your ass all week, sunshine. Licking it, fingering it.” David pitched his voice lower. “Fucking it.”

“Dreamed about it, too. I’ve also been playing a little in the shower. Getting ready for you.”

“Have you now?” David’s nostrils flared. “I might need to see you finger yourself for me.”

Adrenaline and arousal zinged down Micah’s spine, offsetting his nerves and getting his own cock into the game. He swelled almost painfully fast, and he bit his bottom lip.

“You like that idea, huh?” David asked. He palmed Micah’s ass. “Ready to play?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Shoes and socks off. Then go into my bedroom and take off your clothes.”

Like the first time, David’s order both washed over him like a warm breeze and jolted him into action. In the bedroom, he stripped and folded his clothes, then stood by the bed, waiting for David to tell him what to do next. David loomed in the open doorway a beat, before coming inside and standing in front of Micah.

“Undress me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Micah took his time and enjoyed himself. Slowly stripping David’s tee off to reveal his furry chest. Tugging down those tight sweats to show off David’s thick erection—hello, commando! Down past David’s knees. He reverently pulled each ankle through the fabric, leaving the man naked and Micah on his knees.

“Suck me. Get me wet for you.”

Micah’s belly quivered, and he did so with glee. He loved the heaviness of David’s dick on his tongue, the unique taste of the man’s skin, the scratch of his trimmed pubes on Micah’s chin. So perfect. He genuinely wanted to please David. To make the older man fall apart. Curious, he rubbed the pad of one finger along David’s taint—that got a hum of approval, so Micah pushed back to touch David’s hole.

“Something you want?” David asked. Micah tried to tell him with his eyes, because he’d been told to suck, not speak. “Get it wet first, then put it in.”

*Yes, please, and thank you.*

Micah collected saliva that had dripped around David’s balls, then pressed that finger again, while continuing his oral assault. The moment his finger breached David’s tight muscle, David thrust into his mouth, nearly gagging him. David held Micah by the hair, tight enough to feel but not sting, and took control. Fucked into Micah’s mouth, then back onto his finger. Micah relaxed, allowing David to use him. To get himself off.

David warned him a moment before he came, and Micah swallowed what he could. Some dribbled down his cheeks, and David pulled him up and licked Micah’s face and neck clean,

before claiming his mouth in their first kiss of the evening. The kiss was everything Micah remembered and more, and he threw himself into it, licking into David's mouth, dragging his fingernails across David's back. David growled and without warning, tumbled them onto the bed, smothering Micah with his broader body.

Micah humped up against David's thigh, desperate for release. David simply wrestled their bodies higher up the bed without breaking that wonderful kiss. He stretched Micah's arms up above his head and held them there, and that was cool too. Micah was so into devouring David's mouth, he didn't realize right away that David was no longer touching his wrists, and Micah couldn't move his arms.

He twisted his head, and his heart flipped in a weird way. His wrists were restrained by padded cuffs, which hooked to the headboard. "What the—dude, you're sneaky."

David studied his face, dark eyes serious. "You feel okay in them?"

"Yes, sir." He was surprised, but he trusted David and didn't feel at all unsafe.

"I know we haven't established we're anything more to each other than two guys playing and having sex, but if I ever do something that you really don't like, say yellow and I'll back off. We'll talk about it. If you get genuinely scared, or if anything hurts, say red and I'll stop. Restraints, sex, whatever it is. I don't ever want to hurt you, Micah."

"Yellow and red, I got it." He gave the cuffs a tug, but they didn't hurt or pinch at all. "So far, we're definitely on green."

David grinned, then began licking his way down Micah's exposed body.

SURPRISING MICAH with the cuffs could have blown up in his face, but it only seemed to turn Micah on more. They probably should have had the yellow/red discussion before any of the sex began, but sometimes Micah made him lose his goddamn mind. Like getting off down Micah's throat—that had definitely not been planned. David was still half-hard, though, and Micah's responsiveness to David biting and pinching his nipples was helping his dick forget it had just come two minutes ago.

It had been a while since he'd gone twice in one night, but he knew Micah had the stamina, so he attacked his nipples, stroked his cock, and Micah cried out as he painted his own stomach and chest with come.

"Oh, fuck that felt good," Micah panted. "Ow, fuck, my nipples hurt."

David licked the closest. "They're over-sensitized. I wonder how you'd respond to nipple clamps."

"Uh..."

"Not tonight, sunshine." He carefully licked Micah's body clean, taking his time to dip into his navel and tickle around his ribs. Like David, Micah never really lost his erection, that pretty dick making a valiant effort to stay hard. David helped him out by sucking Micah into his mouth, enjoying the spunky taste of his skin, until that gave way to the headier flavor of Micah himself.

The cuffs were loose enough on the headboard that turning Micah onto his stomach didn't twist his wrists into an uncomfortable position. Micah eagerly spread his legs. David spent some time licking Micah's balls and taint, drawing out the moment, knowing exactly where Micah wanted his tongue, and he was being a very good boy by not begging or demanding. Simply moaning and hissing and dropping the occasional, "Fuck, yeah, that."

Micah was so well-behaved, David finally had mercy on him and licked his hole. The instant, "Yes!" sizzled across David's skin. Desperate, needy, and so fucking hot. Micah's taste wasn't

as sharp as the first time—and then David remembered his comment about home prep.

Perfect.

He feasted on Micah's hole until Micah was a shivering mess and tugging against the restraints, but he never once said yellow. Never gave any sign he was anything other than completely okay with this. David had done that for him.

Again.

Time to get ready for the finale. David retrieved the lube and condom he'd stashed beneath the same pillow as the cuffs.

"Oh, fucking finally," Micah said.

David's hand snapped out and landed on Micah's right ass cheek. Micah yelped, and a perfectly pink handprint bloomed on that pale skin. "You gave your body to me, right?" David asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then I don't want to hear words like finally. You take what I give you, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The mouthy brat didn't apologize, though, so David gave him a matching swat on his left cheek.

"Shit, sorry, sir!"

David massaged both pink marks. "Much better. How did those smacks make you feel?"

"I'm not sure. They surprised me."

"Did they arouse you at all?"

"I...maybe?" Micah twisted his head around, and David angled to see more than just his profile. His face was red, eyes bright, no regrets at all. And then a wicked glimmer preceded, "Maybe a few more swats will let me know for sure?"

David growled, then darkened those prints with two more firm smacks to each cheek. Micah yelped the first time, and by the fourth consistent smack, let out a low moan. "I think he likes it."

"Micah likes it," Micah said in a slightly drunk voice. "Dude. More?"

"Not tonight. I don't want you thinking about your sore skin the first time I'm inside you. Now, the lube's gonna be chilly at first."

"Okay." Micah dropped his head back to the bed.

David took his time, because they had plenty of it. Watching a single finger slide into Micah's body was just as breathtaking as two, and he used those fingers to tease Micah's prostate. Micah humped at his hand and muttered things David couldn't hear, until Micah warned he was close to coming.

He pulled his fingers out and rolled on the condom. "Roll over." Micah did with a bit of trouble. David settled between his spread legs and then went down for a kiss. "You want your hands free for this part?"

Micah seemed uncertain, so David reached up and hit the button to release the cuffs. "Thank you," Micah said. "Maybe another time but not my first."

David smiled, happy to have chosen correctly for this beautiful, blissed-out boy. "When I push in, you bear down, okay? It'll help."

"Is it going to hurt?"

"It might a little, at first. But if you feel real pain, tell me and we can try another position."

"Okay. I mean, yes, sir."

David hitched Micah's legs up and steadied his dick against Micah's hole. Watched every flash of emotion on Micah's face as he pushed. Micah had the most expressive eyes of anyone

he'd ever met, and every small flinch and struggle reflected in them. David didn't have a massive cock, but it was still bigger than two fingers, and the moment David's cockhead breached that tight ring, Micah cried out and flailed for David's forearm.

He froze. "Talk to me, sunshine."

"Don't move a sec. Fuck."

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm not sure. It's just really, really intense. Oh fuck, maybe move a little."

David did, sliding deeper a centimeter at a time, watching Micah for any additional signs of distress. The initial penetration seemed to have been the hardest, though, so once David was halfway inside, he pulled out a few inches, and then push back in. Micah's eyes went impossibly wider, his mouth open in a soundless gasp. David tugged on Micah's dick and that helped.

"Oh wow, oh fuck," Micah said. He thrashed so wantonly it took all David's self-control not to just fuck into him hard and fast. To chase his own release.

No. Tonight was about Micah, not David. Micah got to come first.

David took his time with Micah, lazily thrusting his hips, a bit deeper each time, until he was fully seated. He experimented with a long exit, followed by several short thrusts back in, and mixed that up with slow glides in, allowing Micah to feel him. To really, truly feel David moving inside his body, drawing him toward release.

Micah's chest was as beautifully flushed as his face and shoulders, and David leaned down to lick Micah's nipples. He clenched around David's length, so David did it again, using a combination of a mouth on his nipples and a hand on his dick to drive Micah over the edge a second time. Micah's ass clamped down hard as he came, and David stilled, only his hand working Micah, drawing every last drop of semen from his seizing body. Coating them both in his spend.

A jumble of cuss words fell from Micah's lips, and once his tense body loosened, David slid out. Knelt over Micah's supine form and jerked himself. Micah blinked up with lust-glazed eyes and slowly caught his breath, while David chased his own orgasm. He marked Micah's chest and belly, their come mixing together on Micah's skin. Micah licked his lips, as if begging for a kiss, so David pressed his body down on Micah's and did just that.

MICAH SWORE he'd just had an out-of-body experience, and he wasn't sure he'd ever come back down from the clouds. Sex had never been like this before. This pleasurable, this much fun, this...profound. He soared on endorphins while he kissed David, trying to say thank you without words. From the cuffs to the spanks, to the long, beautiful fuck...perfect.

And he didn't give a crap that they were sticky, bodies sealed together with spunk. He could stay like this forever and die a happy man. Except real life was poking at him from the distant recesses of his mind, reminding Micah this was an interlude. Not his real life.

*But it could be. I could have this every night.*

No, he couldn't give in to those thoughts, not when he'd give almost anything to feel this way again. Post-orgasm was a bad time to make big decisions.

David kissed the tip of his nose. "How do you feel?"

"Amazing isn't a big enough word. That was beyond what I imagined."

"Yeah?" David's eyes crinkled with his tender smile. "Physically, though?"

Micah clenched and then wished he hadn't. "I mean, I'm sore but that's part of it, right?"

"Yeah, for a little while. I tried to go slow."

“It was amazing, David, I promise. I’ve never come that hard in my life, and that’s not just lip service.”

“I believe you.” David nuzzled his cheek. “As much as I like cuddling you, we should rinse off before we get stuck together.”

Micah laughed. “Okay.”

A lot of touching happened in the shower, but they’d both come twice and were down for the count, so they settled on kissing on the couch for a while longer, until Micah had to go. He didn’t want to leave, but he had a baby at home who needed her daddy, and that thought threw a bucket of ice water on the last of Micah’s residual arousal.

Bree would always come first, but maybe he could find a way to start mixing those worlds together.

“Do you still want to get coffee tomorrow? Or lunch?” Micah asked.

“Absolutely.” David tapped his chin. “There’s this quirky little place I like called Peg’s Table Leg. It’s farm-to-table style, with a changing menu based on what’s fresh and available during the season.”

“Sounds good. I like checking out local places and supporting small businesses.”

“Good call, seeing as your brother owns a local small-business.”

“True.” Micah donned his coat and scarf, and then leaned in for another long, sensual kiss. “Meet you there at twelve-thirty?”

“It’s a date.” David’s eyes sparkled with warmth and affection.

*It’s a date.*

A date with his daughter along, but was it a date-date? Or just a date between two friends with benefits?

*Guess I’ll find out tomorrow.*

The drive home was a smidge uncomfortable, but in a good way. He had absolutely loved the sensation of a thick cock moving inside his body. David had gone so slowly at first that Micah had felt every. Single. Thing.

He couldn’t wait to do it all over again next weekend.

A light was on in the living room, and Micah was shocked to find Ezra still awake, reading on his tablet. Ezra hadn’t waited up for him once, but maybe— “Is Bree all right? Did something happen tonight?”

Ezra put the tablet down and smiled. “Bree’s asleep, nothing’s wrong. I just...I guess I wanted to see you when you got home.” He stood and walked to the entry, his expression so naked Micah wanted to weep. “I just need to know you’re okay. You know, with what you implied you were going to do tonight.”

Relief warmed Micah’s belly, and memories of Ezra’s first experience with sex made the concern even more touching. “I am one-hundred-percent good with what I did tonight. No regrets, Ez. I’m fine.” He hoped his broad smile punctuated those words to Ezra’s satisfaction.

Ezra studied him a beat, before grinning back. “Good. Any details you wanna share?”

“Nope.”

“Ugh, you’re hopeless.”

“And you’re nosey. Go to bed.”

Ezra huffed, and the faux-outrage was so sweet that Micah hauled him into a hug. “Thank you for being nosey,” Micah whispered.

“Anytime, sugar. Anytime.”

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## Chapter 13

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David hadn't been nervous over a lunch date in a long damned time, and it had everything to do with his date. Friend date, lover date, whoever date. He just wanted to spend time with Micah and meet his daughter. Peg's Table Leg had been his first idea because it had amazing food, but also because it was small. Only fourteen tables, the place often had a wait, so David got there at noon to put their names in.

The weather was a bit warm for early February, so waiting outside wasn't a huge issue, and he wasn't the only one. As the time inched closer to twelve-thirty, he kept his eyes open for Micah, and eventually a tall blond appeared down the sidewalk pushing a stroller. David waved; Micah returned the gesture.

A hostess came out and called for David, which was perfect timing. He greeted Micah with a brief hug, then held the door open. Peg's had a whimsical interior that sometimes took newcomers a minute to adjust to, because it felt a bit Alice-in-Wonderland-ish. The ceiling was covered with tables screwed upside down and painted in colorful patterns, hence the name of the place. The tables patrons ate on were similarly decorated—and right-side-up—and Micah couldn't stop gaping while they sat.

"Do you need a highchair?" the hostess asked.

"No, she just ate," Micah said. "Thanks, though."

Once they'd both unwound from their winter gear, David angled to get a good look at little miss Brianna. She was sucking on a pacifier and seemed content to stay in the stroller. She had Micah's eye shape and nose, but not much else.

"She's gorgeous," David said. "I mean, I knew she would be, but she's so much prettier in person."

"She looks a lot like her mom." Micah's eyes flashed with grief, and he pinched the bridge of his nose briefly. "Sometimes it hits me that she'll never know her mother. She's too young to remember those first short months before the cancer took Kenya away. But she will know her great-aunt and cousins. I'll make sure of it."

"I love that you want her to know all her family."

"Family is important. When you find a tribe that accepts you, keep it close. It's what Ezra did, and I'm grateful his friends have accepted us both."

"I can tell." David reached out to squeeze Micah's wrist. "Just keep doing what you're doing. This kid will not want for love."

A server came over and took their drink orders, so they paid attention to the menu. It always had a good variety of both meat and vegan dishes, and Micah seemed to have a hard time

choosing. Eventually, they both ordered different entrees. The middle of a restaurant—even such a small one—wasn't the best place to discuss delicate things, but David was crazy curious.

"How do you feel today?" he asked. "Still sore?"

Micah smirked. "Not as much as last night. Ezra was super-sweet and stayed up for me for the first time since I moved here."

"How's that sweet?"

"He's been so...hands-off with me experimenting and going out. Says he trusts me to make good choices for myself and all that."

David's temper sparked. "He didn't think last night was a good choice?"

"God, no, nothing like that." Micah played with his soda straw. "I think it was more for him, so he could sleep knowing I was okay with having anal sex. He's been through his own stuff, and he needed to hear me say I was all good. It wasn't about you or me, it was for him."

"I'm sorry he was hurt." David didn't know Ezra well, but he was an extension of Micah, so therefore important to David.

"Me too. I was only a kid when it happened, and I didn't understand until I was much older, but by then Ezra had moved out here and...I'm glad we have this chance. He's such a great person."

"I always got that impression. And I'm so happy for you that you have a chance to get to know him."

"Thanks. Hey, do you want to hold Bree while we wait for our food?"

David eyeballed the stroller. "She seems pretty content."

Micah pouted. "You don't want to hold my baby?"

"No, I do, I just—okay, fine." Micah undid the harness, then slipped the little girl into David's arms. Bree blinked up at him with wide, dark eyes that seemed to judge him right away. "Well, hello, Miss Bree. I'm your daddy's friend David."

Bree just stared.

"I don't think she's impressed," David said.

"She's five months old. Nothing impresses her except her pacifier and a clean diaper."

"Life is simple when you're a baby. It's getting older that screws everything up and makes life complicated."

"Amen." Micah clinked the lip of his soda glass to David's. "I can't keep Bree from growing up, but I can help make her the strongest, smartest woman possible."

"You will. You seem like the kind of guy who can accomplish anything he sets his mind to."

"Shockingly, I get that from my father. He always said if we worked hard enough, we could do anything. To set a goal and do whatever it takes to complete it."

"Sound advice." Bree flailed her arms in the air, so David let her grab his finger. She tried to bite it, which felt weird because she didn't have real teeth yet, but it seemed to make her happy.

"She's been doing that more, lately," Micah said, pointing at Bree's mouth. "Aunt Brenda said she could start teething at any time."

"That's never fun. I remember when Terry started teething. The poor kid became a screaming holy terror. The only thing that calmed him down was a frozen washrag."

"Oh joy." He hid a big yawn behind one hand. "She already doesn't like to sleep very long at night before she's up again. Six hours seems to be her record time."

David chuckled. "The joys of parenthood. Just don't let me catch you napping at your desk."

"I'll do my best."

Their food came not long after, and their chatter became more about that than anything else.

Bree didn't want to go back into the stroller, so David found a way to balance her and cut into his meat. Micah helped and the whole thing was so domestic and easy, David's heart ached to have it every day. He had so many feelings he wasn't sure what to do with, so he tried hard to ignore them.

David insisted on paying their tab, and despite this only being a lunch date, they lingered on the sidewalk outside, neither man eager to separate. It was also February and too cold to just walk aimlessly around the neighborhood, and all David really wanted was companionship. "Do you wanna go back to my place for a while?" he asked. "We can just hang out, watch a movie?"

Micah glanced at the stroller. "Just a movie?"

"Well, I wouldn't be opposed to some kissing, but no pressure to do anything else. I know your first priority is Bree."

"Okay. I'll meet you there."

"Great." David walked to his car with an eager spring in his step, happy their day wasn't over yet.

He beat Micah home, which didn't surprise him, since Micah had both a baby and stroller to deal with. He had Bree in her carrier, and Micah put that on one end of the sofa. David couldn't help himself—he picked her right up and held her closer to his face. Bree grabbed at his ear and pulled, then squealed baby laughter, as if it was the funniest thing in the universe.

"There's something really innocent about the way babies laugh," David said.

"Agreed." Micah twirled a curl of her hair. "You look adorable holding her."

"Did you just call me adorable?"

"Yeah. And?"

"Brat."

"You love it. But I promise not to tease you too much, since we kind of have to keep things PG today."

"Bummer." David winked, then handed Bree over to her daddy so David could get them drinks and set up the streaming system.

They bickered a bit over what to watch, until settling on a recent Pixar film that looked funny. Bree reached for David, so he cuddled her on his lap and Micah leaned into his shoulder. So easy and domestic, just like lunch.

*I cannot fall for him.*

Too late.

MICAH PAID MORE attention to David and Bree than to the movie. She seemed to adore David, perfectly content in his arms for a while, until they both smelled her diaper. And then David earned even more Adorable Points by volunteering to change her. She fell asleep by the end of the movie, so David settled her on his bed surrounded by pillows and a folded blanket.

Making out on the couch felt a lot more illicit with an infant down the hall, and Micah enjoyed himself. This was his favorite thing to do with David, because of the way he varied his kisses. It never felt tedious or practiced. David simply knew what to do with his mouth, so Micah let him have his way with Micah's entire body. A body hard and aching, and he humped up against David's erection.

David nibbled along his jaw. "Wanna get off, sunshine?"

"Should we?"

"Grown adults have sex with babies in the house. We aren't doing it in front of her."

True. Sex didn't end when babies were born; although he imagined couples had it less frequently. And he really did want to get off. "Okay, yes."

"Awesome." David slid to the floor, then reached for Micah's fly. Had his pants down and dick out in seconds.

The hot mouth on his cock made Micah moan, and he slapped a hand over his own mouth. Trying to keep quiet while David sucked him off was not easy, but he managed, and the bliss of coming spread from his fingers to his toes, relaxing his entire body. Instead of asking Micah to return the favor, David rucked Micah's shirt up, put one knee on the couch, and jerked himself off, splattering Micah's stomach when he came.

"Love seeing you covered in my spunk," David said with a possessive growl that made Micah's belly flip.

"I love it, too." He closed his eyes and grinned. "Gonna stay here for a while."

"Relax, I'll get a washrag. Clean you up."

"M'kay."

Micah hadn't expected any kind of sex today, but his body craved David's touch. His kisses, caresses, even his hugs, and he drifted a bit, knowing he and Bree were perfectly safe here.

*David will take care of us.*

DAVID SOAKED the rag in warm water, then grabbed a dry hand towel from the bathroom closet. The blow job had been a risk, because he didn't want to push Micah into anything he might regret. But after the high of orgasm faded, Micah hadn't seemed worried or upset. Simply tired, so David had left him there to rest.

And unsurprisingly, Micah was out cold when David returned. Between two full-time jobs as both parent and an office assistant, he probably didn't get a lot of uninterrupted sleep. David cleaned him up and tucked his clothes back into place, then draped a throw blanket over him. Put a pillow under his head. He'd never seen Micah asleep before, and he looked so content. Peaceful, like a resting angel fallen from heaven.

An angel he wasn't sure how to keep, when Micah needed the freedom to spread his wings and fly.

It was only mid-afternoon, so David pulled out his laptop and did some work at the dining table. When Bree started to cry, he darted into his room to shush her. The diaper was fine, so he got stuff out of Micah's diaper bag and fixed a bottle. If she'd eaten before lunch, then she was probably hungry by now. She only spit up a little, and on him, rather than her own clothes.

Micah slept soundly through the whole thing.

David had some fresh chicken breasts in the fridge, so around dinnertime he settled Bree in her carrier, perched it on the counter opposite the stove, and put together a quick chicken and pasta dish. Once it was finished, he roused Micah from his nap.

Micah groaned and rubbed at his eyes. "Fuck, how long did I sleep?"

"Three hours."

"Really?" He jerked upright and cast about. "Where's Bree?"

"In the kitchen. I wanted to give you a chance to wake up before we eat."

"Eat? Oh, is that what I smell? You cooked?"

"Yeah, I cooked. I am capable of doing more than baking a pizza."

"Wow, okay. Thank you for letting me sleep."

David leaned down to kiss his forehead. "You needed it, and I was happy to mind Bree for a

little while.”

Micah gazed up at him with adoration in his eyes, and David tried not to take it too much to heart. Micah was simply grateful for the nap and free child care.

*Yeah, keep telling yourself that.*

“Be right back.” Micah darted down the hall to the bathroom.

David set the dining table and brought out the pot of pasta, then went for Bree. She seemed annoyed by the carrier, so he put the throw blanket on the floor and set her down to flop around as babies do. When Micah returned, he blinked dumbly at the whole setup before sitting in the chair opposite David.

“This is really nice,” Micah said. “You didn’t have to cook for me.”

*Yes, I did.*

“Hey, I cooked for me too,” he replied with a wink. “This is just an easy something my mom taught me how to toss together. Cream of celery soup for the win.”

Micah took a bite and his eyelids fluttered. “Damn, it really is good.”

“And simple. Don’t forget simple.”

“Simple is good. I honestly don’t know how to cook anything more complicated than microwave popcorn.”

David stared.

“What?” Micah shrugged. “Growing up, cooking was Mom’s job and in college, I always ate at the cafeteria or nearby fast food. Ezra taught me how to do a basic stir fry with a bag of frozen veggies, but I’d like to learn more so I can cook for Bree when she starts eating solid food.”

“I think that’s a good goal to have. What if I start teaching you when you’re here?”

“And give up bedroom fun?”

David waggled his eyebrows just to hear Micah laugh. “I think we can manage to work in both things.”

“Excellent. You are a very good influence on me, do you know that?”

“I try. Now eat, so we can cuddle more before you guys have to leave.” David couldn’t make himself say “go home,” because in the deep recesses of his heart where his growing feelings for Micah stayed put, David wanted this to be their home. He wanted them to stay.

Okay, so maybe he’d feel differently about it during a three-a.m. diaper change, but he doubted it. Even after only six hours, Bree was imprinted on his heart right alongside her daddy, and David didn’t want to give them up. But that ultimately had to be Micah’s decision.

Micah had to choose to stay.

So they ate and did the dishes, and Micah changed Bree’s diaper this time. They all three cuddled on the couch to watch TV, and David couldn’t remember a more perfect day since moving to Wilmington. He didn’t want it to end, and he tried not to show his regret when he kissed Micah goodbye at the door. And okay, maybe he waited in the doorway until father and daughter disappeared into the elevator.

So what?

David shut the door and stared around his empty apartment, feeling its sterility for the first time. Having Micah and Bree over had given his place a sense of warmth it had never possessed before, and with that wonderful warmth gone, he felt chilly. Restless.

Incomplete.

But did Micah feel the same way?

MICAH GOT HOME AROUND EIGHT-THIRTY. Ezra tossed him a curious look from his spot on the couch, video game in progress, but didn't comment on him being gone all day. Micah put Bree down in her crib, then went into the kitchen for a soda. Sat on the opposite sofa and watched Ezra hunt zombies for a while, the volume now on low, hoping the gore and violence would distract him from his tumultuous thoughts and feelings.

Spending the day with David had been amazing. Not only all the time they spent awake together, but the unexpected sweetness of being allowed to nap, then wake up to dinner on the table. The domesticity of it had punched Micah right in the feels and stirred up desires he'd never really felt before: partnership. Not just dating someone, but a real partner who shared everything from cooking to diaper duty. David gave so much without being asked, and it both elated and terrified Micah.

Elated, because he could see himself doing this with David every day, years from now, working together to be amazing dads to Bree.

Terrified for the same reasons, because until David came along, he'd never imagined his future with a man. His entire life, he'd been groomed to grow up, get a degree, get a good job, and marry a woman. Start a family. Micah done some and none of those things, and in the wrong order.

Ezra had committed himself to a man for life, and he seemed perfectly happy and settled. But Ezra didn't have a baby girl to raise. Decisions Micah made about his personal life would affect her future, and having two dads? While obviously not unheard of, it still wasn't wholly accepted in some circles of bigoted dimwits. How would her future classmates treat her? Not only being biracial, but with two dads and a gay uncle? Multiple gay uncles, really, since Ezra and Donner treated all their friends like brothers.

*Am I strong enough to handle that life?*

His heart wasn't giving him a choice in the matter, because a piece of it already belonged to David Milano. Not only for the physical affection, but for simply being himself. His kind, generous, funny self who wanted to teach Micah how to cook real food, and who changed a diaper without being asked, because who just changes diapers?

*David will be an amazing dad.*

But their relationship was only physical, right? Nothing deeper?

*Fuck that, today shoved "only physical" right out the damned door.*

Ezra paused his game. "Okay, spit it out."

"Huh?" Micah snapped his head to the side to stare at his brother. "What?"

"You have this look on your face like you aren't sure if the brown stuff someone handed you is shit or chocolate pudding. What are you thinking about?"

"David."

"Okay, you've definitely got my attention. I'm guessing he's who you were with today?"

"I was." Micah detailed their afternoon and evening together, skipping the blow job and his own personal fears. "This was only supposed to be about sex, but now my feelings are getting tangled up in things."

Ezra tilted his head. "You really like him, don't you?"

"I really do, and it scares me a little."

"Because he's a man?"

"That's part of it. I've also never been this strongly attracted to anyone ever, male or female, and that's what scares me, I think. But more than the physical stuff, we connect on another level. Mentally, you know? And he's totally in love with Bree."

“A man who takes care of another man’s kid without being asked is definitely a keeper in my book.” Ezra moved to sit next to him, his previously curious expression more serious. “Are you worried he doesn’t feel the same way about you?”

“Not as much, but a little bit. I mean, if this was just friends-with-benefits for him, he wouldn’t try so hard with Bree, right? Unless he’s just one of those guys who loves babies.”

“Wow. You know, I never thought I’d be giving relationship advice to my baby brother on navigating his first queer boyfriend, but here we are.”

“Boyfriend?” Micah had never consciously applied that word to David, but he liked it. Maybe too much.

“Okay, maybe it’s too soon for the B-word. Sentiment applies, though, especially since until I met Donner, I’d sworn off relationships for good. I went out, got my freak on, and then sent them packing the next day.”

“Because Brian dumped you?”

“It was *why* Brian dumped me.”

Micah fiddled with the tab on his soda can. “You want to talk about it? We never really have.”

“I told him the truth. Unloaded all my personal baggage about what Dr. Tanner did to me, my weight gain after, the insecurities I still had because of it. A few weeks later, Brian dumped me for someone less high-maintenance.”

“Wow, really? What a shitty thing to do.”

Ezra shrugged. “It was shitty, but Brian wasn’t right for me anyway, and at the time I didn’t want to admit it. And then I couldn’t tell you or our parents the truth, because I’d already failed at so many things. I moved across the country for Brian, so how could I admit he dumped me?”

“And then Donner.”

“Yup. And then Donner. I literally ran into him at Pot O Gold one night. I let myself get drunk and into a bad situation, and Donner was there. He didn’t know me at all, but he walked me home, and the next day he brought me ginger ale. I think I fell a little bit in love with him that day, and even though I pushed him away more than once, he never gave up on me. When I finally chanced telling him about the rape...it was the first time in my adult life that someone else was truly on my side. He gave me a gift that day, and I don’t think he realizes how big it was, or how much it changed me.”

Micah’s eyes stung over the word rape, because he’d never heard Ezra speak so bluntly about what their family had always tip-toed around. The fact that Dr. Tanner had tried to “cure” then-sixteen-year-old Ezra of his homosexuality through brainwashing, torture, and finally by hiring a female hooker to rape a drugged Ezra. When Micah had finally learned the truth of those events...he’d raged for the brother he’d never really known until now.

“I’m glad you met Donner,” Micah said. “Truly glad.”

“Me too. Donner makes me a better person simply by loving me. Do you think the same could be true for you and David?”

“I think so. I feel...stronger when I’m with him. Like everything that’s confusing makes a little more sense.”

“Then don’t lose it.”

“But on Monday, he’s still my boss.”

Ezra narrowed his eyes. “Are you afraid that if things don’t work out, he’ll fire you?”

“No, David’s not that guy. And even if it got too uncomfortable to keep working together, he’d make sure I had another job before letting me go. Maybe that’s what I should do? Look for

another job?”

“Is that really what you want to do?”

“No. I like where I work, and I like what we do for the community.”

“Then see how things shake out with David first. Spending one day with an infant is a far cry from committing to her forever. She will always be a part of your life, Micah.”

“I know and so does David. He constantly reminds me to think of Bree first. If I told him that us not seeing each other anymore was best for Bree, he’d accept it in a heartbeat. But I want to keep seeing him.”

“Then keep seeing him until he gives you a reason not to, or until you’re a happily committed couple who are out and open about it. Just be happy, okay?”

“Yeah. You know, you really are good at this advice giving thing.”

Ezra huffed on his nails, then shined them on his shirt. “You feel better?”

“I do, thanks.”

Micah hung out while Ezra returned to his game, thankful his brother got him to talk things out once again. It helped having a sounding board, especially one with life experience and a genuine investment in Micah’s happiness. Now all Micah had to do was decide what would make him happy and go for it.

*David. David makes me happy.*

But was Micah enough to make David happy in return?

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## Chapter 14

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Four amazing weeks passed, and each included four amazing weekends David got to spend with Micah and Bree. For a guy who'd never pictured himself as a father, he doted on that little girl like she was his own flesh and blood, and he doted on her daddy even more. Ever since that first February weekend when Micah napped on his couch, they'd fallen into a wonderful routine. Completely professional at work, perfect couple on the weekend.

Micah didn't stay over and that was fine. They still had their Friday night dates, sans Bree, and then Saturday and Sunday were a mixed bag of playing with the baby, shopping, excursions outside, and cooking lessons, with a little bit of snuggling and sex tossed in during naptimes.

David had never been happier, even though they were hiding their relationship from everyone. He'd been lucky they hadn't run into any acquaintances, colleagues, or clients while out and about, but that kind of luck didn't last forever. The only people who knew were Ezra and Donner, because of Micah's living situation. Despite having worked for Milson Group for almost two months, Micah was still in Ezra's guest room. They didn't really talk about it. Micah told him he liked the familiarity and its proximity to work.

David sometimes wondered if Micah was afraid of having his own place, because the temptation to spend weekday time with David was too strong. He never went to Ezra's place, even when Micah was home alone. They always met at David's. He'd tried floating the "get your own place" idea again this past weekend, only for Micah to change the subject.

Oh well.

First to arrive on Monday, David shrugged out of his spring coat and turned on the office lights—then he jumped a mile when April rose from her desk chair and crossed her arms.

"Christ, you're going to give me a heart attack," David said. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Are you fucking around with Micah?"

Blood thundered in his ears. "What? Why would ask me that?"

"Because you have been bizarrely happy for the last month or so, whenever Micah is not in the room, and whenever he is, you're a total ice queen, and since Micah is doing a fantastic job, you aren't acting like that because you *don't* like him. You're just not very good at hiding that you *do*. So what's going on?"

The beautiful little bubble they'd existed in this past month burst. David owed April the truth, even if she thumped him over the head with her briefcase. "We aren't fucking around, exactly," he said. "We're seeing each other."

"He is fourteen years younger than you with an infant."

“I am well-aware of those facts. I adore his daughter, and I spend time with them both, so before you start a lecture, I know they’re a package deal.”

“He’s a kid, David.”

“He’s twenty-one, and he is incredibly self-aware and smart. And I promise you, I have not once pressured him into anything.” David took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “I do have one confession to make, though, and you’re probably going to get mad.”

“Oh great.” She leaned her hip against the desk. “Hit me.”

“The night before Micah interviewed for us, we sort of hooked up at a club.”

Her eyebrows arched into her bangs. “Sort of hooked up?”

“In my defense, he said his name was Mike, so I had no reason to connect him to the guy we were going to interview until I walked in the door.”

“Well, that explains why you didn’t say much, but you should have told me after he left. Is that why you avoided me the rest of the day?”

“Yes. But in my defense, I had no idea he had a kid until that interview, and he needed the job. I didn’t want our personal history to affect hiring him, or influence what you thought about his ability to be a good assistant. Not over one hookup.”

“It obviously wasn’t just one hookup.”

“That’s all it was supposed to be.” David glanced at the clock on the wall, but Micah wasn’t due for another ten minutes or so. He sank into Micah’s desk chair. “But damn it, April, I felt something with him, and he felt it too. When we finally talked it out, those feelings were still there, but it was only supposed to be sex.”

“And it became more than just sex.”

“A hell of a lot more, and now we’re in this odd place where I think we both want this to be a real relationship, but we’re also stuck in the boss/employee roles that we swore we wouldn’t cross during the week. I’m falling for him. I didn’t mean to but it happened.”

“You realize your relationship creates a power imbalance here at work, right? What happens if Micah does something wrong and needs to be disciplined? And don’t say he won’t, because mistakes happen.”

“Then we’ll deal with the situation if it occurs. If he screws up as our employee, I promise I won’t try to protect him as his boyfriend. I will treat him like an employee and defer any and all discipline to you. I swear.”

April stared at him for several long moments. “If you let this relationship hurt our business, I’ll murder you with my bare hands.”

“Trust me, I’d let you. But I can’t see that happening. Even if it came out I’m dating my assistant, that’s as big as the scandal could get. We don’t take overtly homophobic clients, and I have never once coerced Micah into anything by holding his job over his head. You know I’m not that guy.”

“I know, and you’re right, but I still want to smack you for not telling me sooner, you big jerk. You could have trusted me with this from the start, and it hurts that you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry I hurt you, and I swear it’s the last thing I wanted to do. I didn’t know how to tell you about me and Micah when I’m not even sure what we are. We’ve been in this odd limbo of weekend boyfriends, because of the boss/employee situation, but he’s a great asset to the company, and he’s got a kid to support. It’s such a mess.”

“Do you care about him?”

“Very much.” David wasn’t ready to say he’d fallen in love with Micah, but he was pretty damned close.

“Then don’t fuck it up, okay? Keep it professional on the clock, but once you guys are off for the day?” April shrugged. “I don’t care what you get up to. Just treat him right. He’s a good kid.”

“He’s the best, and I’ll treat him like a prince as often as he lets me.”

“Good answer, partner.” Her lips twisted. “Now tell him that.”

“Huh?” David looked at the doorway. Micah stood there with takeout coffee in one hand, his other still on the knob, and a bewildered expression on his face. “Hey.”

“Um, hi?” Micah glanced from him to April, and back again. “Did I interrupt?”

“I don’t know, David, did he interrupt?” April asked

“Not at all,” David replied, nerves jumping. “Come inside.”

Micah did, then stood there with his coffee, so uncertain it hurt. “Why are you at my desk?”

“Keeping my distance from the viper over there.”

April stuck her tongue out at him. “Micah, I know you two are seeing each other, and as long as it stays out of the office and doesn’t affect your work, I don’t care.”

Micah nearly dropped his coffee. “You know?”

“I’ve known David for years, and he has tells. And he knows to be good to you, or he’ll answer to me, because I’d hate to lose such an efficient assistant.”

“Um, thanks? Thank you.” He turned those wide, blue eyes onto David. “Right? This is a good thing?”

“It’s a good thing.” David stood from Micah’s chair, and it took all his willpower not to walk over and hug him, simply to feel Micah’s lean body again. “So how about we all get to work? We have a presentation at ten-thirty.”

“Yes! I finished the PowerPoint on Friday, but I want you guys to see it and make sure I didn’t miss anything.”

And like that, the atmosphere in the office was back to normal. But as David fell into the routine of a Monday, he had new hope that this thing he was slowly creating with Micah was about to take a new step toward something bigger and more permanent.

MICAH WAS a jittery mess by the end of the workday Monday because of the question he planned on posing to David now that April was in on their relationship. Revealing it to David’s work partner sent a message to Micah that this thing between them was real. And strong. The next step had to be Micah’s.

April left the office around five-fifteen. Micah and David were each working at their desks, and as soon as the office door shut behind her, Micah sagged into his chair.

David swiveled to face him. “Are you mad at all?”

“About what? April knowing?” Micah had been momentarily terrified of being fired, but April’s gentle teasing had settled his fears quickly. Still, he’d been jittery today, because now that she knew, he swore she was always looking. Which was dumb and paranoid, but whatever.

“Yes, about April knowing. She literally ambushed me with it when I walked in the door this morning. She was hiding in the dark.”

Micah chuckled. “She’s a smart lady.”

“And discreet as long as we’re discreet.”

“Absolutely. Why do you think I’m still over here in my own chair?”

David leaned forward. “Same. What do you say we get out of the office so we can talk without feeling guilty about it?”

“Good plan.” Micah shut down his computer and put a stack of files in the correct drawer. David locked up behind them as they left.

They weren’t the only ones on the elevator, so Micah waited until they were in the parking garage, in a semi-private corner, before asking, “Will you come over one night for dinner to meet Ezra and Donner? I mean, I know you kind of know them, but officially? Um, as my boyfriend?”

The power wattage of David’s smile would have lit up the entire city of Wilmington. “Really? You want to introduce me to your family?”

“Yes. If you want to. I mean, we haven’t really talked about the B-word, and if it’s too soon —”

David shut him up with a kiss—brief but firm. “Yes, I’d love to come over for dinner. How about Wednesday? Ezra can have two days to get used to the idea of his brother dating a cradle robber.”

Micah smacked his forearm. “You are not a cradle robber. I like that you’re older than me. You’re settled, you’re stable. You know what you want out of life. You treat my daughter like a princess.”

Something flickered in David’s expression. “I adore you both, and what I know for sure is I want you both in my life.”

“Good, because we like being part of your life, and I’m glad we don’t have to hide anymore.”

“Same.” David hesitated, then said, “Give Bree a kiss for me.”

“Okay.”

They separated after another, longer kiss, and Micah practically skipped to his car—practically, because he’d never admit to skipping in public. Ever. When he picked up Bree from Monique, he gave his daughter two kisses. One from him and one from David, as promised. Monique commented on his good mood, and Micah admitted he was seeing someone, but not who because Ernie was home.

So were Ezra and Donner when Micah got back to the apartment, and he dropped the dinner bomb on them at the same time. Ezra squealed and hugged him. Donner’s reaction was more subdued, and he promised to switch his shifts around so he was home. Micah hadn’t expected him to do that, but it made him and the dinner date feel important to Donner.

The next two days passed way too slowly, and they planned for dinner at seven, so David could swing by his place and change out of his usual business suit and into something more casual. Ezra dressed Bree in one of his favorite whimsical dresses, and she seemed content in the playpen. The extra time also gave Micah a chance to throw together one of the simple pasta dishes David had taught him.

The only real downside to the apartment was a lack of dining space, but they had four stools at the kitchen island that served the purpose. Ezra set places while Micah put the finishing touches on dinner. A knock at the door nearly sent Micah out of his skin, a mixture of nerves and eagerness.

Micah bolted to answer the door. David grinned at him from the hallway, dressed down in hip-hugging jeans and a gray sweater, and he had a bottle of wine. “Hi,” Micah said. He leaned in for a welcoming kiss. “Come in.”

David did, his eyes constantly moving, taking in the apartment. It was already kind of small and even smaller now with all the baby accoutrements taking up space. Donner and Ezra stood by the island, both smiling.

“David, this is my brother Ezra,” Micah said, “and his partner Donner.”

“We’ve never formally met,” David replied to them both. “Davidson Milano, but I just go by

David.” They exchanged handshakes, and it occurred to Micah that David and Donner were very close in age.

*Guess me and Ez both like older men.*

“Your timing is perfect,” Micah said. “The food is ready, and I cooked.”

“I’m impressed.”

“So am I,” Ezra replied. “Donner’s the best cook in the apartment because of Street Feed, so any new, easy meal is a win in my book.”

“Street Feed?”

Donner took point on that, describing the community service he, Brendan, and Jonas provided for the city’s poorest, while Ezra opened the wine. Micah dished up bowls of pasta. They all settled around the island and made small talk. David told them more about Milson Group, Donner told a funny bartending story, and Ezra watched David like a hawk. Probably doing his big-brother duty by observing the new boyfriend.

As if realizing someone she liked had arrived, Bree started squawking for attention. She wasn’t really crying, because there were no tears, but her voice was impossible to ignore.

“Do you mind?” David asked.

“Go for it,” Micah replied, happy to see David taking point on shushing her.

He slid off his stool and approached the playpen. Little arms flailed, and she quieted almost as soon as David picked her up. Micah hazarded a look at Ezra and Donner; both men had similar surprised looks on their faces, and Micah silently cheered. Maybe David was older and a little kinky, but Bree loved him.

*I think maybe so do I.*

And the thought shocked him to his core. Micah tried to eat, but he spent more time watching David hold Bree in one arm and spoon pasta into his mouth with the other. Bree tried to grab his hand more than once on its trip to David’s mouth, and it became a kind of game. Even Ezra seemed enamored of the pair. Donner a little less so, but he’d always struck Micah as slightly more guarded. Less likely to overtly show his emotions.

The Kelley men couldn’t keep their emotions in.

After dinner, they settled in the living room with wine and Cards Against Humanity. David had a wonderfully dirty mind, and Micah couldn’t remember a more fun time, even with an infant occasionally interrupting for cuddles or diaper changes. Bree switched laps frequently, and she enjoyed the attention all the way up to a late bedtime.

David followed Micah into his room to put Bree down. “Does she usually go to sleep okay?” he asked.

“Depends,” Micah replied. “Sometimes I’ll read a book, so she can hear my voice, or I’ll sing to her.”

“You sing?”

“I mean, I’m no Shawn Mendes, but I can carry a tune.”

“Will you?”

Micah blushed. “Um, I guess.” He put a hand on Bree’s stomach, then very quietly began to sing *Baby Mine* to both Bree and David. He wasn’t a pro, but he could sing well enough to put his little girl to sleep. And when he looked up from her crib, David’s expression made him want to cry for its overwhelming emotions. So many things Micah couldn’t name, and it warmed him deep inside.

David winked and tilted his head, so they both left, closing the door almost the whole way. “You are so stinking adorable with her,” he whispered. “And you can sing pretty good, too.”

“Thank you.” Micah would have kissed him if Ezra and Donner weren’t pretending not to watch them from the couch closest to the kitchen. “You’re pretty great with her yourself.”

“She’s easy to love. Kind of like her dad.”

More heat rose in Micah’s cheeks, because that was as close to an “I love you” as they’d ever come. “You’re pretty easy, too.”

David waggled his eyebrows. “I know.”

“Dork.”

They returned to the living area and sat on the other couch, close enough that their knees touched. After one more round of the game, Donner and Ezra excused themselves to their room, giving Micah and David privacy. Micah pounced immediately, kissing David flat onto his back, slotting his slimmer body between David’s legs.

Unlike most of their make-out sessions, this wasn’t about getting hard or getting off. This was Micah showing David his feelings without words. His joy over how well the night had gone, his pleasure at watching his boyfriend interact with not only his daughter, but also his big brother. Contentment with how his life had changed in the last few months. Pride in accepting all sides of himself.

And David kissed him back, long and slow and sensual. Eventually, though, they simply lay there together, bodies wrapped around each other, with nothing more pressing to do than exist.

“Just think,” Micah said in a whisper, because the moment was too reverent for loud words. “If you hadn’t decided to dance with me at Pot O Gold, we wouldn’t be here.”

“On your brother’s couch?”

“Exactly. Here. Together. You and me.”

“And baby makes three.” David kissed his temple. “I like it.”

Curiosity had Micah asking something he’d wondered about for a while. “Why did you, anyway?”

“Why did I what?”

“Approach me at the club? Can’t resist a tall blond?”

“Something like that.” David’s fingertips traced up and down one arm in a mesmerizing massage. “You intrigued me that night. You reminded me of Casey. And I think you also subconsciously reminded me of Ezra. I’d tried hitting on him once when he first started frequenting the Pot, and he turned me down flat.”

Micah tensed. “You danced with me because I reminded you of my brother?”

“No, like I said it was a subconscious thing, and I didn’t put you guys together until I was told you were brothers.”

“I bet that made me even more attractive.”

“What?” David nudged until Micah sat up. His dark eyes shined with confusion. “Me being with you has nothing to do with Ezra. Nothing, I promise. Where is this insecurity coming from?”

“I don’t know.” Micah leaned into the couch cushion. “Everything is so perfect right now, and I’m still a little gun-shy from being kicked out. I guess part of me is waiting for us not to work out.”

“Oh, sunshine. Have I given you any reason to doubt that I want you? Just you and no other guy, and for no other reason than because I’m attracted to you? Other than that little slip about Ezra, which again, *you*. I want *you*.”

“No, you haven’t, and I’m sorry. I’m being an idiot. Trust me, I’m not usually so insecure. I’ve just never been in a relationship with a man before.”

“Being a man yourself, it’s not all that mysterious. And you aren’t the only insecure one here.”

“What? What are you insecure about?”

David picked at the seam of his jeans. “The age difference. Sometimes I can’t help wondering if you’re only with me for some of the reasons you’ve said. Because I’m older, stable, settled in my life. That you’re with me because you need that balance, and not just because you want *me*.”

Micah remembered those rare flickers in David’s eyes when Micah paid him those compliments, and now they made sense. “I want everything about you, from your stability to your mind, to your amazing body. The entire package, and I’d still want you if you lived in a basement and served burgers at Five Guys.”

His whole face softened. “Thank you for saying that.”

“I mean it.”

“I know, and I believe you. Relationships are about communicating and honesty, and we need to talk about these things. I don’t ever want you to think you can’t come to me with a problem or share a fear.”

“Same.” Micah wasn’t very good at sharing, but he was working on it. These past two months living with Ezra had definitely helped him open up and trust others with his thoughts and feelings. “I think we’ve managed pretty well so far.”

“We have, because we both want this to work. Believe in us, Micah, because I’m not going anywhere. Hell, I’d move you both into my place tomorrow if I thought you’d come.”

Micah’s pulse raced. “You would?”

“Absolutely. Although, it’s a one-bedroom, so we’d have to find a two-bedroom somewhere because Bree absolutely deserves her own room, and—oof!” David fell onto his back from the force of Micah’s hug.

Micah dropped kisses all over his face. “You are amazing for saying that. I’m not sure if I’m ready to move in with you yet, but thank you for the offer.”

“You’re welcome, and it’s a standing offer. I want you and Bree in my life. Hell, we can start apartment hunting first, talk about what we’d both like, where we’d want to live in the city. Make plans for the future so we have them in place when you’re ready.”

Gratitude and love wrapped themselves around Micah’s heart and squeezed tight. “You are an amazing man, Davidson Milano. How did I luck into you?”

“By being yourself and shining like a star on that dance floor. Your light drew me to you, Micah Kelley, and I’m so proud to be with you. I hope it’s okay, but I’m falling in love with you. A little bit more each day.”

“Of course, it’s okay.” Micah kissed his mouth. “I think I’m falling in love with you, too.”

David’s smile was both tender and blinding, and it made Micah a little weepy for all the emotion there, so he distracted them both with more kisses. Gentle, loving kisses that sealed their words as fact. They were falling in love, and soon they’d make plans to get a place together. Maybe two months was quick to be in love, or to make those plans. Maybe not. This was their story, and they got to write it. They got to decide what was right for them and when.

And Micah wouldn’t have it any other way.

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## Chapter 15

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**A**partment hunting with David was a hell of a lot of fun. They spent time on various websites, comparing and contrasting. Micah had never chosen a place to live before, and he had no idea what he wanted, other than for it to be affordable and have in-apartment washer/dryer units. Doing laundry in the basement was a pain in the ass, especially with all of Bree's clothing changes.

They were also in no hurry to find a place. Once Micah told Ezra their plans, Ezra reassured him that he wasn't going to kick Micah out or give him a deadline to leave. Ezra wanted Micah to be positive in his plans to live with David. And Micah was sure, he was just...nervous. He and David continued spending their weekends together, and frequently their weekday evenings, with and without Bree, depending on who was available to babysit. Ezra volunteered the most, as if needing as much niece time as possible before she no longer lived there.

Micah would miss it—living with his brother. But they both understood it was time for Micah to carve his own path. Create a life and future with David and Bree.

On the last Monday in March, Micah was dozing in bed, trying to nap after Bree kept him up half the night, alternately being fussy and just baby-talking. He didn't dare use earplugs, too afraid she'd really need him and he'd sleep through it. Around dawn, Ezra had come in and taken her, and Micah had mumbled a thank you before falling into a fitful sleep. He knew exactly how long he could linger without making himself late for work.

His weekend with David had been wonderful, so he latched onto those memories and tried to drag them into bed with him. Not only memories of being cuffed to the bed and fucked senseless on Saturday night, but also of watching David feed Bree a jar of baby food and get spit up on. Every memory was precious, and he clung to those happy feelings.

But real sleep eluded him, and just as he decided to give up and guzzle some coffee, someone knocked on his bedroom door. Donner stuck his head in, his expression blank. "You need to come out here," he said.

"Why?" Micah sat up fast, legs tangled in the sheets. "Is Bree okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. There's someone here to see you."

"Oh."

Weird.

Micah decided his pajama pants and t-shirt were suitable enough for a surprise Monday morning visitor, so he ran a hand through his hair and followed Donner into the living area. First, all he saw was Ezra standing next to Bree's playpen, where she seemed perfectly content to sit. Then a figure near the apartment door shifted, and Micah froze. Shock rolled over him in waves,

alternately hot and cold, and he wasn't sure he was breathing.

Jean Kelley stood in the apartment clutching a purse, as disheveled and uncertain as he'd ever seen his mother. She was supposed to be in Seattle with her perfect hair, her perfect home, and her perfect husband, not in Wilmington looking like she'd walked through a windstorm to get here.

"Mom?" Micah said, just to make sure he wasn't imagining her.

"Hi, baby," Mom replied.

"You're here."

"Yes." Her wide eyes kept going from him to Ezra, but seemed to linger on Ezra. And why not? She hadn't seen her elder son in almost four years. She hadn't spoken to Micah in months, but he hadn't changed much.

Not like Ezra.

"What are you doing here?" Micah asked, because Ezra seemed frozen. He stepped closer to his brother, worried by Ezra's pale skin and trembling hands.

Mom straightened her shoulders. "I left your father."

Micah's entire body jolted from the shock of those words—words he never, ever imagined her having the strength to say. Especially not after going along with their father's choice to disown Ezra. And after going along with their father kicking Micah and Bree out with nothing.

"You left," Micah repeated. "For the week?"

"No, baby, for good. I filed divorce papers, and your father didn't fight them or me. I brought one suitcase with me, and I'll have the rest of my things sent along when I find a place to live."

"I don't understand."

"He made me choose, and I'm so sorry it took me this long to stand up to him. I wasn't raised to speak back against my husband, and your father is a very intense man, but he made me choose between him and both of my children. And my grandchild. I couldn't choose him this time."

Micah looked at Ezra, who was still stone-faced and silent, but years of pain reflected in his eyes. Pain over being the disposable brother, because hey, Jean still had Micah, right? Losing Micah and Bree had been the final straw, and he would not blame Ezra if he didn't accept their mom back into his life. Ezra had lost so much because of her choices.

Choices she seemed to regret, but she'd still hurt both of her sons. She also seemed poised to accept that Ezra was gay and in love with Donner, but how would she feel about Micah also being with a man?

Not a question to unpack right now. He still had so many questions. "So, you're moving to Wilmington?" Micah asked.

"Possibly, but definitely the east coast." She squeezed her purse tighter to her chest. "I know it's unfair to drop in on you like this, and I will always regret the pain I've caused you both. Especially you, Ezra, honey. There are no words to express how sorry I am for what we did to you. For all of it from the moment you first came out. We should have loved and accepted you, but we didn't, and we failed as parents." Twin tears tracked a light trail of mascara down her cheeks, and she blinked hard.

"We failed both of you when you needed us most," she continued. "I failed you, and I'm not asking for your forgiveness. But I'd like to be part of your lives again, boys, going forward. And I would love to be in Brianna's life, as well. If you'll allow me."

Micah's throat tightened. He wanted that so much, but it also didn't feel right to speak first. He'd been rejected for a couple of months, but Ezra's pain went back years. Hell, it went back at least a decade, to their parents' horrible decision to try and change Ezra, rather than accept they

had a gay son.

In the play pen, Bree squawked for attention, and Ezra barely blinked. Micah picked her up, but remained by Ezra's side, concern for his brother growing by the second. "Ez?" he said.

Ezra jerked into motion then, pivoting awkwardly before storming into his bedroom. The door didn't slam, but it shut sharply enough that Micah jumped. Donner stood off to the side near the bathroom, and he gazed helplessly at the bedroom. Micah met his eyes and saw the same uncertainty.

"I'm so sorry," Mom said.

"You wrote him off, Mom, he's going to be pissed," Micah replied, a bit sharper than he'd intended.

She flinched. "I know. And I can leave, if you think that's best."

"I don't know what I think right now." Bree squirmed in his arms, and Micah really wanted to check on his brother. "Um, do you want to hold her?"

"Oh God, yes, so much." She finally came deeper into the apartment. Micah eased Bree into his mother's arms. She'd been so excited to meet Bree back in Seattle, and she'd never seemed to care Bree was biracial. That hadn't changed. Mom cooed and cuddled and stroked her cheeks.

To Donner, he said, "I'm going to talk to Ezra," then tilted his head at Mom.

Donner nodded his understanding.

*Watch them.*

Micah didn't knock, and he was glad the bedroom door wasn't locked. Ezra stood by the far wall, gazing out the window. Micah had never looked, but he didn't imagine Ezra had a better view than he did. He closed the door to give them privacy, then approached.

"If it helps, I'm not sure how I feel, either," Micah said.

"I feel too many fucking things." Ezra turned his head, both cheeks streaked with tears, but a new kind of anger lit his eyes. "How can I hate her for abandoning me and still want her to hug me? How can I be happy Bree gets to have her grandmother in her life, and also want to scream at Mom and demand she get the hell out of my place?"

"Because you're a complex human being capable of feeling more than one emotion at a time. The whole thing is a mess, and I won't blame you if you don't want her back in your life. I mean it. As painful as it was to be sent away, they never disowned me like they did you. Hell, Mom is probably the reason my cell phone service wasn't canceled before I could afford my own plan. I'm not sure if my relationship with her will ever really heal, but I do want her to be part of Bree's life. She's got an amazing bunch of uncles to love her, but another woman in her life is important, too."

"Yeah." His chin trembled. "She left him for you, but not for me."

"Ezra."

His big brother crumpled then, and Micah caught him. Helped him sit, then hugged him tight while Ezra cried. He sobbed out so many things, and Micah did his very best to keep him grounded while he fell apart. Deep-down pain over deep-down wounds that had probably never properly healed. Micah cried for Ezra's pain, too, as much as for his own.

"I've got you, I love you," Micah whispered, over and over, because it was true. No matter what choice Ezra made about their mother, Micah would support him. Period.

He didn't know how long they sat there after Ezra quieted, silently supporting each other, before Donner opened the door.

He had Bree. "Jean left her cell phone number on the counter. We both figured you two needed some space."

“Thanks,” Micah replied. “Wanna trade?”

Micah helped Ezra stand, then swapped him over to Donner so he could hug Bree. Donner sat on the bed with Ezra and started whispering in his ear. Micah decided to give them some privacy and headed for the door.

“Micah?” Ezra said in a raspy, wrecked voice.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You can snot all over me anytime.”

Ezra choke-laughed. “Brat. And I love you, too.”

Micah winked, then closed the door behind him. He was a little sad Mom had left without saying goodbye, but he had her number. He’d call later, set up a time for her to visit Bree again. And if Ezra decided he didn’t want Mom around him, Micah would go to her hotel, or meet her at a restaurant. Anything to keep Ezra from feeling uncomfortable.

His cell phone rang, and Micah traced the sound back to his bedroom. Work line.

*Oh shit.*

He was ten minutes late, and he nearly dropped the damned phone trying to answer it one-handed, while also supporting Bree. “This is Micah, and I am so sorry.”

“Hey, it’s April. Everything okay? You’ve never been late before.”

“I know, and I didn’t mean to be. We had a, uh...Ezra had a minor emergency this morning, and I completely lost track of time.”

“Is he okay? Do you need to take the day off?”

He could hear David’s voice in the background and imagined April flapping a hand to shush him. “Um, not the whole day, but can I take the morning off? Come in at noon? I’ll bring sandwiches.”

“Noon is fine. And whatever’s going on, I hope Ezra is okay.”

“He will be. Thank you. See you at lunch.” Micah dropped his phone on the bed, then kissed Bree’s cheek. “I have the best bosses.”

David called thirty minutes later. Donner and Ezra were still in their room, and Micah had fixed himself a bowl of cereal for breakfast, which he was eating at the counter. “Hey, you,” Micah said.

“Are you okay?” David asked.

“I think so. It’s been a weird morning. Our mother showed up and said she left our dad.”

Silence. “Are you serious?”

“Yup.” Micah detailed everything from being woken up by Donner to April calling.

“Do you need me to come over?”

Micah smiled at his cereal. “No, I’m actually doing okay with this. I’m more worried about Ezra. He’s hurting so much, and I feel like it’s partially my fault.”

“How is it your fault, sunshine?”

“Because when Ezra lost his shit, he said ‘she left him for you, but not for me,’ and I know you don’t know Ezra’s whole history with our parents, because I don’t really talk about it, but almost four years ago, they disowned him for being gay. And for loving Donner.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. Our mom went along with it, but I guess when our dad turned on me and Bree, that was her breaking point, and it hurts Ezra to know she couldn’t leave Dad for Ez, but she left him for us. And I don’t blame him for being angry with me about this.”

“Micah, I don’t know Ezra well, but I doubt he’s angry at you. Maybe at his parents and at

the situation, but not at you, specifically. How your parents reacted to all of this, from Ezra to Bree, is on them not you. Ezra can't hold you responsible."

Well, yeah, he could but Micah believed David when he said Ezra wasn't actually angry with him. It was a weird, confusing situation for everyone, and Ezra had to work through his emotions. Decide what he wanted, even if it was to shut their mother out of his life. That would be his choice and his alone.

"I just wish I knew what to do," Micah said. "Ez is so upset."

"Let him be upset. Let him do what he needs to do to figure this out, and you take care of you. What do you want, sunshine?"

"I want Bree to know her grandmother. And as mad as I am at my mom, I want her in my life. She's my mom, you know?" Micah pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off tears. "And I can't say it to Ezra, but I'm proud of her for finally standing up to our dad. For choosing her kids over him. And over money. I have no idea how that all shook out, but Mom didn't seem scared or worried about her finances, so I guess they figured it out."

"Don't be ashamed of wanting your mom in your life. I don't call my own as often as I should, and if you think Bree's life will be better for knowing her grandmother, let them know each other. Ezra has to choose his own path, separate from yours."

"I just don't want him to hate me."

David huffed. "Do you really think that will happen?"

Micah glanced at the closed bedroom door. "No. I want to make this better for him somehow, and I can't. He's been so amazing since I showed up on his doorstep, and I feel like I'm failing him."

"You aren't. Be there for him, Micah. Love him. Support him. But live your own life, too, and make your own decisions."

"Thanks." Micah was forever grateful to have David in his corner, offering good advice. "I'm sorry I flaked on work."

"We both understand, don't worry about it. It sounds as if something really good happened to you today."

"I hope so."

"Me too. Go be with your brother. I'll see you in a few hours."

"Okay, bye." *I love you.*

Micah felt the words, but now wasn't the time to say them. They needed to be said in person, not over the phone during an emotionally stressful time. And this wasn't a reaction to stress. Micah truly was in love.

*Will Mom be able to accept that I love a man, too?*

He'd never know if he didn't speak to her.

Donner and Ezra were still in their room, and Bree seemed content in the playpen, so Micah punched Mom's number into his phone. He went into his bedroom to place the call.

"This is Jean," she said.

"Mom, it's Micah."

"Hi, baby. I'm so happy to hear your voice. How's Ezra doing? He was so upset by my arrival, and I hate that he's hurting again because of me."

"Ezra isn't okay, and I honestly don't know what he'll want going forward. But I know what I want, I just have to tell you something first."

"Okay."

He stared at the sailboat artwork on the wall. "I'm bisexual, and I'm discussing moving in

with the man I'm in love with."

Nothing for several long seconds. "You haven't been in Wilmington for more than three months, and you're already in love? That seems fast."

Micah swayed. She hadn't said a thing about him being bi or in love with a man, only that it was too soon? "Uh, it's a little fast, I guess, but he makes me happy, and he treats Bree like a queen. Mom...I think you'll like him. Will you give him a chance?"

"Of course, I will. I was a different woman ten years ago when all that happened with Ezra, and I regret it. Every single day, I regret forcing him into therapy, and I regret losing my son. Your father and I had so many fights we hid from you, and him sending you and that precious angel away? I couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't lose both my sons and my granddaughter, and I am so beyond blessed that you are giving me a second chance."

He wiped a tear from his cheek. "Ezra thinks you chose me over him."

"God no, it's nothing like that, but I understand why he thinks so. It's the timing of everything." Mom let out a rough sob. "I hope he gives me a chance to redeem myself, and it means everything that you want me in your daughter's life. Goodness, I still can't believe my youngest boy is a father."

"Me too sometimes, and I've been a dad for months. But I wouldn't trade Bree for the world, and I'm glad she'll be able to know you. I mean that, Mom. No matter what Ezra decides, you will be Bree's grandmother."

She was semi-silent for several moments, broken only by silent gasps, and Micah kind of wished he could be there to hug her. "I guess I should choose a grandmother name, right?"

"Anything you want. She can't talk yet, so she has plenty of time to learn it."

Mom laughed. "True. I've always been partial to Nana."

"Nana Jean. I like it." Nana was an easy enough word for Bree to pick up, and he couldn't wait until she started talking and finally said Dada. "Do you know where you're staying yet?"

"Yes, I have a room at a local hotel. I can text you the address, if you like."

"That would be great. Until I know what Ezra wants, you probably shouldn't come over again."

"I understand, baby. I've hurt your brother so badly, and I can't ever make up for it, but I'll try if he lets me. Thank you for giving me a chance."

"It's more for Bree than for me, Mom. But you're welcome. And I'd like to get together again this week. I should actually be at work now, so maybe one night for dinner?"

"I would love that. There's a restaurant here at the hotel, or we can go to a place you like. Whatever you want."

Her accommodating attitude reminded Micah of the doting mother of his childhood—the mother who'd disappeared when he was ten and every facet of their family changed. "I'll call you soon, okay? We'll figure dinner out."

"That sounds great. I love you, Micah."

"Me too."

He hung up and left his room. Ezra was on the couch closest to the kitchen with Bree in his lap. Even from a distance, his eyes were puffy, his skin pale. But he was smiling at his niece, and that gave Micah hope. Donner pattered around in the kitchen, and the scent of coffee hit him. Micah sat next to Ezra, uncertain what to say.

Donner brought them both mugs of coffee, but Ezra wouldn't put Bree down to drink his. "Aren't you late for work?" Donner asked.

"I don't have to go in until noon," Micah replied. "I have a little time. Thanks for the coffee."

Do you work tonight? I can't remember."

"I go in at four."

"I can handle watching Bree, you guys," Ezra snapped. "We already pre-planned me watching her today, and I'm not going to crumble again, I just needed to get all that out, okay?"

Micah squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay to crumble sometimes. That's why we're here. To put you back together again."

"Like Humpty Dumpty?"

"Exactly, you cracked egg."

Ezra blew a raspberry at him, which made Bree squeal, so he did it again. "I honestly don't know what I want, Micah, but Bree deserves to know her grandmother."

Gratitude squeezed his heart. "Thank you. I think so too. It took a lot of courage for Mom to leave, and even if all she gets is to love Bree and occasionally talk to me, I think she'll be happy. I know she'll be happiest if she gets us both back, but only if that makes you happy, too, Ez. I will one-hundred-percent support whatever you want. Take all the time you need to decide what that is."

Ezra rested his head on Micah's shoulder. "When did you get so wise?"

"You're a good influence on me, I guess."

"You two should seriously dress up as identical twins for Halloween," Donner said apropos of nothing. "I've never seen you just sit together like that, and other than the slight height difference, you really do look alike."

David's weeks-old comment about flirting with Ezra popped into his head unbidden, and Micah shoved it away, not interested.

Ezra snorted. "We'd turn a lot of heads at Pot O Gold, that's for sure."

"We already do," Micah said. "You're hot and you know it."

"Trust me," Donner added, "he knows it."

This time, Ezra blew a raspberry at Donner, and Bree squealed again. "Like I said, I'm okay. I just need to sit on things for a while before I make a decision about Mom."

"No pressure," Micah said. "I've gotta get ready for work."

Part of him hated leaving Ezra, but Donner was here for a few more hours, and being around Bree always seemed to cheer Ezra up. Maybe time alone with his partner and niece would soothe some of the hurt their mother's wound had caused.

As promised, Micah brought sandwiches from a nearby deli they all liked, and after assuring them he and Ezra were both fine, they ate at their desks. David tossed him concerned looks all afternoon, which Micah tried to ignore while he got his work done. April left the office for the day first, which was becoming a bit of a habit, and David immediately asked, "How are you guys really?"

Micah shrugged and closed his day planner. "I'm really okay. Ezra needs time. Like I said on the phone, they disowned him four years ago, and the financial payoff included a restraining order."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. Being told you can't be in the same room as your own parents is a gut-punch, and it's not easy to get over. And as pissed as I was at them for doing it, at the time I was also a little pissed at Ezra for signing the agreement. Now I completely understand why he did, and I'd understand if he doesn't give our mother a second chance. It has to be his call. Again, he has to do what's best for him in the long run."

"And what's best for you?"

“Right now? Giving her a chance to know Bree. If Mom and I create a new relationship, so be it. But she needs to know all of me to do that. I already told her about us dating and moving in together, but I kind of left out the boss/employee part.”

“For some, that’s a bigger deal than an age gap.”

“Kinda didn’t mention that, either, and I want to. I want her to know you. Will you come to dinner with us this week?”

David blinked at him several times. “Really?”

“Really. I don’t know how much of her bigotry was a reflection of her husband’s and how much of it was hers. And if she can’t accept you and me, all parts of you and me, then I may have to rethink my decision about having her in our lives. You and Bree come first for me.”

“You can’t put me above a relationship with your mother.”

“Actually, I can. I gained that right when she didn’t stop my dad from kicking me and an infant out of the house in the dead of winter. Yes, she’s trying to make up for it now, but that doesn’t change what she was complicit in.” Micah stood and approached David’s desk. “I created a life here that I love, and I found a man I treasure, and that’s more important to me right now.”

David’s eyes shined with joy and love. “I accept that, and I’d love to join you for dinner. I have a business engagement tomorrow, but how about Thursday evening?”

“Works for me. I’ll call Mom and finalize the details.”

“Perfect. Do you, ah, want to spend some time together tonight?”

“Normally, I would, but I kind of want to see how Ezra’s doing.”

“Completely understandable given the circumstances. Walk out with me?”

“Of course.”

Part of the routine of keeping their relationship out of work was leaving together, and then spending a few minutes making out in the parking garage. A small sip to satisfy them, especially if they didn’t have evening plans. And as much as Micah would love some naked cuddling time with David, his brother needed him more.

Sometimes being a responsible adult sucked.

At home, Bree was in the playpen while Ezra cooked. Micah gave his brother a hug just because, before getting his girl. Ezra was subdued, but not depressed and later, after Bree was down, they played a street racing game. They did things brothers and friends did, and it was kind of perfect.

Kind of.

He just wanted Ezra to smile and mean it. Just once.

But it didn’t happen that night, or for several more after.

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## Chapter 16

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Over the phone, Mom sounded eager to meet David, but actions spoke louder than words, and they agreed to meet at her hotel's restaurant for dinner. It was neutral enough, and the menu wasn't too expensive. Micah met David in the lobby, so they could approach the restaurant together. They shared a brief kiss, and David even had one for Bree, who was squirming in Micah's arms. The instant Micah passed her to David, she settled.

*Seven months. How is she nearly seven months old?*

It didn't seem possible.

Then again, she'd begun teething and that wasn't fun for anyone in the apartment or Monique's home.

Micah gave the hostess his mother's name, and they were led to a table where Mom waited with a martini in front of her. Her favorite drink during parties, or when she was nervous. Micah wouldn't mind a beer or two, but he had to drive home at some point, and he needed to keep a clear head for whatever happened.

"Hi, baby," Mom said. She stood to greet them. Micah allowed a brief hug, and David shifted Bree to shake her hand. "That dress is adorable."

"Ezra bought it," Micah said without thinking. "He's her personal stylist."

"I love it. You must be Micah's boyfriend."

"Yes, ma'am," David replied. "Davidson Milano, but everyone calls me David. It's very nice to meet you."

"Jean Kelley, and likewise."

They all sat. It was a four-top table, so Micah ended up on one side with a highchair for Bree, and David opposite him, next to Mom. The waiter came for a drink order, and Micah resisted that beer, ordering a Sprite instead. Bree sat in the chair, perfectly content with a handful of yogurt puffs, and she'd captured Mom's attention.

"She's grown since I last saw her," Mom said.

"It's been three months," Micah replied with no real venom in his voice. Just stating a fact.

"I know, and I'll always regret missing so much time with her. Do we, ah, want to split an appetizer?"

They perused the menu for a few minutes, deciding on an app, and even discussing some of the entrée choices. It wasn't a fancy restaurant, but they had a decent selection of food, and since no one had mentioned who was paying for what, Micah chose a simple steak salad for his meal.

Once all the food had been ordered, Mom said, "So David, tell me more about yourself. What do you do?"

David glanced briefly Micah's way, and Micah nodded. "I co-own a small firm that does urban planning for low-cost and low-income projects in the area." He spoke for a few minutes about the company and some of their current clients. "And Micah is an absolute joy to have in the office. He keeps April and I organized and on our toes."

Micah's stomach tightened, and David's face went blank as he realized what he'd let slip.

"You and Micah work together?" Mom asked.

"I'm his and April's assistant," Micah replied, shoulders straight, not an ounce of shame over dating his boss.

"I see." She gave David a shrewd look. "So did you begin dating my son before or after you hired him?"

"Technically, after we hired him," David said slowly. "However, we met in a club the night before his interview, and neither of us realized who the other man was until the following day. Micah was qualified for the job and immediately available to train, so I had no good reason not to hire him."

"Other than you're attracted to him? Isn't that an abuse of power?"

"I was never coerced into anything, Mom," Micah said, annoyed at her implication, but also not surprised by it. "We had chemistry, we connected, and we both wanted to continue the relationship. His business partner knows, and we keep it out of the office. David has been a model boyfriend, and Bree adores him. We aren't doing anything wrong."

Mom turned a fierce look on him. "How much older is he than you?"

"Fourteen years. And?"

"I'm simply trying to understand, Micah. You've never shown any interest in men before now, and in the last three months, you're not only going to move in with one, but you work for him and are dating him? Someone fourteen years older with his own business?"

Micah huffed. "I don't care about the age gap, and neither does David. And I've always been bi, Mom, I was just too scared to act on it or tell anyone. Ezra was the first person I care about who I told I'm bi, and that was after you and Dad kicked me out. I am with David because I'm attracted to him, I like spending time with him, and he makes me happy. Isn't that what's important? That I'm happy with someone who loves my daughter?"

Mom blinked hard several times, her eyes a bit damp. "I suppose it is. It's all a bit unusual, and you don't sound like the boy I remember."

"I'm a man now, Mom. The moment I took custody of Bree, I grew up. Everything I've done since December has been for her. David is for both of us. He wants us, and I want him, and if you're going to be in our lives, you need to understand and accept those things. I'm making the best possible choices for myself and my daughter."

"I can understand that, but I'm still your mother, and I will always have concerns and questions. I'll never stop wanting to protect you. You're only twenty-one. Still figuring out your life. But you are also an adult, and I respect your decisions. I may not agree with them, but I respect them."

Micah tried not to bristle. "What don't you agree with? That he's a man?"

"No, I'm glad you found someone who loves you and makes you happy. I have concerns over his age and your work dynamic."

"Mrs. Kelley," David said, "I completely understand your concerns, and I'd be lying if I didn't say I've had similar ones over our age difference. But at the end of the day age is a number, and I love your son. He is so strong and so sweet. Generous. Funny. I'm blessed that he chose to love me back. Meeting him and Bree was the best thing that's happened to me in a long,

long time.”

Mom turned her wet gaze to David. “Thank you for saying that. We’re in such an odd position that honesty is the only thing that will help us find our way. I spent half my life suppressing who I was, because I was taught to submit to my husband. I lost one son because I couldn’t defy my husband, but I cannot lose the rest of my family. Keep loving my son, and we won’t have a problem, you and I.”

Micah’s heart nearly beat out of his chest when Mom and David hugged. It sealed a silent promise between them, and he couldn’t be prouder. They’d come to an understanding, and it gave Micah hope that things between them would work out all right in the end.

The only real question remaining was what would happen between Mom and Ezra. But that wasn’t Micah’s question to answer. Only Ezra could make that choice.

DAVID WAS a nervous wreck waiting for Micah to arrive for their customary Friday night date. Thankfully, he’d had a lot of meetings and on-site inspections at work that day, so he hadn’t spent too much time anticipating their date and lusting after his boyfriend.

Dinner with Jean Kelley had gone ten times better than David expected. From the stories Micah told him about Ezra being disowned and Micah getting kicked out, he’d expected a much harder fight to win the woman over. But she seemed to genuinely want a relationship with her son, and he never once doubted her intentions. Her protectiveness, especially regarding their age difference, was endearing as hell, and he saw a little bit of her in Micah.

He also didn’t know Jean the same way Micah did, and he really wanted to talk. To make sure he’d made the good impression he suspected he had.

Micah knocked at seven-thirty, and David opened the door with beers in hand. It was their tradition, and after a long kiss, Micah gulped from his drink.

“You okay?” David asked.

“Yeah, just ready to unwind.” Micah tossed his sweater onto the nearest chair, no longer formal with his coats or sweatshirts. “It’s been a fucking stressful week.”

“I can’t imagine.” He closed the door and led Micah to the couch, so they could sit and cuddle up close. “How are you feeling?”

“Mostly, I’m tired. And not just because I have a teething infant and an emotionally fragile brother for a roommate.”

“How is Ezra?”

“Getting some much-needed alone time with his boyfriend. Bree is staying over with Donner’s sister tonight, and Donner took off Street Feed, so he and Ezra could have the apartment to themselves for the night.”

“The night?”

Micah gazed up at him with those big blue eyes that slayed him every time. “All night.”

“I like that plan. Tell me what you need, sunshine.”

“I just...don’t want to think for a while.”

David nuzzled his neck. “I can help with that, you know.”

“I do. Sir.”

The single, three-letter word wriggled down David’s spine and settled in his balls. He put their beers aside and drew Micah to him so they could kiss. Micah had a perfectly kissable mouth, and David could have stayed on the couch like that for hours, but Micah needed more

from him tonight. David could help him not think, only react, and to trust he'd be taken care of all night long.

"Bedroom," David said. "Take only your shirt off."

Micah sprang into action. David followed more slowly, making silent plans for what he wanted to do to Micah's body, while maximizing pleasure delivery. Definitely cuffs again. Micah loved those, especially while David tortured his nipples. That desperate inability to make it stop, while also never wanting it to end.

He leaned in the doorway. Micah stood near the bed, his long, pale torso on display, arms resting loosely by his sides. But his cheeks were flushed with anticipation, and David couldn't wait to see more redness all over his body. "Undress me," David said.

"Yes, sir."

Micah did, one slow layer at a time, until David wore only his boxers. Tented boxers, because David really got off on someone else undressing him, and Micah seemed to love it. He attacked the task like a man slowly unwrapping a birthday present and trying to delay the joy of the moment he saw what was beneath the paper. Then Micah reached for his boxers and knelt to help David out of them one foot at a time, leaving David completely naked. On display. Micah gazed up through a fan of pale eyelashes, waiting for the next command.

He was in the perfect position to suck David, but this was about Micah. David cupped Micah's left cheek in one palm. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life," Micah replied.

David brushed his thumb over Micah's bottom lip. "Then up on the bed, on your stomach."

"Yes, sir."

AROUSAL SIZZLED in Micah's veins as he stood, his entire body reacting to the commanding tone of David's voice. Tonight was exactly what he needed. To give control over to David, to react and experience, and not to think for a few hours. He pushed all his fears, concerns, and confusion away, and he got up on the bed. Stretched out on his stomach, with both hands folded under his head.

David moved to the side table and opened a drawer. Micah had peeked inside once, and he'd been impressed by the assortment of toys and fetish gear, and while some of it terrified him, Micah wasn't opposed to trying new things down the road.

"Lift your head up," David said.

Micah did, and his stomach clenched when David put a leather blindfold on him. They'd never done this before, and it both excited and unnerved Micah. He remembered yellow and red for safety words, but deep down, Micah didn't imagine he'd have to use them. The blindfold was snug and allowed no light through, so Micah closed his eyes and gave in to the darkness.

Next, David cuffed his hands to the headboard with those familiar, padded restraints, while also kneeling over Micah's body. David scooted backward, until he was sitting on the backs of Micah's thighs. A bottle cap squirted, followed by a soft floral fragrance that was not lube.

Warm hands rubbed both shoulders in a soothing motion, digging into the muscle a bit, smoothed along by that scented oil.

*He's giving me a massage.*

Micah had never been given a real massage before, with oil and everything, and under David's gentle ministrations, tension began unfurling from Micah's body. David dug at a few knots and it bordered on painful but a good, relaxing sort of pain. All over his back and ribs, up

and down his bound arms, those determined fingers touched skin and muscle, nails occasionally scraping, until he reached Micah's jeans and belt.

"Lift your hips for me," David said. "That's good." He undid Micah's belt and fly, and then Micah was naked, too.

He kind of wanted David to spank him again, because he loved the way his cheeks burned afterward, but this was David's show. David continued the massage, digging into the taut muscles of his narrow ass, then down to where butt met upper thigh. Down his left leg to his feet, where David first massaged his heel and insole, then gently popped each individual toe joint. Then from the top of his right leg to his toes, leaving Micah a pile of jelly.

"Let's roll you over."

Micah wasn't sure he could move, much less roll, but David helped settle him on his back, and the beautiful genius started the massage all over again. Neck to nipples. Pecs to navel. He rubbed around Micah's erection, across his lower belly, even his inner thighs, but avoided his actual dick and balls. Micah didn't know how he could be so relaxed and so turned-on at the same time. The fronts of his legs got the same attention as the backs, leaving Micah so boneless he didn't think he'd ever move again. And the heightened sensation of the blindfold?

Mind. Blown.

David removed the blindfold, un-cuffed him, then manhandled Micah's limp body beneath the covers. "I'll be right back," he said and left the bedroom.

Micah luxuriated in being so well taken care of by his boyfriend. As much as he wanted to come, he could stay suspended in this joyous moment for the rest of his life. Eventually, David returned, and he helped Micah sip from a bottle of water. "Massages release a lot of body toxins, so you have to stay hydrated."

Micah made an agreeable sound and drank what David offered.

"You might be a little sore in the shoulders tomorrow," David continued. "You had some hard knots up there."

"Mmm."

"You look ready for a nap."

"Am."

"Then let's sleep for a while."

Micah couldn't find the energy to argue. David slid beneath the covers, curled his warm, furry body around Micah's, and Micah relaxed in his arms, more content now than he'd ever been in his life. This was his new favorite memory with David, and it nothing to do with sex. Nothing really to do with the roles they liked to play in bed. It was about taking care of each other, as partners should.

*Partners. I like the sound of that.*

He fell asleep and woke a while later in the near-dark. Instead of being covered by David's big body, David's side was pressed against his back. Micah squirmed around. David was awake and sitting up against the headboard reading. He grinned down at Micah. "I couldn't sleep."

"Should have woken me up." Micah kissed David's arm. "Time is it?"

"It's a little after eleven, and you needed that nap. You didn't move a muscle the whole time."

Micah stretched, a bit more energy in his body now that he'd rested, and he still had a semi in need of attention. "Can we have sex now?"

David chuckled. "I love how blunt you can be, especially when you're well rested."

"Is that a yes?" Micah reached out to rub his palm over David's lower belly. "Maybe with the

blindfold?”

“It does heighten sensation, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yeah.” Determined and eager, Micah plucked the book from David’s hands, dropped it onto the far side of the bed, and then swung one leg up and straddled his lap. “Hi.”

“Hello.” David squeezed his hips, and the dick beneath Micah’s ass took notice of his proximity. “Someone is getting a bit cocky in bed. Do I need to cuff you?”

“Yes, please.”

David nipped at his chin. “Then assume the position, sunshine.”

Micah jolted into motion and, not soon enough, the leather blindfold stole his sight, and then those soft cuffs stole his freedom. The bed bounced a bit as David climbed off, but instead of the soft squeal of the bedside drawer opening, the apartment floor creaked as he moved around. Curious and eager, Micah resisted the urge to squirm. To hump his erection against the mattress for a little friction.

Long minutes passed.

“David?”

Silence. His nerves buzzed but he wasn’t scared. David hadn’t left the apartment, he was certain of that. He was dragging this out, making Micah jumpy not knowing what might happen next, especially with his sight gone. All he could do was listen. The faintest whiff of cherry made it over the lingering floral scent of the massage oil he hadn’t washed off yet.

Sugary cherry, like lip balm or candy.

The floor creaked nearby, and with it came a stronger scent of cherry and of David’s aftershave. Something touched the small of his back, and it took Micah’s brain a split-second to understand it was freezing cold. He yelped and kicked, and the cold thing lifted away.

“What the—?”

“Should’ve tied your legs down,” David said with a chuckle. “You’ve got long legs.”

“What did you do?”

Ice dragged from the small of his back, straight up his spine to his neck, and Micah yelped again. Goose bumps prickled along his shoulders, and he tugged once at the cuffs, unsure how he felt about this. Then David warmed him back up by licking along the cold trail he’d left behind. The ice and scent reminded Micah of...

“Is that a popsicle?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Dude, that’s evil.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” Micah was enjoying the cold play too much to stop. “Don’t wanna waste the popsicle.”

David let out a soft, growly sound, and he spent the next couple of minutes driving Micah insane by rubbing the cold popsicle against his skin, and then licking up the melted syrup. He had Micah turn over, so he could do the same with his belly and nipples. A popsicle in his navel made Micah laugh and his dick even harder. It went on and on, cold and skin, then tongue over cold. His erection lay flat against his belly, hot and ready to come, but David was studiously avoiding his crotch.

*If he goes back to my nipples, I can probably come.*

David proved how devilish he was by running the popsicle up the length of his cock, and Micah shouted at the foreign sensation. He’d jumped into cold pools and the cold ocean, but never while hard. This was completely different in a holy-fucking-yes kind of way.

“Like that?” David asked.

“Fuck yeah, yes, sir.”

“There’s only a little bit left.”

Micah bucked when the cold hit his glans, and David kept it there. He thrashed, undone by the freezing liquid, and then David swallowed down his whole length. Micah shouted as he came, so turned on and upside down, he didn’t know how to do anything else. His body took over, pumping come down David’s throat, while he trembled and shook from the force of the sudden orgasm.

David licked and sucked on his softening cock until Micah pleaded for him to stop, it was too much. Micah drifted on wave after wave of joy and contentment. Long after David removed the blindfold and cuffs. Long after David licked him open, lubed him up, and then fucked him on slow, sensual thrusts in and out of his body. It almost became too much sensation, too much pleasure, and yet still not enough.

After David found his own release, they lay together for a long time, limbs tangled, sometimes kissing, often just existing in this one perfect moment.

Micah had found his person. Maybe his entire life had upended in December, but he’d landed on steady feet, and with April showers looming tomorrow, everything finally made sense. David was his future. One day Micah would find another job, but the one constant he saw for a long time to come was David. And Bree. Ezra and Donner, and all their extended friends and family. Maybe even his mom.

He’d come to Wilmington to find hope, and now he had it in spades. Micah nuzzled at David’s throat, then said, “I love you.”

David threaded his fingers through Micah’s hair. “I love you, too, sunshine. So very much.”

“Good.” With a joyous peel of laughter, Micah kissed his boyfriend. Many things in his life were still uncertain, but not this. Not them. Not the little family that was Micah and David, and Bree makes three.

They’d fought for and won their happy ending, and Micah couldn’t wait to see what came next.

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## Epilogue

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Two Months Later

"DO YOU, Ronald Andrew Myers, take this man, Brendan William Walker, to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

The question brought happy tears to Micah's eyes, as did the rest of the minister's words as Romy and Brendan recited their vows and made solemn promises to have and to hold, for richer or poorer. The pair stood in front of the service counter at Half-Dozen, the long space filled with family and friends seated in rows of rented folding chairs festooned with white flowers and streamers.

Ezra had thrown himself into being Romy's Best Person these past few weeks, excited to have the wedding and reception right there at the café they both loved and worked in. And the party planning had kept Ezra distracted from his tenuous relationship with their mother. He spoke to her on the phone once a week, but they'd yet to truly reconcile. Micah hoped it happened, but he also supported Ezra's choice to take baby steps with her.

In his lap, Bree squirmed but didn't really fuss. He almost got a sitter for her, but Romy insisted she was welcome. Bree reached for David, so Micah handed her over to his partner. David winked as he accepted her little body onto his lap. Not only was today for celebrating Romy and Brendan's wedding, it was the first night David and Micah would spend together in their new apartment.

An apartment they'd signed for last week and had slowly begun to fill with their things, including new furniture they picked out together. Bree had her own room, which would be weird for Micah after spending the last five months sharing a bedroom with her crib, but it was time. Time for separate rooms, time to give Ezra his guest room back, time to truly begin his life with David, just as Romy and Brendan began theirs as husbands.

"If anyone has reason why these two should not be wed," the minister said, "please speak now, or forever hold your peace."

Behind a broadly-grinning Romy, Ezra glared at the crowd. A few people tittered. Donner stood beside Brendan, and he kept his gaze forward, on the happy couple about to become spouses. The quartet of best friends was beyond mismatched, and also completely perfect for each other.

"You go on and marry my boy," Brendan's mother said, and several folks laughed.

The minister smiled and nodded. “Then by the power vested in me by the State of Delaware, I now pronounce you husbands. You may kiss your spouse.”

Brendan lifted Romy right off his feet with both arms and kissed him soundly to the cheers and whoops of their guests. Micah wolf-whistled, so happy for his new friends, and even happier for the joy it seemed to bring Ezra. In the row ahead of Micah, Jaime, his sister Shannon, and Alessandro clapped loudly. Brendan’s family took up the right side of the café, and a dozen other people whose names Micah couldn’t remember filled in the rest of the audience.

The one thread between all the faces in Half-Dozen that day was their connection to Romy or Brendan. Micah was still learning all the stories and who met who first and how. Deciphering the complex relationships between all the different couples who smiled, clapped, and supported the newlyweds.

Instead of more traditional wedding music, club music began to play, and since the café had no real aisle for Brendan and Romy to walk down, they began interacting with their now-standing guests, laughing, hugging, and shaking hands. The ceremony was non-traditional, and the pair seemed beyond happy by the entire production. Micah and David hung back, giving the people closer to the married couple priority to congratulate them.

“You have got to be Ezra’s brother,” a soft voice said.

Micah turned. In the row behind his, a boy his age with shaggy brown hair stood next to a much-taller, red-headed man. He traced the comment to the shorter of the pair. “I am. Micah Kelley.”

“Hi, I’m Will Madden,” the shorter man said. He tilted his head at the red-head. “This is my boyfriend Taz Zachary.”

Micah introduced David, and they all shook hands. “How do you guys know Romy?”

“Happy accident,” Will replied. “I met Romy here at the café, and then we were there when Brendan proposed, and it’s so awesome to be here for the wedding. You obviously know them because of Ezra.”

“Guilty.”

“Is this your daughter?” Taz asked. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is, and thank you. She’s growing like a weed. I swear we buy new clothes every other week.”

“I bet.”

“Well, we won’t keep you,” Will said. “It was nice to meet you guys.”

“Same here,” David replied with a proud grin. Micah loved that they hadn’t asked who specifically was Bree’s father, only commented that she was beautiful. Maybe she had Micah’s DNA, but David was an amazing dad to their little girl, and on the day they chose to take the same steps as Romy and Brendan, Micah hoped to make David’s role in her life official.

Something he hadn’t shared with David yet.

*Soon.*

Micah had grown up attending parties hosted by his parents, so he knew how to work a crowd and mingle, and he did just that as the ceremony eased right into the reception. Finger foods came out from the kitchen, and a drink station had been set up on the counter that lined one wall. He and David took turns eating and holding Bree, but after a while, greedy hands wanted to hold the adorable bundle of joy. Micah tracked her whereabouts while relaxing into casual conversations.

All of Brendan’s nieces and nephews were there, and they’d set up a table of coloring books and simple crafts to keep the youngest kids occupied. Micah found himself frequently drawn to

their laughter and innocence, and then his thoughts drifted to Bree. He'd imagine her older, surrounded by friends and cousins, growing into a beautiful young woman with hopes and dreams of her own.

Children truly were magical, and Bree had brought her own brand of magic into his life six months ago. She'd given him back his brother, and she'd helped Micah find a vast assortment of friends here in Wilmington. He had a relationship with his mom again, which he treasured. Ezra was slowly building a new relationship with her, but it would take time.

Micah tracked Bree's laughter to the other side of the café. Ezra had her up on his shoulders, and she seemed to love being on top of the world. He was talking to an Hispanic couple... Anthony and Marc. Yes, Anthony worked on the café's food truck. They'd met the couple a few weeks ago at a party celebrating Anthony's twenty-fifth birthday. He and Marc were childhood friends turned lovers. Marc's best friend Tate and Tate's boyfriend Jonas—same Jonas from Street Feed—had also been at the party, and Micah spotted them chatting with an older couple near the drink station.

So many smiles, so much laughter. So many happy people sharing a small space, celebrating the forever union of a beautiful pair of men. A rag-tag family of men and women, adults and children, all here to support Romy and Brendan, and to support each other.

David wrapped his arms around Micah's waist from behind and pulled him against his chest. "What are you thinking about so hard?" David asked.

"Musing on where we are and why." Micah turned so he could drape his own arms around David's hips. "Thinking about how much my life has changed in the last six months and how happy I am that it did."

"I don't suppose I have anything to do with how happy you are?"

"You know you do. You welcomed me and my daughter into your life, and you've helped me get to know my own desires and kinks better. I've never felt judged by you, and I can't say that about a lot of people. Thank you for being you, Davidson Andrew Milano."

"You are an easy person to love, Micah Ezekial Kelley. I cannot wait to spend our first night together in our new place."

"Same." Micah followed the sound of Bree's laughter again, this time to her new perch on Brendan's broad shoulders. "But we may have to fight to get our daughter back."

David's eyes gleamed. "Our daughter."

"Yup. We're not perfect people, but we make each other better, and you're a great dad to Bree. I want us to share responsibility, and I'll probably screw up, get mad, and pull the DNA card, but this is me asking you officially to co-parent. Partners."

"Partners." David kissed him softly on the mouth. "I love everything about that word. And I love you."

"I love you, too."

They kissed again, sealing those words as fact.

"Get a room, you two." Ezra appeared beside them with Bree in his arms. "Where's the diaper bag? She took a dump."

David laughed, then took Bree from him. "I got this." After another quick kiss, David worked his way toward the table where they'd left the diaper bag.

"You definitely have a keeper, bro," Ezra said as he slung his arm around Micah's shoulders. "Can't believe you're moving out."

"Admit it, you'll miss the nighttime crying and teething angst."

"Of course, I will. And I'll miss having you underfoot. But I'm glad you're spreading your

wings and flying on your own. That's all I ever wanted for you."

"And that's what I want for you." Micah spotted Donner and Brendan laughing with Monique and Kendra. "Has this wedding got you thinking of putting a ring on it?"

"You know, as much as I loved doing this for Romy, I wouldn't want the fuss. If I ever got married, I'd drag Donner down to city hall, sign stuff, swear stuff, and be done with it."

"Ezra Kelley doesn't want a fuss?" Micah feigned shock. "Who are you and where is my brother?"

"He grew up. Finally. However, if you and David ever decide to tie the knot, I am all over wedding planning for you."

"I bet." He leaned into Ezra and looped an arm around his waist. "None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for taking us in. Thank you for being awesome."

"You're welcome. Together, the Kelley brothers and their men can do anything we set our minds to."

"Damn straight."

Micah hugged Ezra and laughed, happy and content, and so hopeful for the future. A bright, beautiful future full of love and joy, and he couldn't wait to see what came next.

Right after the grooms cut the wedding cake.

TO BOTH NEW-TO-ME and long-time readers, I hope you enjoyed this story. I loved diving back into this world, and I was overjoyed to give longtime Brendan and Romy fans the wedding they deserve. If you aren't familiar with the other couples in these pages, you can find the beginning of their entire journey in NO SUCH THING (Belonging #1), available through Carina Press and all digital retailers.

For updates, info and the occasional freebie, sign up for my free newsletter: <https://vr2.verticalresponse.com/s/signupformynewsletter16492674416904>

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Fractured Hymns

## About the Author

A.M. Arthur was born and raised in the same kind of small town that she likes to write about, a stone's throw from both beach resorts and generational farmland. She's been creating stories in her head since she was a child and scribbling them down nearly as long, in a losing battle to make the fictional voices stop. She credits an early fascination with male friendships (bromance hadn't been coined yet back then) with her later discovery of and subsequent love affair with m/m romance stories. A.M. Arthur's work is available from Carina Press, Dreamspinner Press, SMP Swerve, and Briggs-King Books.

When not exorcising the voices in her head, she toils away in a retail job that tests her patience and gives her lots of story fodder. She can also be found in her kitchen, pretending she's an amateur chef and trying to not poison herself or others with her cuisine experiments.

Contact her at [am\\_arthur@yahoo.com](mailto:am_arthur@yahoo.com) with your cooking tips (or book comments). You can also find her online (<http://amarthur.blogspot.com/>), as well as on Twitter ([http://twitter.com/am\\_arthur](http://twitter.com/am_arthur)), Tumblr (<http://www.tumblr.com/blog/am-arthur>), and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/A.M.Arthur.M.A>).

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