

MEGAN LINDEN

Just Married #2



MARRIED

for now

MARRIED FOR NOW

JUST MARRIED
BOOK TWO

Megan Linden

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ABOUT THE BOOK

IT WAS TOO RISKY... AND YET.

Tommy Medina thought he'd left his past behind and managed to start over. He was a few months into his fellowship, he had his hands full in more ways than one, and he had a harmless crush on a hot surgeon. His life was good.

But then the news came about his invalid visa. Now, he was about to lose everything he'd worked so hard for.

He definitely didn't expect his crush to come to his rescue, that was for sure.

Brandon Sherwood couldn't truly tell why he was so determined to help Tommy out. Sure, he'd made a promise to himself once, but was he really going to risk it all now for a barely more than a stranger?

Apparently so.

At the first glance, they were total opposites, but as their married life progressed, it turned out they fit better than either of them could ever expect. If only everything else was so easy...

CHAPTER ONE

Tommy Medina should be at the Collins Foundation's winter holiday party right now, in a ballroom full of sharply dressed people, drinking champagne and eating too small portions of delicious food.

And yet, here he was, standing in front of his favorite place in Ruth's Children Hospital—the nursery for newborns with minimal or no complications. Normally, he would be holding one of the babies right now, letting them lull themselves back to sleep on his chest, but he needed to calm down first before he could help any of the little ones.

So he stood on the other side of the glass, just looking at them, repeating all the baby names in his head, over and over again.

Veronica, Isaac, Adele, Roy, Vikram, Kaitlin, Beatrice, David. Veronica, Isaac, Adele...

He was going to lose it all. The fellowship training in neonatology he'd barely started, his future, everything.

Veronica, Isaac...

Without his visa, he couldn't stay in the States. He would have to return to Mexico, a country he didn't even remember because he had been around two when his parents packed their things and moved. Tommy had nobody there, aside from a few cousins he'd never met. He had nothing.

He'd done everything right, he'd *tried* to do everything right, and it still wasn't enough.

Nothing he'd done was ever enough and Tommy was tired of it. Every step of the way was hard, harder than it should be, harder than the people around him had it. He'd hoped time and time again that the next step would be easier, but then, like clockwork, something always happened to remind him that no, *easy* was never in the cards for him. Struggle or give up, those were his choices.

Or there was no choice involved at all, like right now.

"Hello, love," a quiet voice came from behind him, and a second later Rebecca, the oldest nurse in the maternity ward, appeared at his side. "You decided to skip the party for much better company, I see."

Tommy had only been at Ruth's for a few months so far, so he'd never attended the Collins Foundation's party before, but from everything he'd heard, nobody here liked it. It was expected for at least some of them to make an appearance, though, and as the newest addition to the staff, Tommy had been picked to attend.

However, a part of him had been looking forward to it, once he'd learned who else drew the short straw. He'd even dry cleaned his suit before his last shift, so it would be ready for tonight.

But that was before.

Before this morning, before the summons to HR, before the news that changed everything. *No valid visa.*

"Tommy?"

He glanced at Rebecca before turning back to the babies. He couldn't stand another look of concern, of pity. He was

going to break under the weight of it all.

He cleared his throat.

“Like you said, the company’s much better here,” he said, unsure if she knew yet. If the news had already spread to the entire staff.

He knew it wouldn’t stay a secret for long, but he hoped for a little more time. If he was forced to leave, he didn’t want to say goodbye to each and every person he knew here. He was going to be a crying mess as it were.

But he also didn’t want to make it sound like he shunned the party just because.

“I had a hard day, and I couldn’t...” He paused, feeling his throat constrict. *Damn it. Get it together.* “I wouldn’t make a good impression. These guys here,” he went on, waving towards the window, “won’t complain too much.”

“If anything, they may complain you’re not in there.” Rebecca curled her arm around his waist and pulled him with her. “Come on, let’s get inside. David looks like he’s seconds away from waking up the whole crew.”

Tommy opened his mouth to protest, since he still didn’t think he would do any good, shaken as he was, but before he knew it, he was sitting in the armchair in the corner of the room, with bundled-up David lying on his chest and already blinking slowly.

“There you go,” Rebecca whispered with a soft smile. “Our superhero to the rescue.”

Tommy swallowed hard, keeping his gaze on the baby. People were so nice at Ruth’s, so ready to accept him. As if all

he had to do to prove himself was his best, as if his work was really all that mattered—aside from, perhaps, his uncanny talent to put any baby to sleep quickly. That was a knack highly sought after, especially here, so he spent a lot of time in the nurseries, during his shifts but also outside of them.

Work consumed most of his time and energy, and usually he didn't even complain, because he had designed it that way himself.

But soon, he was going to lose everything he'd built.

David squirmed and Tommy took a deep breath, pushing the thought away. He was here to calm the boy down, not to agitate him more.

“Do you need anything else?” Rebecca asked in a whisper, and when he shook his head, she nodded. “I'm going to leave you, then. I'll be back later.”

With that, she was out, and it took Tommy a minute to realize she'd maneuvered him into this for his own good, not David's. She knew what Tommy needed better than he did.

Dios, he was going to miss it. It had been so long since he'd last felt truly taken care of.

Then again, the last time he'd let somebody take care of something for him was how he'd gotten where he was now—about to lose everything.

As if Paul hadn't cost him enough already.

Tommy closed his eyes, focusing on the warmth of David on his chest and the familiar smell of the nursery. He slowed his breathing and tried to empty his mind, letting himself drift.

He imagined himself at tonight's party, walking into a nicely decorated ballroom and seeing the crowd of rich people dressed to impress. He wouldn't have cared about any of them, searching instead for the table reserved for Ruth's Children Hospital, hoping to see one man and one man only.

Brandon Sherwood in a suit was probably a sight to behold. Or maybe he would be wearing a tux? He gave an impression like money wasn't an issue for him, so he probably owned a tux—and filled it out nicely. After all, he looked great in the simple scrubs and nobody looked good in those.

Tommy had tripped over nothing at all the first time he'd seen Dr. Sherwood cross the hospital corridor like he had a war to get to and win. The man was tall, with short, dark hair graying at the temples and the cheekbones to die for, partially hidden under a nicely trimmed stubble.

As Tommy had learned in time, Dr. Sherwood seemed to command his surroundings and not care about anything other than the best possible care for his patients. He was known as a no-nonsense kind of guy—not rude, but not particularly nice, either. Blunt, too. Tommy had heard many stories about Dr. Sherwood's stand-offish nature that only gentled around the kids.

Then, one day, Tommy had witnessed him breaking a smile in the middle of a corridor as a boy opened his pajama top to proudly show off his scar like a Superman logo on his chest, and that was it. He'd been harboring a crush ever since.

Well, *bigger* crush. He'd already tripped into one—literally—the first time he'd seen the man.

Tommy would happily let him do anything he'd want, away from any professional setting. To have that focus turned solely on him would be... thrilling, to say the least.

As it was, though, Dr. Sherwood had barely said a word to him outside of discussing the patients, which was why Tommy had been hoping for a chance to change that tonight, at the party. They would have sat at the same table, maybe even next to each other, if Tommy's luck was for once different than usual.

Maybe Tommy would have been brave enough to ask him to dance.

Maybe...

But today *hadn't* gone differently and, no matter how much Tommy might wish for it, they hadn't had a chance to reenact some weird version of a Cinderella story where a handsome prince fell for an awkward and short Cinderella in a cheap suit who hadn't slept well in ages.

No fairytales for Tommy.

If he was truly smart, he would have learned that one a long, long time ago.

With a sigh, he opened his eyes slowly and looked down at David, sleeping peacefully, with a small hand curled into a loose fist by his face. *Dios*, the boy was cute when he was sleeping. Awake, he was a little terror, but once settled and quiet, he could melt every heart, Tommy's included.

They weren't supposed to have favorites, and Tommy was ready to help any baby that needed it, but there was always one he had a soft spot for and David was currently it.

Rubbing the boy's back gently, Tommy lifted his gaze, blinking fast as the harsher light from the corridor blinded him for a few seconds. He noticed someone standing on the other side of the window, looking hurried and smartly dressed. A father, maybe?

Then, Tommy's eyes adjusted to the light and his heart picked up its pace as he recognized the man.

Brandon Sherwood was here. And he was staring straight at him.

CHAPTER TWO

“Something is up with his immigration status.”

“It seems like he’s worried they’re going to deport him.”

Brandon Sherwood didn’t have a plan of action when he walked out of the Collins Foundation’s party after hearing the news. He just knew that he needed to move, that he needed to do *something*. That he couldn’t stand back and let it happen.

Not again.

He went back to the hospital on a hunch. Everyone at Ruth’s knew that Dr. Medina was a baby whisperer and that he spent a lot of his time in the nurseries, lulling newborns to sleep or simply holding them until they calmed down and stopped crying. Rumor had it that he could be found there at any time of the day or night, during and after his work hours.

Brandon knew from experience that a helpless child could be the best distraction, so he figured Dr. Medina—or Tommy, like most of the staff seem to call him—might feel the same, especially now that he needed all the support he could get.

And Brandon wanted to be a part of that support system. It was bizarre, considering they barely knew each other, but he couldn’t help it. He felt compelled to inject himself into this situation, even though he hadn’t thought about Juanita—or his old promise—for years now. The moment he’d heard the news about Tommy and that silly joke about green card marriage, though, it all came back. His guilt-driven, desperate conviction

as he'd made that promise to himself. *One day, if I can help, I will. I will.*

Brandon swallowed hard, pushing emotions aside. His gut was leading him now, and he'd learned to trust it above almost all else over the years.

Tommy might reject his help, of course. He and Brandon had only talked a handful of times before now, and Tommy might already have enough people willing to be there for him, so maybe Brandon wouldn't be needed for anything.

If that was the case—if he found out that the matter was being handled already and everything was going to be fine—he would gladly step back and pretend nothing had happened.

But if not...

If not, Brandon would do whatever he could to help.

And he could do much more than he'd once been able to. He had more power now than when he'd been barely eighteen. More resources, too.

He didn't want to waste time changing out of his tuxedo, but he pulled his tie loose, letting the ends hang over his chest, as he entered the empty elevator and exhaled slowly.

He checked the time. *9:20 pm*. No wonder there weren't many people still around.

He rolled his shoulders right before he exited at the maternity floor. Tommy might not be here. Maybe he was with people who knew him and cared about him and were already razing the world to the ground to help him out. Why would Tommy be here if he had people like that?

Still, Brandon needed to check. Needed to make sure.

After all, there was no time to think too much when something like this happened. He'd learned that the hard way twenty-five years ago.

He walked down the quiet corridor, passing by a patient looking like she would be ready to go into labor any second now, as she was slowly putting one foot in front of the other, supporting herself on a drip stand and cursing under her breath.

Good luck, he thought but didn't say, leaving her to it.

He got to the end of the corridor and paused by the large window of the primary nursery room. At first, he couldn't see anyone aside from the babies at front, but then he saw Tommy in the back, hidden in the shadows of the room as he sat in the armchair with a baby bundle on his chest.

Brandon inhaled sharply at the sight as his heart constricted. Tommy was short and lean, not big by any stretch of imagination, but his hand seemed to encompass the baby's entire body. His expression was open and soft, so soft it was painful to look at—as if Brandon had walked in on a secret he wasn't supposed to see.

In that moment, the urge to protect him bloomed in Brandon's chest, instant and overwhelming. It wasn't just a courtesy to a fellow doctor or a way to make amends for the past. He felt compelled to help Tommy, to shield him from whatever mess he found himself in.

When Tommy raised his head, blinking slowly, Brandon could tell the moment he noticed him standing there. Tommy

was no longer relaxed and focused on the baby, but tense as if he was expecting something to happen, unsure whether it was good or bad.

I'm not here to hurt you, Brandon wanted to tell him. *I only wish to help you.*

Let me help you.

He wouldn't be surprised if Tommy laughed him off or perhaps thought he was creepy, coming in hot like this. Still, Brandon was determined to see it through, his reputation be damned.

The two of them stared at each other for a long time, neither of them moving. Brandon couldn't come inside without changing his clothes first, so he had to wait for Tommy to leave, but Tommy apparently didn't get that Brandon was there for him.

As if there was any other reason for Brandon to be here, now, when he was supposed to be at the party, representing Ruth's. Whoever had thought Brandon should be included on the guest list had it out for him or for the hospital—possibly both—but Brandon still wouldn't have stormed out of there like that if there was no emergency.

Finally, Tommy seemed to decide that Brandon wasn't going away anytime soon, because he got up and gently put the baby back in the bassinet in the second row before quietly slipping out of the room.

He ran a hand over his ponytail, tugging at it as he faced Brandon.

“Hi,” he offered, half-statement, half-question.

“Hi,” Brandon said, voice surprisingly stable considering how he felt, now that he was standing here with Tommy, unsure what to do to help.

Tommy glanced between the window and him. “Is there anything you need, Dr. Sherwood?”

“Brandon, please.”

Tommy’s eyes widened slightly. “Tommy, then. Is there anything you need?”

“I wanted to ask you the same question,” Brandon admitted quietly, not wanting to garner attention.

“I’m—” Tommy hesitated, swallowing hard. “I don’t—”

Shit. Brandon should have known better than to start this conversation in the corridor, empty or not.

“How about we go somewhere to talk?” he suggested, looking around. His office was two floors above, but he was sure there was an empty room they might use here.

Tommy nodded and turned around, leaving Brandon to follow as he led them to an office a few doors down, with tables set up in a rectangle and a long whiteboard on one of the walls.

They both hesitated before taking the closest chairs, sitting on two sides of the rectangle’s edge.

“I apologize, I know that it’s a private matter and I don’t want to impose,” Brandon said. *Too late for that, though, isn’t it?* “But I heard that you may be in trouble and I wanted to check on you.”

“Why?” Tommy asked quietly, tugging at his ponytail again and not meeting Brandon’s gaze.

“Because I don’t want...” Brandon paused. “Nobody wants to see you leave.”

Tommy scoffed before rubbing his eye. “Trust me, I don’t want that, either.”

“Will they make you?” Brandon put his elbow on the table as he leaned closer. “I don’t know exactly what happened so I’m not sure—”

“I thought I had a valid visa,” Tommy cut in. “Turns out, I don’t. There was a missing signature on a file from my previous employer that I was assured went through okay. Extending the visa was supposed to be only a formality, since I was legally employed, I had a fellowship contract here, and I had all the paperwork... Or so I thought.”

“And they notified you today that the extension was denied?”

Tommy closed his eyes for a second before opening them again. His gaze was fixed on the table in front of him.

“Worse. They sent the notification to my old address, and I didn’t get the notice they sent a few months back. Which means that, technically, I’ve overstayed my visa.”

Fuck. That was bad.

“Do you have a lawyer?” Brandon asked. That should be a good place to start, after all.

“I don’t, but Director Collins brought on the hospital’s lawyers, since it’s an HR issue, as well. They sat down with

me this afternoon and basically told me that my only saving grace is that I overstayed my visa for less than 180 days. It's still not enough to keep me in the country, though." Tommy's voice got husky at the end there and Brandon, who had held many difficult conversations in his life with the patients' families and considered himself numb to them at this point, suddenly found it hard to take a full breath. "I can leave and apply for a visa again from Mexico, but after overstaying, it's unlikely that I'll get it. And definitely not fast enough for me to finish my fellowship on time."

"Is there anyone here that can help you?" Brandon heard himself ask.

"To do what? Pack my things?" Tommy stilled and grimaced, then sagged in his chair. "Sorry. That was rude."

"You don't have to apologize. This is obviously life-altering, you don't have to be concerned about being polite," Brandon told him. "Not to me, at least. After all, I'm never nice, myself."

This time, Tommy's huff was more amused than resigned.

"That's not true. I've seen you with the kids."

"Well, kids are different."

Tommy nodded, one corner of his mouth curling up into the saddest smile Brandon had ever seen on him.

"That they are. But to answer your question, no, there's no one who can help." Tommy closed his fist around the end of his ponytail. "Director Collins and Daniel have tried, the lawyers are sympathetic, but at the end of the day, it is what it is. I'm just... I think I'm still in denial because I can't even..."

He pressed his fingers to his eyes, obviously trying to stop himself from crying. “Fuck.”

Suddenly, Brandon’s heart was being squeezed by an invisible hand, which he knew was ridiculous. He was a cardiothoracic surgeon, and he might specialize in children but he still knew a thing or two about adult hearts. He was embarrassing himself with that metaphor.

And yet.

Then, because apparently, somewhere between the party’s ballroom and here, he’d lost both his mind and the ability to remain calm and collected while other people were suffering right in front of him, Brandon ran a hand over his hair, leaned forward, and asked:

“What about getting married?”

CHAPTER THREE

“What about getting married?” Brandon asked. Or at least Tommy thought that was what he’d heard, but that couldn’t be true.

Could it?

“What about what?” he asked, dropping his hand and opening his eyes.

There was barely any space between them now and Tommy wished he could be enjoying this instead of falling apart right in front of his hopeless crush. Brandon had to have done something to his hair just now, because it was sticking out in different directions, and he looked closer to being disheveled than Tommy had ever seen him. The guy was usually a blank, serious, and put-together counterpoint to parents or other family members who were freaking out about their child’s condition.

“Getting married to an U.S. citizen is a way to stay in the country and apply for a green card if your overstay was so short,” Brandon said, as if that was a completely normal segue in a conversation.

Tommy knew about that, of course. He was an immigrant in a country that had strict rules about who could enter and stay in its territory, especially from across its southern border.

But sadly, a quick wedding wasn’t a solution he could count on.

“I’m single, so that’s out as an option,” he admitted.

The last guy he'd dated wasn't even willing to be open about their relationship to their colleagues or anyone else, for heaven's sake.

Obviously, there was no marriage on the horizon for Tommy.

"And there's no one who would..." Brandon hesitated and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it even more.

Tommy stared at Brandon's long fingers before blinking a few times and focusing back on the conversation.

No one who would...

"No."

He didn't have close friends, not really. Before starting at Ruth's, he believed that he wasn't good with people who weren't kids under ten. Now, he knew he was generally liked by the staff here, and he liked most of them back, but they were simply his colleagues, nothing more.

And even if he had any close friends, he wouldn't ask them to take a risk like that. No way.

"I'm afraid it only works in movies and there's no Ryan Reynolds to my Sandra Bullock, sadly," he added with a shrug, aiming for a joke and landing flat, because his life was falling apart and there was only so far his sense of humor could take him.

"You lost me there," Brandon admitted. "I don't think I've seen Ryan Reynolds in anything other than the Deadpool movies."

“But Sandra Bullock is a *queen*,” Tommy argued, momentarily distracted, because, well. Sandra Bullock.

“I’ve seen *some* of her movies?” Brandon offered, the ghost of a smile barely visible in the corner of his lips.

“Clearly, you should rectify that as soon as possible, but I admit *The Proposal* isn’t the best movie she’d ever made.”

“That’s the movie with the immigration story?” Brandon said with a tilt of his head and Tommy wondered if he thought the same thing he had, when he’d first heard about it—that the main cast was conspicuously white for that kind of plotline.

“Her character is Canadian. And it was 1997.”

“Ah.”

There was a moment of silence, surprisingly comfortable, given the situation and the fact that Tommy wasn’t sure the two of them had ever even been alone in a room together.

“What happened in the movie, then?” Brandon asked.

Tommy had seen it years ago, but he shared what he remembered, complete with the cautionary tale in the form of an immigration agent who was out to prove the main characters’ upcoming wedding was a sham.

“That’s a weird life lesson coming from a romantic comedy,” Brandon commented. “But I guess that genre has other stuff to answer for, too, especially back then.”

“Well, say what you want, but there’s a distinct lack of candidates for me to marry for my green card, so maybe the teaching took, after all,” Tommy pointed out, leaning on his forearms against the table.

Brandon looked at him for a long moment before rolling his shoulders and straightening in his seat.

“I haven’t seen it, though,” he said.

Tommy frowned, not following. “I know, but I’ve just explained it to you.”

“Yeah, but I guess it’s too late for me to internalize that lesson.”

Tommy stared at him. Brandon couldn’t mean what Tommy thought he meant. That was impossible. Bizarre. Improbable.

Too good to be true.

“What do you—?” Tommy whispered, voice cracking at the end there.

“You know what I’m trying to say, here.”

Tommy shook his head. “You can’t.”

“Why not?” Brandon asked, and that was the stupidest thing Tommy had ever heard.

Why not, he says.

“Are you joking right now?” Tommy asked, crossing his arms against his chest. Because that was... While joking about this wasn’t okay, not in the slightest, it was at least more probable than the idea that Brandon could be seriously saying what Tommy thought he was saying.

Brandon decided to prove him wrong, though.

“I’m not joking, I swear. I know we don’t know each other well, but while I can come off as gruff, I’m not an asshole, and

I wouldn't lead you on like that."

"I know you're not an asshole," Tommy told him. "You couldn't be, if for no other reason than the fact that no asshole would interact with the kids the way you do. But," he added, shaking his head, "you're right about the other thing—we don't know each other well. You can't be willing to do this for me."

"And yet, here I am. Willing to do exactly that."

"You'd be risking jail time," Tommy hissed, lowering his voice, just in case. "This isn't an oopsie, this is serious."

Brandon sat back. "Trust me, I know."

"Why would you do that, then?"

"Because it isn't right that you'd be thrown out of the country—and out of the life you lead here—over a mistake in the paperwork. Because our immigration proceedings should be way different than they are. Because you are a great doctor and everyone likes you here. Because it's not that scary, not if we do it right. And..."

He hesitated, glancing down at the table, and Tommy realized there was more to the story, here. There was something else Brandon wasn't saying, the real reason he was willing to even entertain the idea.

Or the biggest one, at least.

"Please, tell me what's that really about," Tommy asked softly, not wanting to spook him but needing to know nonetheless.

After all, he'd promised himself after Paul that he would never again walk into a situation without knowing what he was agreeing to, long-term.

And this, right here, was possibly the biggest gamble he would make in his entire freaking life.

“Because I said no, once,” Brandon finally said after they were sitting there in silence for what seemed like forever. His voice was quiet and he wasn't even looking at Tommy, but he had Tommy's full attention. “I was barely eighteen, not even a week from graduating high school, when my twin sister came to me in tears. Her best friend—a girl I knew for years at that point, because they'd been inseparable since our first day in middle school—was going to be deported back to Venezuela. Apparently, her parents came to the U.S. with her when she was three, and they were undocumented. Nobody outside of the family knew, even Linda, my sister.”

Brandon pulled off his tie and started curling it over his hand carefully, watching every movement, and Tommy stared at him, barely breathing.

“She asked me, hell, she begged me to help Juanita, to marry her and pretend to be her husband so that she'd be able to stay,” Brandon went on. “I was eighteen, and gay, and I was about to go to college. I couldn't imagine marrying anyone, especially a girl. I couldn't give up my future for a chance of Juanita staying in the country. I said no.” He took a deep breath, closing his fist over the tie. “She was gone two days later.”

“They deported her?” Tommy whispered, heart aching for a young girl he'd never met.

“Yeah. It all happened very quickly, as these things go. My sister didn’t even get to say goodbye. She was furious and didn’t talk to me for a month.”

“It wasn’t your fault!” Tommy argued, indignant on Brandon’s behalf. Nobody, especially not an eighteen-year-old, should be responsible for something like this.

“Logically, we both knew it, but Juanita and her family were gone, Linda was heartbroken, and I couldn’t help feeling guilty. Looking back, I can clearly see that even if we managed to get married in time, it wouldn’t have helped Juanita, not in her situation. Not to mention that there was no way we would be able to sell being a loving couple. Hell, Linda and her would have better luck doing that, but same-sex marriage wasn’t legal back then yet.”

“If you know that it wouldn’t have worked anyway, why...” Tommy paused, unsure how to finish that sentence. *Why do you still care? Why would that be the reason you’d be willing to do it now, with a man you barely know?*

“Because I remember how it felt,” Brandon told him. “That helplessness. I didn’t want to do it, I had all the right reasons to refuse it, and I don’t regret it. But I promised myself back then, a stupid eighteen-year-old who wanted to ease himself from that burden, that if I ever found myself in similar circumstances, and I’d be able to make it work, then I would.” He huffed with a shake of his head. “I have to say, I forgot all about that promise and didn’t expect to ever be in that spot again, but the moment I heard about your situation... I don’t know. It all came back.”

“You don’t have to do it, you know?” Tommy tangled his fingers together on his lap and gripped them tightly. “It wasn’t your problem to solve back then, and it’s not your responsibility now. That doesn’t make you a bad guy.”

“I’m not trying to play a hero here. My ego is taken care of by my work, and I don’t need a boost,” Brandon said. “And if you don’t want to risk it, or if this creeps you out, or you have other reasons why you’d rather not do this that are about *you*, that’s fine. We can forget all about it and I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you from a distance. But if you’re trying to talk me out of it for my sake, don’t bother. I know what I’m suggesting and I’m willing to go through with it. So, make that call for yourself, not for me.”

“Make that call for yourself.”

Dios, as if it was that easy.

As if there wasn’t a permanent ban from entering the U.S. attached to it if it failed, not to mention the commitment it would take if it worked. Marriage for citizenship wasn’t easy even if it happened between a couple that had already been together, but to do it with little more than a stranger...

Tommy didn’t even want to think about how that would impact the crush he was harboring on Brandon, considering everything they would have to do to sell this whole thing to the public—and to the immigration office.

Then again, he would get to stay here, if they succeeded. He wouldn’t have to start from scratch, wouldn’t have to pick himself up yet again, this time with absolutely no real prospects.

He would get to remain at Ruth's, finish his fellowship training, and do what he loved with the people he liked and who liked him.

Could there be anything better than that? Wouldn't that be worth risking it all for, especially since it was either that or packing his things and leaving without a fight?

"Make that call for yourself."

He took a deep breath and looked up to meet Brandon's gaze.

Could they really do this? Just like that?

CHAPTER FOUR

Brandon could see the answer in Tommy's eyes before he even said it, but it still sent a shiver down his spine when their fates were sealed.

"Okay." Tommy straightened in his seat. "If you're really willing, let's do it."

"I am," Brandon assured him once again, even as his heartbeat sped up.

It wasn't like he was unaware of the risks. He knew more about the immigration issues than an average Joe, since his sister had made it her life's mission to work on making things better for the immigrants and dragged the whole family into it, too, one way or another. She'd also based her every campaign around that topic ever since she'd first run for office.

He could already imagine her reaction when he called to tell her about this. Even the edited version would be a lot to take in.

But he wasn't going to dwell on it anymore. The matter had been settled, now they needed to start putting the plan in motion.

"Okay, how about we get out of here and go to my place?" he suggested. "My apartment is more than big enough for two and you could have the guest room—for tonight but also for when you move in. We'll of course have to make it look like we're sharing, but we'll worry about it later. Do you want to drive by your place to pick up some things so that you'd be

comfortable at mine? I live close to the hospital, right by Fort Greene Park.”

“I’m in Flushing, so it’s much further away,” Tommy said. “But I have a bag here for emergencies.”

“Great. How about we go grab it and then head out?”
Brandon paused. “Unless you want some more time with the babies?”

Tommy snorted. “I would wake the whole room up with the way my heart rate is going right now, so better not.”

“Don’t be saying such things to a man dealing with heart issues for a living,” Brandon quipped and Tommy let out a surprise laugh.

Nice. Not everyone understood his dry delivery.

Brandon got up and Tommy slowly followed, but he seemed unsure, as if suddenly he had no idea where to go or what to do.

“Hey.” Brandon chanced putting a hand on Tommy’s shoulder, noting how delicate it seemed under his giant hand. “It’s going to be fine. We’ll take care of everything. But if you need a breather...”

He probably came on too strong. He went right into the managing mode, or ‘the overbearing asshole mode’ as Lucian had called it by the end of their relationship. But then again, his ex had been quite willing to take advantage of it when it suited him, so it was rich of him to throw it in Brandon’s face when he had.

“I’m sorry.” Tommy put his hands into his pockets and turned to the door, dislodging Brandon’s hand as he did so. “I

know we can't afford to waste any time. I'll get it together, I swear."

"You're fine," Brandon assured him. "You're incredibly put together, given the situation."

"I'm really not, that's only a front."

"Well, if that's the case, then you're a great actor and our ruse will go smoothly."

Tommy gave him a warning look before he opened the door.

"Don't jinx it."

* * *

Entering the apartment he'd left a few hours ago to attend the party felt weird, given how much had changed in such a short time.

He got engaged, for one.

He was about to break quite a few laws and then go on defying them for a while.

And he had his surprise-fiancé moving in.

Changes, indeed.

"This is it," he said, letting Tommy in and closing the door for the night. "I'll give you a tour and then we can split up and reconvene in the living room in a bit? I'd like to shower and change, because the tuxedo is killing me at this point."

“It looks great, though,” Tommy offered and then went red in a matter of seconds, which was more endearing than it had any right to be.

“Well, thank you. Getting things tailored works wonders.”

Brandon hung his coat and took Tommy’s jacket from him to put it away as well. While it had snowed earlier in the day, the sky had been clear when they left the hospital, fortunately, which allowed for a nice stroll.

Tommy rubbed the back of his neck and kept his gaze fixed on the floor, so Brandon decided to move on from the topic.

He walked Tommy through the apartment—the living room, the kitchen, the small bathroom, his office...

He paused by the guest room.

“That’s yours, now.” He opened the door and motioned for Tommy to get inside first. “It has an en-suite bathroom with a shower, but no tub. I hope that’s okay.”

Tommy put his go-to bag by the bed and turned to him with raised eyebrows.

“I haven’t lived in a place with a bathtub since I left for college, so I think I’ll be fine.”

Brandon briefly felt sorry for Tommy, because he himself absolutely loved taking baths, especially after the surgeries that went on for seven hours or more. Then he realized they’d most likely led very different lives and he needed to remember that if he didn’t want to make a fool of himself.

“Okay, then,” he said. “So this is you, and I’m in the master down the hall, which concludes the tour. Do you have any questions?”

Tommy muttered something under his breath, but Brandon didn’t catch that.

Before he could ask, Tommy cleared his throat and shook his head.

“Nothing urgent. So we could split now, as you suggested, and talk more later?” he said, turning it into a question as he went.

They agreed that half an hour should be enough and Brandon headed to his own bedroom, tugging the jacket off as he did so.

Damn, he was going to have to learn to share space with someone again. Someone he wasn’t even intimate with, which meant keeping his clothes on outside the bedroom and a bunch of other things he hadn’t had to think about for years.

“It’s going to be fine,” he muttered to himself once he was in the safety of his bedroom. He’d done much harder things in his life than some lifestyle adjustments, after all.

He finished undressing and headed into the shower. He sighed as the hot water hit his shoulders and back and closed his eyes, relaxing under the spray.

He’d done the right thing. He knew that deep in his bones. And whether it was about fixing the old hurt and keeping his promises or helping out a bright man who needed help, it didn’t matter.

It was probably both, anyway.

Brandon wasn't prone to making impulsive decisions, to put it mildly, but he also didn't question his gut anymore. He was at that stage of life where he knew himself well and understood what made him tick. He kept his word, for one. When he made a decision, he stuck with it, and it always turned out fine in the end. Sure, he could change his mind if somebody convinced him of their position, but more often than not, he was the one doing the necessary convincing.

Making his case was never hard for him. Their mom always said that he and Linda came out of the womb ready to take on the world and argue with everyone. What took more effort and care as he grew older was making sure that he wasn't pushing someone into something they didn't want.

Sure, he was used to getting his way and definitely preferred it, but control had to be agreed upon—especially in his personal life. At work, him calling the shots was a given. When he'd taken someone to bed, however, there needed to be a discussion beforehand.

There was no taking anybody to bed here, though, he reminded himself. His mind had gone places it definitely shouldn't, so Brandon turned his focus back to the task at hand. They needed to decide a bunch of things tonight and that had to be a collaborative process.

And he would do himself a favor if he treated it more like a work situation than a personal one, because lines would get blurred as it was, given that they had to sell the relationship to everyone.

The last thing he needed was to start off by blurring them in his own head.

With that in mind, he quickly finished his shower and left the bathroom in a cloud of fog to put on his most comfortable pajamas, the set he'd gotten two years ago from Linda for his birthday—their birthday—and loved right from the start. Linda had of course commented on his 'posh style', but that didn't stop her from buying herself a corresponding set from the women's line.

At the end of the day, they were twins, after all, and they were more similar than not.

He went through his night routine, knowing that once he and Tommy started discussing things, it might take them half the night and the last thing he'd want to do after would be to moisturize before bed.

With a few minutes to spare until their half an hour mark, Brandon left the bedroom and headed towards the living room. To his surprise, Tommy was already there, pressed into one corner of the couch, with his arms around his curled-up legs. He wasn't even holding his phone. He was just sitting there, in loose clothes, and stared off into space.

He lifted his gaze as Brandon entered the room and his eyes widened.

Brandon reflexively looked down to see if there was something wrong, but couldn't see anything. He even buttoned the pajama shirt all the way up, so he was as proper as he could get, given that he was, after all, in loungewear.

"Do you want anything to drink?" he asked Tommy.
"Water? Juice? I have orange and pineapple."

Tommy coughed. “Water would be great, thanks,” he said in a breathy voice.

Brandon fetched the water for them both and then sat down on the other end of the couch, sitting sideways so he was facing Tommy. Fortunately, the couch was long enough that there was still quite a lot of space between them. The last thing either of them needed was to feel crowded while discussing their married life.

Married life.

Brandon took a drink of water.

That would take some getting used to.

CHAPTER FIVE

At some point during his first year of residency, Tommy had learned to fall asleep anywhere and everywhere, but he'd also gotten into the habit of becoming instantly alert upon waking up unless he was at home, in his own bed.

This is going to be my bed now, he thought, staring at the ceiling in Brandon's guest room. He woke up from a dream of being at a beach he'd never been to, staring at the horizon, waiting for a ship to come. It dissipated as soon as he opened his eyes, like all of his dreams did, and he was now wide awake at seven thirty-five on a Saturday morning—his *free* Saturday morning—after going to bed mere five hours earlier.

And yesterday hadn't been a dream. He was now staying in this country without a valid visa, risking deportation.

He was also about to get married to his unsuspecting crush and pretend to be a real couple for at least two years, in front of their work colleagues, their families, and the immigration office.

Oh, and he was moving in with said crush, too. This apartment was three times the size of the one Tommy was currently sharing with two other people, and it came with Brandon, who had sent Tommy's heartbeat into a frenzy last night by wearing pajamas that made him look like a professor from a posh school, all proper and put together. And buttoned up.

Tommy had wanted to attack those buttons with his *teeth* last night, so he urgently needed to get it together. He couldn't embarrass himself in front of the guy who was throwing his fate up in the air to marry him out of the goodness of his heart and not the unmitigated love that knew no logic or reason—or any kind of love, really.

He still couldn't believe Brandon was willing to go through with this, for nothing in return but fulfilling an old promise. Most people would ignore such a thing, but not Brandon, apparently.

Tommy rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. If the offer itself didn't seem real, everything they'd discussed last night definitely made it so. The timeline, the stories, the living arrangement, the necessary consults with a lawyer...

"I got this one covered," Brandon had said. "My sister specializes in immigration law."

"Is she local?" Tommy had asked. "If we end up testifying in court..."

"Well, she's local, born and raised, but she's currently splitting her time between New York and DC. She put her practice on hold, since she's a congresswoman now, but she still knows everything there's to know about this. If we need a lawyer to represent us in court, she'd recommend one to us."

Because that was yet another bizarre thing that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Apparently, Brandon's sister was Congresswoman Linda Chase, the woman widely known in New York for working on behalf of the immigrants on local and, since she'd won her seat a few years ago, national level.

Tommy huffed into his pillow now and thought that his Cinderella fantasy might not have been that far off the mark, minus a few details here and there.

Like a happy ending, for example.

But he at least had a plan now, which had to count for something, right?

Right.

They would apply for the marriage license on-line today and pick it up on Monday morning. Then, given that Tuesday was Christmas Day and Brandon's sister was bound to have plans already, they'd likely marry on Wednesday, in Fort Greene Park, with as many people from work as they could corral into it.

“Wedding photos are considered evidence of a bona fide marriage, so we'd need those,” Brandon had pointed out. “And if we have guests at the wedding, we can take photos with them as well, and submit those as friends and family photos, too.”

They would also take some photos of just them as a couple, apply for changes in the paperwork at the hospital, and cover a bunch of other things to make it more legitimate on paper.

They would have to sell a convincing story to their colleagues, first.

Tommy liked what they came up with, though, even if some aspects of it hit too close to home.

According to the new, revised story of Tommy's life, he and Brandon had started seeing each other in secret pretty

quickly after he'd started his fellowship at Ruth's, but they hadn't wanted to share it with anybody yet, given their respective work situations. They'd been planning to announce it at the party last night, but since Tommy had been held back with the news about his visa status, that obviously hadn't happened. Brandon, upon learning about the situation, had promptly taken the knee in the very place they'd met, since he'd realized he didn't want to be without Tommy, ever.

Tommy, overjoyed, had of course accepted the proposal, and was already in the process of moving in and starting their new chapter.

Dios, selling this story was going to be a disaster.

Then again, it was a toss-up what was going to be harder—making other people believe it or not letting himself fall for it, too, since that fairytale ending was more tempting than anything Tommy had pictured in his fantasies about his crush before.

What was going to help him keep his head above water, though, was the harsh reality of what they were against. They were both aware of how brutal the process of dealing with the immigration officers could be, and they needed to make sure not to slip, which meant that their immediate future included long hours spent swapping stories.

And, of course, Tommy wouldn't mind finding out all sorts of things about Brandon, but not like this—not like there was a checklist and an exam afterwards.

Then again, maybe there was a way to make that part more enjoyable. They didn't have to quiz themselves as if they were

back in medical school or something. They could hang out and talk, maybe while eating a nice meal...

Okay, so Tommy wanted dates. He could readily admit it, if only to himself. He wanted time and space for them to learn stuff about each other, and not because some immigration officer might ask, but because he genuinely wanted to know.

And even if it wasn't like that for Brandon... Would it be so bad if Tommy made the best of the situation?

Yes. Yes, it would be bad. Not only was it pushing the boundaries of what they'd agreed on, but it was also a certain way to a heartbreak and Tommy had had enough of those already.

He didn't need more.

* * *

An hour later, he finally left the room when his empty stomach reminded him he'd barely eaten anything yesterday. Brandon had told him last night that he could help himself to whatever he wanted in the kitchen, so Tommy figured he might as well take him up on that and then go out to pick up groceries for them both.

Brandon had also said he was likely to be sleeping in today, since they'd stayed up late, so Tommy didn't expect him to be up and about anytime soon. He moved quietly down the corridor towards the kitchen, but the quiet only lasted until he saw Brandon in the living room, doing yoga near the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Brandon was in loose pants but without a shirt, and the way he looked, with his back curled in a graceful arc and his ass high up in the air, made Tommy's brain freeze.

The sound of a phone hitting the floor distracted them both, but as Brandon turned around, Tommy had to swallow a whimper when he got a look at that chest and stomach.

He was *not* going to survive this.

“Shit, sorry, I didn't want to scare you,” Brandon offered as he got onto his feet more gracefully than anything Tommy ever managed.

Fear was not the emotion Tommy was currently experiencing—far from it—but he needed to push through it and calm down.

Focus, he told himself. *Focus on anything else but him.*

“It's fine,” he croaked, leaning down to pick up his phone and hide his face for at least a few seconds. He was probably bright red right now and it wouldn't take a genius to figure out why. “I thought you were going to sleep in, so I didn't expect to see you.”

“That was the plan, but I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep. I figured some yoga might help. And this is my favorite spot,” Brandon said, half-turning to the window, and the winter sunlight hit him just right, accentuating the lines of his body, the dips and valleys Tommy wished he could trace with his lips.

FOCUS.

Still, Tommy didn't know if he was more relieved or disappointed when Brandon picked up a T-shirt from the

nearby chair and put it on.

“Did you sleep well?” Brandon asked as he put his phone in the pocket of his pants, prompting them to slip a bit lower and causing Tommy’s mouth to water.

Pushing away fantasies of falling onto his knees and begging, Tommy made a sharp turn towards the kitchen.

“I woke up early, but I managed a few hours, so it’s fine,” he said. “And my stomach has been insisting I get up for about half an hour now, which finally brought me out here.”

“Have at it.” Brandon indicated the kitchen. “I put the coffee on earlier and it should be ready by now.”

“Have you eaten already? I could make us something, if you’d like,” Tommy offered, figuring it was the least he could do, but Brandon shook his head.

“Thanks, but I usually eat later in the day. I can join you for coffee, though, if you’re up for company.”

Tommy smiled, pretending there were no butterflies in his stomach.

“Great. I’m always up for it.”

With that, he headed to the kitchen, and it wasn’t until he was there when he realized how his words sounded.

Damn. He really needed to get it together.

When he chanced a look behind him, Brandon was there, too, already pouring himself coffee.

“Are you allergic to anything?” Tommy asked as he opened the fridge. “For future reference.”

“Strawberries and coconut.” Brandon sat at the small table by the window. “You?”

“Peanuts, unfortunately.” Tommy took out eggs and butter from the fridge. “I carry my EpiPen everywhere, by the way, there’s one in the front pocket of my bag and another in my backpack. I also have one stored in my locker at work.”

“Then I should store one, too.” Brandon pulled out his phone. “I’ll write it down. Mine aren’t so serious, they’re only uncomfortable instead of life-threatening.”

Tommy went through every cabinet and drawer to figure out where everything was, then prepared himself scrambled eggs with two pieces of toast. As he worked, they carried on a conversation about likes and dislikes in the kitchen and general habits—or lack of thereof—regarding feeding themselves. As it turned out, they were both self-proclaimed decent cooks, but only took advantage of it when they were off work. At the hospital, Brandon tried to make good choices and usually went to the mess hall for lunch and dinner, but Tommy admitted to being less careful about his diet there.

“Well, I was like that, too, when I was younger,” Brandon said, then paused and tilted his head. “How old are you, by the way?”

“Twenty-nine.” Tommy sat down with his breakfast on the other side of the table, realizing all too late how small it really was. Apparently, it was only meant for two people if they didn’t mind being very close. He tried not to move his legs at all so that he wouldn’t brush them against Brandon’s, but it happened almost right away anyway. “You?”

Brandon grimaced. “Forty-two. Which means I’m going to be hearing all about the May-December thing.”

“I’d say it barely counts.”

“My sister takes great pleasure in teasing me about any and all topics she can think of, so she’s not going to pass on this one.” Brandon took a sip of his coffee. “My parents won’t join her only because they’ll be too happy to see me ‘finally settled’.”

“You seem to be close with your sister,” Tommy said between one bite and the next.

“Well, we’re twins, after all,” Brandon offered. Then, after a pause, he added, “We’ve always been a team, that’s why it hurt so much, I think, when we had that falling out over Juanita. We even went to the same college for undergrad, but split when it was time for me to go to med school and for her to go to law school. We both returned to New York, at least, so it’s been easier to stay in touch, but with my work schedule and her splitting her time between here and DC, it’s still not the easiest thing. We talk a lot on the phone, though.”

“Do you want to tell her the truth?” Tommy asked, shifting in his seat and bumping his knee into Brandon’s accidentally. “About us?”

Brandon paused with his mug half-way to his mouth.

“I don’t,” he admitted after a while. “On one hand, it would be easier to be honest with her, but on the other... I don’t want her to have to lie for me, if she’s ever questioned about it, especially given the position she holds. It’s my decision to make, *our*,” he corrected, pointing between the two

of them, “decision to make, with all that it entails. I believe we can make it work, but that’s still a risk I’m taking on, one I don’t want her to take on with me. Besides, even the story we agreed on will be enough to drag out the old ghost, I’m sure.” He took another sip of coffee. “I don’t want to make it any harder on her, or on us.”

Tommy stared at Brandon, unsure what to say. He had nobody to confide in, since there was no way he’d admit to his parents what happened and worry them like that. He’d tell them about the wedding, of course, but not about the real reasons behind it.

Not until everything was said and done.

“And what about you?” Brandon asked, as if he was reading Tommy’s mind. “Do you want to tell somebody?”

“No. I don’t have any siblings, or close friends who could keep a secret like that. So I guess it’s staying between the two of us.”

Brandon tilted his head. “I’d assume you have a big circle of friends, but you don’t, do you?”

Tommy frowned, but while the words themselves could come off quite harsh, Brandon’s tone didn’t. He was surprised, not accusatory.

“No, I don’t,” Tommy admitted. “Kids like me, but adults, not so much. And I’m not really a people person myself, although I’m not sure which came first, their dislike or my distance.”

“Huh.” Brandon shifted and this time he was the one bumping into Tommy beneath the table. “From what I’ve seen,

you're universally adored at Ruth's, though."

"By the kids? Yeah, I know. I'm the Baby Whisperer."

"That, too, obviously, but adults, as well." Brandon shook his head. "You really think they don't like you?"

"Well, it's definitely been better at Ruth's than anywhere else I've been, but I thought they're like that with anybody? You know, welcoming and warm."

"Most of the staff are polite to everyone, yes, but the way they had taken to you seems different. You've heard your other nickname, right? Sunshine?"

Tommy lifted an eyebrow. "No, I haven't. I only heard the Baby Whisperer thing, which I got before, too, even if it wasn't so readily embraced."

"I thought it was hard to miss, since even *I* heard it multiple times by now." Brandon sat back. "They call you Sunshine because of your smile. You light up when you smile and it's contagious."

Tommy's cheeks heated and he looked down at his almost empty plate.

"Nobody said it with me around, no."

"Well, now you know," Brandon told him, lifting his mug as if in a toast. "They definitely like you and they enjoy being in your presence. Trust me, the nurses, especially, aren't so relaxed around other doctors."

Tommy tried to imagine any nurse grinning up at Brandon before hip-checking him, or tossing their arm around him, and had to bite back a laugh.

Brandon nodded. “Exactly.”

“I guess I figured it’s because I’m the youngest and still new, so it’s a form of teasing.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s that, too, but they wouldn’t do it if they didn’t like you. They’re professional and respectful of the boundaries, both of the patients and of the members of the staff.”

“They’re great,” Tommy said, finishing up his eggs. “Honestly, everyone at Ruth’s is great. You can’t fake this kind of atmosphere, even if you try.”

“That’s true. It’s been a long process, though, and some ups and downs, since the financial situation has been hard over the years. On one hand, only those who truly want to be here remain, but on the other, we lost some great people who couldn’t afford to stay on when they had other opportunities elsewhere.”

Tommy grimaced at the thought of his fellowship salary. He was overjoyed that he’d managed to get into Ruth’s, but yeah, if he had a family depending on him or if he wasn’t willing to still share an apartment, he couldn’t have made it work, no matter how much he’d like to.

Then, he hesitated. He didn’t want to burst their warm bubble, because he enjoyed the conversation, but he felt like they needed to circle back to the topic they’d left alone last night.

He needed to, at least.

He took a deep breath and met Brandon’s steady gaze.

“So, speaking of money.”

CHAPTER SIX

Ah.

The peace couldn't last forever, could it? Which was a pity because Brandon couldn't remember a nicer morning in... quite a while. It was better not to dwell on how long.

"Yes?" he asked, sitting up again and putting down an empty mug, while Tommy curled his hands around his.

"I know that to sell this marriage as real we have to combine finances to some degree, but I want you to know, I'm fully on board with any prenup you propose. There's no doubt in my mind," he added, gesturing towards the rest of the apartment, "that our financial situations are vastly different. I want to make it clear that I'm not planning to take advantage of you. More, that is, since I'm already overstepping."

Brandon sighed.

"I'm the one who suggested marriage, so if anyone was overstepping, it was me. Secondly, I won't argue the prenup, but I am going to insist on you letting me handle the majority of bills, groceries, and anything else related to our everyday life."

"I'm *not* going to be sponsored," Tommy cut in, straightening in his seat. He was obviously irritated, which counted as the first time Brandon saw him like that. For all that Tommy denied it, he honestly appeared easygoing and amiable, at least at work.

“Good, since I’m not looking to become a sugar daddy,” Brandon told him dryly, because, at the end of the day, he was exactly as no-nonsense as most people assumed. “But as we’re creating a life together, you’re being thrown into a situation that’s already imbalanced in regards to power dynamics. Because of my age, my citizenship status, my higher position in the hospital and finally, yes, my financial situation, both through work and generational wealth,” he explained. “These are facts we can’t do anything about. What we have the power over is making sure that we both have our own money to do with as we please. Also, and I’ll be honest here, but with no intention to offend you—it’s easier for me to simply spend more money than try to adjust my lifestyle to the one we can both afford. I’m not judging your lifestyle, whatever it is. But I, too, was once a doctor on a fellowship, with a student debt that felt overwhelming even with the family trust I knew was coming once I turned thirty. I didn’t have this,” he indicated the apartment the same way Tommy had, “back then, either. But I do have it now and I don’t want to give it up.”

“I’m not asking you to give it up.” Tommy crossed his arms against his chest. “I’ve already agreed to move in here. I’m only asking to be included.”

“You are going to be included,” Brandon assured him. “That’s why I said I want to handle the *majority* of bills and other everyday expenses. I want us to have a joint account for that spending, with equal access, and for us both to transfer a percentage of our pay to that. I’d suggest 40% of yours and 60% of mine, to start with, and we can reevaluate at some later point.”

Tommy frowned. “I can do more than 40%. I spend more than that on my rent and groceries right now.”

“Yeah, well, I can do more than 60%, too, but I don’t think we’ll have to.” Brandon shrugged. “Listen, if it doesn’t work, we can come back to this conversation in a few months, how about that? But I already agreed on the prenup and I’m honestly not trying to sponsor you, here. What I am trying to do is create a situation that’s fair to both of us, even if it’s a little uncomfortable at the beginning.”

“And you think that split is fair?” Tommy pressed, but his shoulders already dropped a bit and he visibly unclenched, so Brandon figured they were on the right track.

“I do. Hell, I’d offer more from my side and still feel it was fair, but I’m trying to be considerate of your worries.”

Tommy let out something that was half a huff and half a laugh.

“Okay, fine. We can do that.”

Brandon nodded, trying not to appear too relieved. He honestly hated navigating those waters, which was partially why he hadn’t truly cohabitated with any of his last few partners.

“Great,” he said and stood up to gather their dishes. “Now, though, I think it’s time for me to call my sister, slash a lawyer, slash an immigration specialist. If you think I’m too controlling, wait until you meet her.”

“I don’t think you’re too controlling,” Tommy muttered behind his back, but Brandon shook his head.

Just you wait, then.

Sooner or later, everyone threw it in his face.

* * *

Linda barged into the apartment an hour and a half after his phone call, which didn't really surprise him all that much.

To be fair, he'd be rushing over to her place, too, if she dropped the kind of bomb that he'd dropped on her.

"You've got to be kidding me with this," she told him as he let her in.

"Hello to you, too," Brandon said, crossing his arms against his chest as she put down her enormous bag and took off her coat and woolen scarf. "Please, behave, Tommy is here."

"Of course—" she started hotly, glancing around, but he cut her off.

"I mean it, Linda. I called you so you could help, but if you're looking for trouble, you can go and we'll figure it out ourselves."

She narrowed her eyes at him and they stared at each other for a long time before she finally deflated.

"I can't believe you're doing this."

Well, at least she sounded more confused than angry.

"I get it, I do, but please, try to wrestle with your disbelief at a later time and focus on helping now, okay?" Brandon

motioned for her to take the armchair by the couch. “I’ll be right back.”

Without waiting for her response, he turned around and headed to the guest room. He knocked and then opened the door to see Tommy sitting on the edge of the bed with a notepad and pen in one hand and the phone in the other.

“Hurricane Linda is here, but I think I talked her down some,” Brandon said. “Want to come out and say hi?”

Tommy got up and then hesitated for a split second about the things in his hands.

“You can bring them with you, she likes people who come prepared.”

“Yeah, but prepared for what,” Tommy whispered, probably to himself, which would explain why he startled when Brandon chuckled.

When their gazes met, Brandon winked and tilted his head towards the living room.

“Come on, I’ll protect you if needed.”

He said it without thinking and then half-expected Tommy to frown at him and try to reassert his independence again, but instead, the man gave him that soft, blinding smile that earned him his nickname at the hospital.

This, right here, was a lethal force.

“Smile at Linda like that and she’s going to be eating out of your hand in record time,” Brandon whispered.

It would have been nice, if it went that smoothly, but unfortunately, the introductions were stiff and wary, instead.

Tommy and Brandon sat down on the couch, closer than they would have without Linda here but still with a bit of space between them. Brandon quickly covered what he hadn't in the phone call—the fabricated story about their secret relationship and more details about the real situation they were currently in. Tommy supplied any additional information regarding the documents he did and didn't have at Linda's prompting.

She was at least polite in asking the questions in regard to Tommy's status, Brandon had to give her that. Years of experience listening to these kinds of stories probably overrode any sisterly doubts.

For now, at least.

She made her own notes on paper, too, instead of on the tablet she usually wrote on, and Brandon wondered if she was trying to avoid electronic evidence of any kind.

Or maybe he was starting to be paranoid.

“Okay,” she finally said, tapping her pen against her notepad. “The situation is not great, but it's not terrible, either.” She met Tommy's gaze. “I'm not saying it's not hard on you, of course. I realize you're facing a terrifying prospect. I just mean that, with how things stand, you have a real shot at this. It hasn't been that long since your old visa expired, the new one was denied because of what appears to be a filing issue, and you've been steadily employed for a few years now. If you get married and later prove that you're in a bona fide marriage, you'd most likely be allowed to stay in the U.S. It's never a fail-proof option, of course,” she added quickly. “But the odds are in your favor.”

Tommy relaxed into the couch as if somebody cut off all the strings that were controlling his limbs.

“Really?” he breathed out, voice soft and disbelieving, and Brandon reached out without thinking, curling his fingers over Tommy’s hand and squeezing. Tommy turned his hand, tangled their fingers together, and held on. “I was afraid that it’s... too good to be true,” he admitted.

At that, Linda folded like a cheap suit and instantly turned from a disgruntled sister to a powerful ally who knew what she was doing.

“Getting married to get a green card, yes, that’s often too good to be true, but that’s because there are other factors to consider and some people overlook that.” She glanced at Brandon and he wondered if she thought about Juanita at that moment or about one of the hundreds of other stories she’d heard over the years. “But with all the other circumstances as they are, you do have a much better shot than most.” She paused. “As long as you understand that there are risks involved, too.”

Brandon was only half-listening to her as she went on, since any issue she mentioned, he was already aware of—the scrutiny that would fall on their marriage, the conditions, the penalties involved. He and Tommy had covered that last night as well, but Tommy appeared to be listening carefully, anyway. Brandon was more focused on Tommy’s smaller hand in his—soft, and warm, and relaxed. They weren’t holding on for dear life anymore, they were just... holding hands.

And it felt nice.

“Bran?” Linda’s voice made him lift his gaze.

“Yeah?”

“The wedding?”

“The park here, a small group of people from the hospital, the officiant, and a photographer,” he recited quickly. “And you, if you’re available.”

“How dare you,” she told him but with no real ire. “Even if Congress wasn’t in recess, I’d be there, and you know it. And I can be the officiant, too.”

Right. Brandon forgot about that. He looked at Tommy, who was already watching him and nodded now at his silent question.

“Great,” Brandon said, turning to Linda again. “How’s Wednesday for you?”

Linda snorted, turning to her phone, most likely to check her calendar.

“You’re one high maintenance twin, you know that?” she teased, using the phrase they tossed back and forth over the years.

“Yeah, yeah, Congresswoman Chase,” he waved her off, “you’re one to talk.”

“Eloping tramps Congress, sorry not sorry.”

“Says who?”

“Says me, and Mom and Dad will agree, because you’re going to make them miss your wedding and I’m finally going to be the favored child.”

“Oh, yes, because your status was so low before,” he said, rolling his eyes, before turning to Tommy, who seemed to be

watching them go as if he was watching a tennis match. “Don’t ever listen to her sad stories about us growing up,” he warned him. “She’s a lying liar who lies.”

Linda huffed, putting the notepad and phone away and curling her legs under her, making herself comfortable.

“Don’t listen to *him*,” she countered, zeroing in on Tommy. “He was always a clear favorite but won’t admit it. Thankfully, now he’s getting married while our parents are on a month-long cruise. I’ll get my revenge.”

Brandon snorted but relaxed back into the cushions.

They’d passed their first test and earned his sister’s approval.

It was going to work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Being summoned to the boss's office first thing in the morning was nobody's idea of a good time, but Tommy figured that, if there were no ICE agents in Director Collins' office, no news could be worse than what had happened on Friday.

Still, that didn't stop him from being a nervous wreck on their way to work, as he and Brandon were walking there together on a Monday morning, holding hands so that other staff members could see.

It was getting easier, in a way, to ignore the butterflies in his stomach any time Brandon so much as brushed against Tommy, but it was still a challenge.

Well, it was getting easier, or he was too busy freaking out about other things. Possibly both.

"It's going to be fine," Brandon assured him once again. "If even one ICE agent showed up at the hospital, you'd be getting multiple calls, texts, and messages telling you to call in sick and stay away."

"Maybe nobody saw them."

"There's no getting into that hospital without a bunch of people knowing in less than ten minutes and you know it, especially if they asked about you."

Tommy had to concede the point. The rumor mill at Ruth's was intense and the speed in which the news traveled was honestly impressive.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Brandon asked, dropping his hand when they were walking up the few steps to the hospital entrance.

Tommy curled his fingers against his palm and shoved his suddenly cold hand into his pocket.

“No, I can’t show up to my boss’s office with an emotional support person. That would be ridiculous.”

“Well, if everything turns out fine, you can invite Richard to the wedding right there and then.”

“Dios, shut up, I’m not doing that alone,” Tommy told him as he glanced around the hospital’s front hall, pretending he hadn’t noticed all the heads turning away as he did so.

Let’s hope it’s because of Brandon and not because of those ICE agents.

“Call me when you’re done, okay?” Brandon took a step back. “I have surgery in an hour and a half, but I’ll keep my phone on me until then. Or simply come and see me, that works, too. In the meantime, I’ll follow up with HR, because my phone call must have thrown them for a loop.”

Separating from Brandon turned out to be harder than it had any right to be, given that up until Friday night, they hadn’t spent any time together outside of work. And yet now, after barely a few days of living in each other’s pockets, it was hard to just turn away and go.

One look at the clock over the front desk was enough to push him into action, though. They’d left home early to pick up their marriage license, but now he was in danger of being late.

He walked away in a hurry after promising Brandon he'd find him after the meeting, and yet he couldn't resist turning back near the end of the hall.

Brandon was still standing there, silent and solemn, watching him go.

Dios, Tommy was in such a big trouble.

He swallowed hard and turned towards the elevators, rushing when he saw one still open.

"Wait, please!"

The hand shot up, stopping the door from closing, and Tommy made it inside, only to see Daniel Collins there. Daniel had been the hospital's administrative director for years now, but recently he'd become the head of the Collins Foundation that owned both Ruth's Children Hospital and its total opposite, Collins Memorial.

"Thank you," Tommy said. "I have a meeting with Director Collins and don't want to be late."

Daniel gave him a nod and a smile. "I wouldn't want to be late, either. He doesn't like that, does he?"

"Does anybody?"

"Point taken. But then again, there are those who don't mind leaving other people waiting."

"I'm not one of them," Tommy assured him, explaining himself out of habit. "I'm usually early, actually, but I got held up in the hall." *By my inability to leave my fake fiancé behind.*

"Don't worry, we're still early," Daniel told him as they paused at the management floor. He gestured towards the

elevator door. “After you.”

They parted by the desk of Director Collins’s assistant, Shonda, but five minutes later, when Tommy was sitting down in the director’s office, Daniel slipped into the room as well and took a seat next to his uncle on the couch.

“Very well,” Director Collins started, turning to Tommy. “Thanks for coming, Dr. Medina.”

Tommy looked between the two men as his stomach tightened itself into knots.

“Of course.”

“We’ve asked you to come see us in order to go over a few things in regard to your current situation. But first, we’d like to know if there have been any changes on your end or if there’s something we could help you with.”

Maybe Brandon should have joined him, after all, since it looked like Tommy was about to spill the beans.

“There have been some... personal developments,” he said, clearing his throat. “That may help with regards to my status.”

“Oh?” Director Collins raised his eyebrows. “May I ask what those are? I’m not usually so forward when it comes to my employee’s personal life, but as you can imagine, this situation is unusual.”

“Of course,” Tommy agreed. “And this is relevant to the case at hand. So. I’m getting married. The day after tomorrow.”

Daniel choked on air, bringing their attention to himself.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m fine.” He glanced between Tommy and his uncle, then back. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Tommy swallowed. “It’s quite sudden, for obvious reasons, since we would otherwise take more time, but... I’m still happy.”

“Congratulations from me, as well,” Director Collins said, turning from his nephew back to Tommy. “Would that be related to the call HR got half an hour ago about changes in the relationship status from one of our doctors?”

Tommy took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*

“If you mean Brandon Sherwood, then yes, it would be related, indeed.”

He could only hope that the two of them would assume he was nervous due to the news and having to talk to his bosses about his private life and not because of... anything else.

“We weren’t aware that the two of you have been involved,” Daniel said before clearing his throat. “And although we’re happy if you’re happy, we feel it’s important to make sure...”

He drifted off and turned to his uncle, who leaned towards Tommy.

“The HR protocols and rules are there for a reason and we consider them helpful tools in maintaining the proper relations in the workplace, where different power dynamics may be in play. Since you are our newest hire and you’ve recently started your fellowship, and Doctor Sherwood is—”

“Dios, no!” Tommy cut in, unable to listen to what was certainly going to follow that setup. “There was nothing

untoward about the start of my relationship with Brandon and I haven't felt pressured in any way." Then he hesitated, because they hadn't decided on this part, but it seemed important, now. "Actually, it was me who... pursued him, if that helps. We're aware we should've let the HR know sooner, but we didn't want to say anything before we were certain we both wanted to move forward with the relationship. However, I assure you, there was no issue of consent you need to worry about."

"Ah," was all that Director Collins said, both him and Daniel looking relieved while trying to hide it. "That's good."

"We apologize for making you uncomfortable," Daniel added.

"No, no, I understand," Tommy told them, probably red all over. "If the situation was different, I'm sure I'd appreciate it."

"Very well, I'm glad we got that part out of the way." Director Collins offered a small smile, which was so unlike his usual one that Tommy instantly tensed once again. "There's, however, one more issue we need to discuss."

"Yes?"

Daniel leaned in with his elbows on his thighs.

"We've consulted the lawyers further about your situation as it stands now," he started. "Which is to say, it may be different once you get married and apply for a change of status. But until then, we had to make a note in your file—our *internal* file, mind you—about your status being 'in need of a confirmation'. That was the wording we decided was the safest one to all parties involved, but that brings us to the

unfortunate consequence of such note, which is that you cannot see any patients, for now.”

Tommy froze, his mind drawing a blank at first, like a reboot to the system, and then everything came in at a lightning speed. He couldn't work. He couldn't see patients. He was... He was...

“You're not fired,” Director Collins assured him quickly. “Nor are you suspended for cause. We don't want this on your permanent record and we don't wish to upend the progress of your fellowship. We also wouldn't want you to be stuck without pay as the situation resolves itself, which is why we decided that it would be best if you focused on any research you have in progress. You may also assist your fellow doctors in their research, if you so choose and they agree to take you on. Basically anything that doesn't involve direct access to the patients, you're still allowed—and frankly expected—to do. But you cannot treat anyone nor assist while a patient is being treated by another doctor.”

Tommy could hardly breathe. He was grateful he still had a job, of course he was, but without the ability to see the patients, he was pretty much stuck behind a desk for an unspecified amount of time.

“Sadly, you also cannot assist in the nurseries,” Daniel added quietly, delivering the final blow.

Tommy closed his eyes. Of course he couldn't. *Of course.* He should've expected this. The hospital couldn't just have some... guy walking around and hugging babies.

And yet.

“Tomás, we are sorry about this, but our hands are tied.”

Once Tommy was sure he wasn't going to start crying, he opened his eyes and met Director Collins' sympathetic gaze.

“I know,” he said, voice tight. “And I honestly appreciate you trying to accommodate my situation as much as you're able to. I know I'm lucky. In many other places, I'd lose my fellowship position, so I'm truly grateful. I just...”

“Your whole life is getting turned on its head and there's little you can do about it,” Daniel said when Tommy drifted off, unsure how to go on. “It's normal to feel helpless, or angry. I'm glad you can count on your fiancé, but I want you to know that we're here for you, too. If there's anything that you need, now or later on, whether it's a written statement for the authorities or some time off to handle any necessary meetings or appointments, please let us know.”

“Thank you,” Tommy told him quietly. “I'll keep that in mind.”

They wrapped up the meeting soon after and he left Director Collins' office, but then he halted in the corridor, unsure what to do next. A part of him wanted to go crawl into a hole and not come out for a year, even though he knew he couldn't do that.

He couldn't.

Another thing he wanted was to seek out Brandon and hear him say that everything was going to be okay. And maybe hold his hand, if Tommy was lucky.

Before he could decide whether to follow that impulse, he turned his head towards the elevators and saw Brandon

stepping out of one.

The relief was so swift and strong that Tommy faltered in his step, but then he hurried towards Brandon, uncaring who might or might not see them. Without thinking, he circled his arms around Brandon's waist and hid his face in Brandon's chest.

He took a deep, shaky breath, inhaling Brandon's scent, a mix of laundry detergent and his aftershave that shouldn't smell so good, but it did.

For a split second, Brandon didn't move. Then, he put his arms around Tommy slowly and pulled him closer.

And there was nowhere else Tommy wanted to be.

Nowhere but here, like this.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One look at Tommy standing there in the corridor, seemingly lost and alone, was enough to convince Brandon that it had been the right idea to come here when he learned that the surgery had to be postponed because of the patient's pre-op test results. He hadn't been sure if Tommy would still be here, but he'd followed a hunch and, now, he was glad that he had.

Tommy burrowing into him was a surprise, but one that Brandon would welcome more of, anytime. He hesitated at first before giving into what he wanted—putting his arms around Tommy and pulling him closer. He pressed his face to the top of Tommy's head, inhaling him in, and he never wanted to move. Not ever.

Which was a dangerous thought to have, given their situation, but Brandon ignored that for now. There would be other times to be measured and careful, to make sure he wasn't overstepping anything and wasn't getting himself in too deep.

For now, he was glad to be able to offer comfort in a way Tommy had chosen.

He didn't know how long they stayed like this, but he could tell the moment Tommy tensed, barely a second before he pulled away and took a step back without lifting his head.

Brandon dropped his arms and pretended he didn't miss the weight of Tommy pressing against his body, as well as his warmth and scent.

He's just like that, he told himself. Hugging babies and such, it's comfort for him, nothing else. Don't get any ideas.

The thing was, Brandon didn't mind that, at all. If he could be Tommy's *emotional support person*, and do nothing but offer him comfort, it would be fine, too.

"Sorry," Tommy muttered as he shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced to the side.

"Nothing to be sorry for," Brandon assured him. "How about we go somewhere and talk?"

"Stairwell?" Tommy suggested.

Brandon meant it more in terms of his office or maybe an empty storage room, but Tommy was already turning towards the door leading to the stairwell, so Brandon followed him out. He pretended not to see the looks they were getting from all directions, including Daniel Collins who watched them from the doorway of his uncle's office.

The stairwell was cold and dark, but it was also empty, which was probably what counted most for Tommy, who seemed embarrassed about his public display of emotions.

Determined to wait him out, Brandon leaned against the railing as Tommy slid down to sit on the stairs and curled his arms around his knees. It reminded Brandon of Friday night and seeing Tommy burrowed into the corner of his couch, unconsciously protecting himself.

I can protect you if you let me. I want to.

Brandon pushed the thought aside when Tommy cleared his throat and started talking.

“I’m not allowed to see patients,” he said, voice quiet and scratchy. “I can’t even assist, I’m only allowed to do research, and... I should be happy I’m not fired, right? And I am, of course, I’m relieved, because I’m sure I’d be packing my things in any other hospital, but it’s not... I can’t help in the nurseries, either, and I understand it, I do, better safe than sorry and all that, but...”

His breathing was getting faster now, and Brandon moved to squat right in front of him.

“Hey, hey, breathe.” He curled one hand over the back of Tommy’s neck and the other around his ankle. “Come on, inhale slowly, hold, one, two, three, exhale slowly...”

Tommy followed his guidance and got his breathing under control before swallowing hard.

“Of course I can’t see the patients,” he whispered. “I’m a complete mess.”

“You’re not a complete mess,” Brandon told him firmly. “You’re not even half-way there.”

Tommy’s snort turned into a cough.

“Don’t joke, I’m obviously not ready for it,” he said when he calmed down, but he offered him a shadow of a smile, so Brandon counted it as a win.

“I’d be crushed if they told me I can’t see patients, too,” he offered. “I had that happen once, during my residency, when this asshole doctor was trying to blame me for his mistake. It only lasted a week and I was cleared while *he* got suspended, but it was still the longest week of my entire medical career. And we know something about long weeks, don’t we?”

“Everyone tells me they’re the longest when you’re in residency,” Tommy said with a shake of his head. “I’m seriously hoping that’s true, because I’m only getting older, here.”

“Oh, yeah, poor old you,” Brandon told him dryly. “How the late years had gotten to you.”

“Shut up, I’m not saying I’m old but older. And you’re not old, either.”

“Thank you so much, that means the world.”

As they smiled at each other, Brandon realized he was still holding Tommy’s neck. Before he could do anything about it, the door to his right squeaked open and a woman from accounting—Karen, maybe?—almost dropped the files she was holding when she saw them there.

Brandon pulled away from Tommy and got onto his feet, with Tommy following right behind, but it was too late. She’d already seen them in a pretty compromising position.

Then again, wasn’t that what they needed? For the news about them being together to spread out quickly around the building, hopefully with as little direct input from them as possible?

Still, it was hard to squash that part of him that wasn’t comfortable with people knowing his private business, especially at work.

“Sorry, sorry,” possibly-Karen said, passing them quickly before making her way down the stairs.

Brandon looked at Tommy, whose blush was clearly visible even in the shadows of the stairwell, but they stayed

silent until they heard the door a level below them open and close.

Brandon wasn't sure what to say. Thankfully, Tommy erupted in laughter and sagged against the railing next to him.

"Dios," he muttered when he calmed down a bit. "Today has been... a lot."

"At least we're off to a good start with informing people about us, I guess." Brandon shrugged, letting go of his discomfort when faced with Tommy's better mood. "Although I bet we can still shock some of them with the news about the wedding."

"Some?" Tommy raised his eyebrows. "I think you mean all of them."

Brandon nodded, acquiescing to the point.

"We could wait another hour for the news to spread and then we should probably start inviting people to the wedding. I'm available until two, but then I have surgery and it may run late."

"Lucky you, you'll be safe in the operating room while I'm probably going to be bombarded with questions."

Brandon snorted. "Even if I wasn't in the operating room, nobody comes to me with questions until they absolutely have to."

"That's unfair!"

"That's one of the perks of being seen as the standoffish one," Brandon told him. "Not my fault they all like you better, *Sunshine*."

Tommy scrunched his nose and Brandon should honestly be too old to consider someone acting cute as attractive, but Tommy was proving him wrong left and right.

“I’ve obviously made a mistake while establishing myself around here,” Tommy said, pulling Brandon away from a dangerous line of thought. “I should’ve played up my grumpy side.”

“Please, you wouldn’t last a day,” Brandon teased. “Not among the kids. They’re the real Kryptonite.”

“Oh yeah, even you have a hard time remaining cool and indifferent in their presence, so I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Exactly,” Brandon said, trying not to be too pleased about the fact that Tommy had noticed things about him that he seemed to like even before Friday night. “So, how about we go to my office and sort the invitations Linda printed out? Then we can talk through your research projects, if you want, or I can leave you to it.”

Tommy nudged his shoulder.

“That would be great, I’d like that,” he said and offered Brandon his big smile.

Sunshine, indeed.

Damn.

* * *

Brandon shut the door to his office and leaned against it with a sigh, closing his eyes.

“Tired?”

Startled, he straightened and opened his eyes to see Tommy sitting in his old armchair with a tablet and a notepad on his lap, half-hidden by the bookcase, which was Brandon’s only excuse for not noticing him sooner.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Tommy said with a brief grimace. “I hope it’s okay I’m here. I needed a break from everyone.”

“You’re welcome here anytime,” Brandon offered, surprising himself. He was usually protective of his space, but Tommy didn’t feel like an intruder, whether here or at home. “Like I said, nobody bothers me, so you should be safe here.”

Tommy beamed at him. “Thanks. We have at least some time until they realize where I’m sneaking off to and come looking for me.”

“I’ll scare them off, don’t worry,” Brandon said, choosing to omit the other reason the staff would likely stay away from a place that Tommy was *sneaking off to*. Most people wouldn’t want to walk in on their colleagues in a compromising position, after all.

“My hero.” Tommy stood up and stretched, prompting Brandon to look anywhere else. “But seriously, you seem tired.”

“The surgery ran long because of complications with the valve...” He paused. “It doesn’t matter, sorry.”

“No, are you kidding?” Tommy leaned against the bookcase. “You’re doing heart surgeries on kids, of course it’s interesting!”

Brandon snorted. “I have a few exes who would say otherwise.”

“Well, that’s why they’re exes, right? Because they have no taste.”

“It was a bit more complicated than that each time, but I appreciate the vote of confidence.” While Brandon’s voice sounded flippant, he did feel warm at Tommy’s enthusiasm. “Anyway, I’m ready to go home if you are.”

“Sure, I’m off the clock and I was only waiting for you.”

Brandon had considered a lot of angles of them getting married and what it would mean for his life, but he was still getting surprised by the little things. For example, how good it felt to have someone waiting, ready to go home together.

In the past, if someone was waiting for him, it was usually full of tension, with the built-in assumption that he was already late and needed to make amends. But with Tommy, it was just easy. He waited because he wanted to and he wasn’t angry about it at all.

As they were walking out together, quite a few members of the staff smiled at them or offered congratulations, which made Tommy blush and shove his hands in his pockets even as he smiled back. Brandon mostly nodded and thanked people, unused to this level of attention but willing to push through.

They needed the recognition, after all.

Most of the people they’d invited earlier in the day assured them they would be delighted to come. Some couldn’t make it on such a short notice, but expressed their well wishes and congratulations. Brandon was honestly surprised that they

weren't getting weird looks about eloping so soon after getting together, but he figured that Tommy's legal situation was enough of an explanation, in the end.

Hell, at the party on Friday someone had even joked about marrying Tommy to help him out, so it was obvious that the staff was rallying behind him. Then again, maybe more people would have approached Brandon to make sure he knew what he was doing if he was, well, more approachable.

One of the fellow surgeons, Shawn Kelly, came the closest, pausing by the door of the post-op washing room when they had been the only ones left.

"I'm glad Tommy has a real chance now, I really am, so don't get me wrong, but... I wanted to say that it's okay to have doubts, too. If you have them."

Brandon turned the water off and reached for a towel before facing Shawn.

"I appreciate that, but I don't have any, actually," he told him, glad that he could be honest about this part, at least. "Before proposing, I assumed I might have some, but now I'm certain."

Shawn nodded. "Okay. Good luck, then. I wish you *both* all the best."

With that, he left before Brandon could say anything more, but it was still nice of him to check, even if a bit out of character. They'd been working together for about four years now, and even shared an office in the past, but they weren't close or anything. If pressed, Brandon would say that Shawn was the closest he had to a friend around here, but that wasn't

saying much, because he generally didn't have personal relationships with anyone at work.

Excluding the one person whom he was about to marry.

So. There was that.

CHAPTER NINE

Tommy was barely out of bed on Wednesday morning, trying to make Brandon's coffee machine work as he wanted it to, when he heard someone opening the front door with a key.

Huh. He had assumed Brandon was still sleeping, given how tired he was last night and how the coffee wasn't done when Tommy got up, but apparently not. Tommy opened the cabinet again to grab the second mug.

"Hey, I just—Jesus Christ!"

A shriek right behind him made Tommy drop the mug and watch it break into pieces on the floor.

He turned around, heart beating fast, only to find Linda there, leaning against the kitchen entryway with a hand pressed to her chest. She was holding a suit cover in her other hand.

They stared at each other for a long few seconds before Brandon appeared behind Linda. He was barefoot and only had his pajama pants on, which immediately kick-started Tommy's heartbeat once again, because, *hello*, all the skin on display.

"What the fuck, Linda?" Brandon asked, no, demanded, looking between her and Tommy. "You can't come in here like you own the place."

"Sorry! I'm sorry." She turned to Tommy and then to her brother. "I thought I'd just drop it off without waking you up,

but then I came in and saw the light in the kitchen and... Shit, sorry. I guess I forgot you're not living alone anymore."

"This wouldn't be okay if I did live alone, you know," Brandon told her. "We've talked about this."

"I said I was sorry. I won't do it again."

Brandon ran a hand through his hair and Tommy got distracted once again, but then quickly stopped Brandon from entering the kitchen.

"No, wait, I have to clean this up first." Tommy crouched down and picked up a few of the bigger pieces of the mug. "Go sit down in the living room or something."

"I can't, I really have to go." Linda pressed the suit cover against Brandon's chest. "Here, this is my pre-wedding surprise for Tommy." She looked back at him. "A nice one. I promise."

"What?" Tommy straightened up. "You didn't buy me a suit, did you?"

"A tuxedo, and no, I rented it for you."

Tommy turned his gaze to Brandon, silently asking for help.

"Linda, I'm sure you mean well, but, again, what the fuck?" Brandon took the suit—*tuxedo*—cover from her and shook his head. "When I called you, I wanted legal advice and possibly you being there at the wedding. I didn't mean for you to take over our lives."

"Well, you know how I can get." Linda glanced between them. "But Tommy doesn't, and you're right, you're right, I

went a little overboard, perhaps. Still, the tuxedo is already rented out and the flower arrangements will be minimal, I swear.”

“Flower arrangements?” Tommy and Brandon asked at the same time.

Linda sighed. “That’s why I get involved in things. Yes, flower arrangements. You need nice wedding photos and a ceremony that looks as real as we can make it on short notice and with minimal prep. And if, down the line, I need to make some waves for my brother-in-law, I’d need those nice photos, too, for my team.” She took a step back. “Anyway, I really do need to go. I’ll be back at five, okay? I will use the intercom, I promise!”

With that, she disappeared as quickly as she came in, and Tommy was left standing with pieces of a broken mug still in his hands, staring at Brandon who was similarly astounded.

“Why would she need photos of our wedding for her team, whatever that means?” Tommy asked weakly, half-afraid of the possibilities.

Brandon blinked a few times.

“I’m sure we wouldn’t like the answer to that,” he said, staring at the tuxedo cover he was still holding. “I need a shower and a big coffee before I even attempt to make sense of my sister’s behavior. I’ll be right back.”

With that, he left, and Tommy stared after him for a few seconds, but then he forced himself to move.

Cleaning up, first. Coffee, second. Everything else, sometime after that.

One foot in front of the other was the only way Tommy had a chance of surviving this whole thing.

* * *

A few hours later, Tommy had no choice but to agree that Linda commandeering their wedding preparations had some pretty substantial upsides. Not only did she take care of flower arrangements and a photographer, but she made sure they could hold the wedding away from the main paths of the park in an alcove decorated with holiday lights.

And she was a great public speaker, too.

“Sometimes, there are moments in life when you step into something new, something more, something better. When you have to let go of the fears that hold you back and the doubts that creep into your mind. When you have to say yes, I do—yes, I do want you; yes, I do want this life; yes, I do choose this life with you over anything and everything else.”

Tommy tightened his grip on Brandon’s hands as his chest constricted.

Here we are. We’re really doing this.

And none of it is real.

Well, most of it wasn’t. Because the marriage would be real in the legal sense. Because Tommy’s heart doing somersaults was real in every sense. And...

And because sometimes, when he looked at Brandon, he thought that their life together could be real, too. Not a

romantic love story, perhaps, but a simple, everyday kind of life, where they went to work together and came back together, where they alternated cooking dinners or ordering in, where they swapped patient stories or talked through their research ideas.

It was already real. They were already creating this life and it felt better than anything Tommy had had with any of his so-called real boyfriends.

“And now, it’s time for the vows,” Linda announced and Tommy swallowed.

No turning back now.

Good thing he didn’t want to.

They’d decided Brandon would be the first one to recite his vows, and Tommy listened to them now with focus so narrow that everything else ceased to exist.

There were only the two of them, holding hands and looking at each other.

“I, Brandon Sherwood, take you, Tomás Pedro Medina, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will cherish and honor you all the days of my life.”

These words didn’t seem like much, when they’d found them online. They were short, non-denominational, and only needed a small switch from love to cherish to make them more honest.

But now, gazing right into Brandon’s eyes as he recited them, Tommy’s heart was full and he had to blink fast not to let the tears fall.

It was ridiculous. He was ridiculous.

“Tommy, now it’s your turn,” Linda said quietly.

He cleared his throat.

“I, Tomás Pedro Medina, take you, Brandon Sherwood, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will cherish and honor you all the days of my life.”

“Exchange the rings, please.”

Rebecca and Frank, Linda’s husband, who were standing as their witnesses, handed them the rings—the simple gold bands they’d bought over the weekend. Tommy had winced at the price of what was basically a prop, but Brandon just handed over his credit card to the man behind the counter and later reminded Tommy that they were going to spend at least two years wearing them, so they might as well go for it.

Now, as Brandon slid the ring on his finger, Tommy’s heart gave up and free-dived right into the abyss. Tommy didn’t have a crush anymore. He had fallen hard, and there was no bottom in sight.

To make it even worse, Brandon ran his thumb over Tommy’s knuckles before pulling away.

Bastard.

Then, it was Tommy’s turn. He held onto Brandon’s hand too hard, probably, but he would be shaking otherwise, so he figured this was better. He pushed the ring down Brandon’s finger and stared at it, overwhelmed.

“By the power vested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you husband and husband,” Linda said. “You may kiss each other.”

Damn.

Tommy forgot. He forgot about this part. *Dios*, how could he have forgotten?

It didn't matter now because it was already too late.

He lifted his gaze from Brandon's ring to his eyes and held his breath as Brandon leaned closer.

The kiss was no more than a brush of lips against lips, and yet, Tommy's entire body was instantly set on fire. It was as if Brandon had thrown a lit match into gasoline—overwhelming and inescapable.

When Brandon started to pull back, Tommy followed before he could catch himself, to the amusement of everyone.

Because there were people there with them, watching the whole thing, and taking photos, and... And Tommy could barely pay attention to anything but Brandon—his lips, his hands, his eyes.

He was in love with his fake husband and there was no going back from that.

CHAPTER TEN

Brandon couldn't stop thinking about that kiss.

It was barely anything, just a peck, but Tommy's taste and the way he leaned into it... *Damn*.

Brandon had to force himself to pull back and get it together. People were watching, after all, ready to congratulate them and offer well wishes.

Linda was the first one, of course, hugging Brandon hard enough to hurt and not saying a word for the longest time. Then, she pulled back, with actual tears in her eyes, and clasped her hands on the sides of Brandon's face.

"I want you to be happy, you hear me?" she whispered fiercely. "The happiest you've ever been."

He only swallowed hard and nodded, because, really, what was there to say? He'd lied to her enough.

When she turned to Tommy, Frank was there to hug him, too.

"Congrats, brother."

Then it was Rebecca, and Shawn, and Daniel with his husband, Noa, and a dozen other guests. There were photos, and a toast with a non-alcoholic champagne, and cupcakes Linda pulled out from who-knew-where.

But above all, there was the warm weight of Tommy tucked into his side, slotting perfectly under Brandon's arm, and Tommy's bright eyes, bright enough to match his big,

happy smile, telling Brandon that it wasn't all fake. Because Tommy wasn't this good at acting. He was decent—they both were, judging from the fact that everybody had bought into their surprise love story—but he couldn't have faked the energy that emanated from him. That smile wasn't fabricated and he wasn't pretending.

Despite everything that life had thrown at Tommy lately, in that moment, right here, he was happy.

And Brandon was happy with him. Because he couldn't not be.

Whatever they had ahead of them, whatever adjustments, and challenges, and legal battles they'd have to face in the future, they were going to get through it all, because they also had this—the joy, and laughter, and simple pleasures. Their everyday life and the special moments.

And Brandon couldn't wait for more of that.

“Okay, okay, how about the first dance?” Linda asked, loudly, and before Brandon could cut her off, the small crowd of guests started clapping and shouting their support for the idea.

“I'm going to kill you,” Brandon mouthed towards his sister before turning to Tommy, who was staring up at him. He was flushed, but it could be embarrassment or cold, it was hard to say at this point. “I'm a truly terrible dancer,” Brandon admitted in a whisper. “And she knows it.”

“I don't mind,” Tommy told him with a small smile, and Brandon realized that Tommy wanted this.

Fuck.

Brandon didn't have it in him to decline now, so he reluctantly led Tommy to the middle of the alcove when Linda put Etta James's *At Last* on her phone's speaker. He shook his head at the song selection, knowing it was a dig at his age, but he had to agree that the song was beautiful, nonetheless.

And it was slow enough for them to simply sway together, with no fancy steps.

He forgot all about it, though, when he pulled Tommy close and looked right into those dark eyes, almost black now in the dim light. He let himself get swept into the music and started moving, carefully and slowly.

"You're doing great," Tommy whispered after a while, smiling softly, and Brandon suddenly wanted to kiss him, to lean in and just...

But it wasn't a part of the plan. They'd already had one kiss they hadn't discussed, Brandon wasn't going to push any more intimacy on Tommy, who had no room to say no.

Thankfully, Tommy lowered his head then and rested his forehead against Brandon's chest, so Brandon put his chin on the top of Tommy's head and closed his eyes, trying to forget that people were watching them.

They swayed like that through the entire song and Brandon only misstepped once, barely avoiding crushing Tommy's foot. It helped him return to reality, though, because he'd gotten swept into the moment and that wasn't the best idea, given everything.

This whole thing was for show, after all.

And Brandon needed to remember that.

* * *

He honestly didn't expect any gifts from their guests, but apparently, the staff at Ruth's had organized quickly and gifted them dinner at one of the newest restaurants by the riverbank.

"There's a reservation for tonight, if you want," Shawn said, "but if you have other plans, I can call and cancel it, and you can set it up again at some other time before the end of January."

They had no plans, so it would be nice to eat a nice meal in celebration of the occasion—something just for them. Brandon didn't want to assume, though.

"What do you say?" he asked, squeezing Tommy's hand gently and brushing his thumb over the wedding band.

"I'd love to, actually." Tommy gave him that soft smile that hadn't seemed to waver ever since they'd exchanged the vows. "I've heard great things about that place. I'd say this is the best occasion I can think of to check it out."

"Great." Brandon nodded with a smile of his own. "We're in, then."

They bid farewell to all their guests and were ushered into the backseat of Linda's Honda.

Thankfully, neither she or Frank tried to pull them into small talk, letting them be.

Brandon couldn't concentrate on anything but Tommy, anyway. They were pressed together, holding hands and

keeping them on Brandon's thigh, and he rested his head against Tommy's, inhaling the already-familiar scent of him.

Enveloped in their little bubble, Brandon was actually a bit disappointed when the car came to a stop and Linda turned to them.

"We're here, lovebirds," she announced. "Come on, get to it before this carriage turns into a pumpkin."

Brandon wasn't sure if he didn't imagine it, but Tommy also seemed reluctant to pull away. Still, they said their goodbyes and left the car.

Then they entered the restaurant—a cozy space with wood everywhere and clear white tablecloths, with no Christmas decorations at all, which felt refreshing—and were led to a small table in a nook by the window, with a beautiful view of the river.

"Wow," Tommy whispered, leaning closer to get a better look.

"Yeah," Brandon agreed, but he was watching Tommy. The soft light of the faux flying candles made him seem otherworldly beautiful and Brandon was beginning to suspect he was going to be in deep trouble if he didn't contain this... whatever it was. Marrying someone to help them out was one thing. Wanting anything more out of them than easy companionship was another.

He turned to watch the restaurant instead. The place was almost full, but it didn't feel crowded, probably thanks to the clever placement of the tables. Some were more isolated than

the others, but none seemed to be uncomfortably close together.

Pine twigs were the only nod to seasonal decorations, but somehow the space still felt like a room a person would want to cozy up in during a winter night, with a blanket and a warm drink.

Not the usual hot spot in Brooklyn, but it was definitely a place Brandon could come to appreciate a lot.

The waiter came by to give them the menus and offer two glasses of a drink of choice, on the house.

“With compliments from the manager and best wishes for your new beginning.”

They settled on mulled wine to start with, then ordered the same duck dish the waiter recommended, potatoes and mushrooms on the side.

Once they got their drinks, Brandon raised his mug in a toast.

“Happy wedding day to us.”

Tommy clinked his mug against Brandon’s. “Happy wedding day.”

They talked a little about the ceremony and made some jokes about Linda’s bossiness, but once the waiter came back with their dinner and left, Brandon picked up his cutlery before glancing at Tommy once again.

“Listen, joking aside, I’ll make sure she reigns it in. It’s not okay that she let herself in this morning at all, but it’s particularly not okay now that we’re living together.” He

paused. “I know that she and I have always had weird boundaries or lack thereof in the past, but we’ve been working on it. I guess we slip sometimes.”

“You didn’t slip, she did,” Tommy pointed out. “Unless you count making excuses for her as slipping.”

Brandon stared at him for a long moment, not knowing what to say.

“Shit, sorry,” Tommy said with a grimace and lowered his gaze to his plate. “I shouldn’t have... It’s not my place.”

“No, no, you just surprised me, that’s all.” Brandon shook his head. “Also, you defended me and called me out at the same time, which is impressive, I have to say.”

Tommy blushed and Brandon shoved a piece of the duck in his mouth to stop himself from commenting on it.

“Yeah, well.” Tommy shrugged. “I have some extended family with what I’d call little to no boundaries. In my home, it was only me and my parents, so we skipped the sibling stuff, but there was still an issue with my father’s lack of ability to say no to his parents which caused tension between him and my mom.”

“In our case, it was us, the twins, and them, the parents,” Brandon said. “Looking back, I get how hard it must have been for our mom, because she often felt excluded. Once we left the diapers stage, Linda and I basically acted like we didn’t need anybody but ourselves, unless mom or dad had to come in to break out a fight, when we were both convinced we were right. But most of the time, we agreed, so it was us scheming in our little world and everyone else was an add-on.”

“And your mom stayed home with the two of you?”
Tommy asked.

“She stayed home until we were three, then we went to daycare and she returned to work. She was a nurse, but she’s retired now. My father has an import-export company and has always traveled for work a lot, so she was still the one who took care of us, whether she was working or not.”

“So it was more like you two and her, and she felt lonely?”

Brandon took another sip of his wine.

“I think so. She didn’t express it a lot, or anything, but there were a few times when it came out. You know how it is—you grow older and you start to see your childhood and your parents a little differently.”

“Oh yeah, that’s true. Distance definitely helps, too. First, I moved away for college, and then they moved all the way to Spain for my father’s job.”

“Are they still there?”

“Yes. They have no plans to ever move back here and, from the photos they send, I don’t blame them.” Tommy took a sip of his wine. “But tell me more about you and Linda.”

“Well, we were inseparable until middle school, when she met Juanita and I met a few friends, too. That expanded our circle a bit and was enough for us to start having separate lives. Then came first crushes, first loves, stuff like that. We were still each other’s first call about pretty much everything, but it was more... normal, I guess.”

Tommy hummed. “And are you still each other’s first call now?”

“Usually no,” Brandon said. “Frank definitely put us to rights on certain things.” He grimaced. “It wasn’t always pretty and Linda came close to breaking up with him over that a few times, but he knew how to get through to her—and, to a lesser degree, to me—and make us see what we didn’t want to see.”

“He wanted to be her first call.”

“Yes, exactly. Which I get, and I even got it back then, but I was still used to it being different. And I hadn’t been in a serious relationship yet, at that point, so there was nobody on my side pushing me to grow up already.”

Actually, he realized that even once he’d gotten more serious with someone, none of his partners had ever approached the topic of his relationship with his sister with anything other than eyerolls or some passive aggressive comments here and there. There had never even been a conversation like the one he was now having with Tommy, and he wondered if it was on him or on them.

Maybe both.

“Could it be that it’s easier for her to maintain the boundaries when it comes to her, but harder when it comes to you, since you have been single for a while?”

“For sure,” Brandon said, impressed that Tommy picked up on it so quickly. “I’m not single now, though, so she’ll have to learn to do things differently. And I promise to put my foot down, if necessary, but feel free to tell me when you think she’s overstepping.”

“Okay, but then you should also feel free to tell me to back off when I’m butting in where I don’t belong.”

“Hey, no,” Brandon protested. “Sure, there is some stuff that’s between me and my sister that’s personal. Same with my parents. But to make it work,” he waved a hand between them, “we need to learn how to share our home and our lives and in that, you definitely belong. That’s the point.”

“We need boundaries, though, too,” Tommy pointed out, but with a small smile that told Brandon it wasn’t a dig.

“Of course, one hundred percent. We talked about some of them already, right? So we can discuss more as they come up. I’m open to it.”

Tommy watched him for a while before turning towards the window.

“You really are, aren’t you?” he asked, sounding surprised.

Brandon nodded. “I’ve come to realize that not talking about stuff at the beginning results in mounting resentment later on. And I’ve also never been in a situation where I knew so soon that I’m going to spend at least two years with somebody,” he added. “Maybe that’s why I’m more willing to put in the work.”

“Well, you can spend two years with somebody and never get to have those conversations,” Tommy said, staring out at the river. “Even if you want to.”

Ah. The murky waters of reminiscing about an ex.

“That sucks,” was Brandon’s brilliant reply.

But Tommy snorted and seemed to return to the here and now, so maybe it wasn't the worst reaction, after all.

“Yeah, it does suck. But let's call it a lesson learned, never to be repeated.”

“Sounds good.” Brandon nodded. “I have to say, though, it's hard to believe someone managed to sidestep it with you, because you sound very... aware of how humans work, let's just say. And you don't sound judgmental at all.”

Tommy glanced down at his plate again.

“Well, I don't sound judgmental to *you*,” he said after a while. “And I guess I found myself in a situation where I buried my awareness of how humans work, as you put it, deep, deep down, and hoped that things were going to be different...”

“... this time,” Brandon finished with Tommy. “Of course. I feel like everyone has to make that mistake at least once.”

“Perhaps. I only wish I hadn't wasted over two years on learning that one personally.”

“Well, let's hope it's going to be better from here on out.” Brandon picked his mug again and pointed it towards Tommy. “To being smarter now?”

Tommy looked at him for a long moment before shaking his head and bringing his mug up to clink against Brandon's.

“To being smarter now,” he echoed quietly. “And making better choices.”

And maybe it was some lingering effect of their wedding ceremony, or maybe the growing connection they seemed to

be building with surprising ease, but Brandon realized that the choice that led him to this moment—the choice of suggesting this marriage—had been the best one he'd made in a long while.

Which was pretty damning, when he thought about it.

It still felt true, though.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“To being smarter now. And making better choices.”

It was two days since their wedding and the celebratory dinner, and Tommy still cringed at the words because they were the opposite of true, as far as he was concerned.

Falling in love with his fake husband wasn't being smart.

Getting swept up and lost in the moment and the intimate bubble they'd found themselves in wasn't making better choices.

Sure, Brandon seemed like a better man and a better partner than Paul had ever been, but at the end of the day, he wasn't Tommy's partner at all.

And that—Tommy buying into the fantasy of a relationship instead of facing the reality of what was going on—felt like life repeating itself.

So no, Tommy wasn't being smart, nor was he making better choices. That realization, however, didn't stop the butterflies from fluttering in his stomach at the sight of Brandon in the kitchen this morning, already pouring coffee into two travel mugs and lifting his head to smile at Tommy when he heard him approach.

It also didn't stop Tommy from hiding out in Brandon's office for most of the day with his research—and with his stress.

In love with his fake husband or not, he was still an undocumented person of color, and every day could be the day the ICE came knocking on his door.

They'd spent most of the day yesterday updating documents at the bank, the utility companies, and at work, to create as much evidence of shared life as possible. Then, after consulting one more time with an immigration attorney recommended by Linda, they filled out the necessary forms and applied for a marriage-based green card.

So, in theory, they'd done everything right. The application was in the system and all they could do now was wait for the interview to happen in a few weeks' time. Then, they'd have to prove their marriage was real and, if it went okay, Tommy's application would be approved. He'd be safe.

In theory. Because in practice, he was going to have mood swings all the way up to that interview and would probably balk at every knock on the door and every sound of a phone ringing until he was certain that it had worked and he had his status secured again.

Which was why it was easier to freak out over falling stupidly in love than to focus too much on the legal issues.

And the feelings helped sell their story, so at least something useful came out of his inability to fall for the right guy in the right circumstances, right?

Right.

Kelly, one of the nurses from the maternity ward, found him in line at the mess hall during lunch and pretty much

kidnapped him in plain sight, dragging him towards the table where other nurses he knew were sitting.

“We miss you,” she told him when he tried to protest that he should get back to work. “Babies miss you, too, but we miss you more.”

“Me or my baby whispering powers?” Tommy teased, but she frowned at that and hip-checked him.

“You, of course,” she said with a serious face. “Sure, baby magic is great and all, but that’s not the only reason why we keep you around.”

Before he could say anything, she pointed him to the chair in the middle of the table, between Rebecca and Ash.

“Well, of course not,” Rebecca said when he sat down. “We mostly keep you around for that bright smile of yours.”

“And the boyfriend tips,” Kelly added, taking a seat on the opposite side of the table.

“*And* the baby magic,” Ash offered with a wink, making Tommy laugh.

“Okay, okay, I get it, I’m awesome,” he said, surveying the table. “I guess I’ve missed you, too.”

He realized it right before he said it—he truly did miss these people. He didn’t just miss the work itself, although that was a big part of it, of course. He missed the babies, and joking with the staff, and the feeling of belonging he didn’t realize he was starting to feel before he lost it.

Temporarily lost it.

Hopefully.

“You better,” Rebecca told him. “But you’ve been holding out on us and I don’t know how I feel about that. If I didn’t catch you on Friday sneaking out with Dr. Sherwood, I wouldn’t believe the news on Monday!”

“Oh.” Tommy lowered his gaze, feeling himself blush. “Well, we were trying to keep it a secret for a while and you know nobody around here can keep a secret to save their life.”

Rebecca huffed, but Ash chuckled from Tommy’s other side.

“I’d be offended if it wasn’t true,” he said before pointing at Tommy with his fork. “But we know now, and everyone knows, so come on, spill the whole story already.”

“We want details,” Kelly told him with a smirk and, *Dios*, Brandon would kill him if he manufactured the details she was implying, so Tommy focused on telling them the rehearsed version, adding some things here and there about how caring and attentive Brandon was.

“I guess there is some truth in all that stuff about looking beyond the grumpy exterior, huh?” Ash asked.

“Well, he’s still grumpy, don’t get me wrong,” Tommy said, but he could hear in his voice how fond he sounded. “But it’s only a part of him, not all of him.”

“Grumpy or not, he’s still a good man.” Rebecca nodded. “I’ve seen him with the kids and he’s always patient and honest with them. It’s adults who he has less patience for.”

Tommy chuckled. “That’s true. But he’s not that bad, honestly. I think he’s simply more detached at work. Outside of it, he’s—” *softer* “—different.”

“He has to be, if he caught you,” Kelly said and Tommy ducked his head again.

Why didn’t he ever notice that they genuinely liked him as a person?

He didn’t know, but he promised himself to do better, to trust people more.

“Okay, so that’s all about me, but what about you?” he asked, lifting his head and catching Rebecca’s gaze. “And what about the babies? Who went home already? Tell me everything!”

* * *

When he returned to Brandon’s office, after lunch and a quick visit to the HR department to sign some more stuff, Brandon was already there, apparently done with the morning surgery.

“Hey,” Tommy said, smiling at the sight of him. “How did it go?”

“Nice and easy. If the recovery proceeds as expected, she will be home right after New Year’s.” Brandon took a sip of his coffee. “HR was looking for you about some additional forms. Did they call you?”

“Yeah, I was just there. And I learned how much better my medical coverage will be on your insurance plan instead of my own. I knew there’d be a difference, but it’s bigger than I expected.” He grimaced, lowering himself onto the chair on

the other side of Brandon's desk. "I wasn't happy about that part, but I resisted the urge to tell the guy off."

"Right choice," Brandon offered dryly. "It's not like he was the one making these decisions. I can point it out to Richard or Daniel, though. I know the hospital had to cut a lot of expenses over the years, but now that Daniel's going to be behind the wheel, they should know what we want them to fix."

"You assume that they'd want to fix it," Tommy grumbled.

Brandon lifted his eyebrows. "Any reason I shouldn't?"

Tommy grimaced and ran a hand over his hair. "No, sorry, I don't know where it came from. I was in a great mood moments ago, but now I feel spent and cranky."

"You're stressed and off your usual schedule, so it's a wonder you're not even more cranky," Brandon told him. "You can vent some more, if you want, or we can each work on our separate things for a bit."

Tommy inhaled and exhaled deeply, losing some of the tension. Having his choice narrowed to two options helped, too, because he at least had some direction.

"I'm gonna get back to work," he muttered, getting up and heading for the armchair he'd commandeered for himself for good.

"Okay," Brandon said behind his back and, when Tommy turned towards him, seemed to go back to whatever he was working on before, typing on the computer quickly and without pause.

Whenever Tommy was working on a paper or any kind of project, he would write a few sentences, pause for research, write a sentence, pause again... He definitely spent more time overthinking than actually writing, so he was jealous by the confidence Brandon was excluding in the moment.

Would Tommy be like this when he was Brandon's age, or at a similar position? Or would he still be like he was now, unsure of himself and looking for external validation?

He opened his mouth to ask Brandon how it had gone for him, how he'd gotten to where he was now, but then he changed his mind. They were supposed to focus on work and besides, Tommy would be able to ask him those questions some other time.

Because they were married now. And they had time, period.

Tommy smiled at that and picked up his tablet.

They had time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

With everything going on, the New Year's Eve had slipped Brandon's mind, but when Linda called him and asked if he was still coming on Monday, he remembered that he had agreed to show up at her party a few weeks ago.

"With Tommy, of course," she said. "If you'd told me earlier that you're seeing him, I wouldn't have spent so much time trying to set you up with someone, you know."

"Clearly, I should've taken that under consideration," he told her dryly. "But honestly, I forgot all about the party, so I'll have to check with Tommy, in case he has something else planned."

There was a pause, then Linda cleared her throat.

"Yeah, sure, but let me know today, okay? I need to decide whether I've ordered enough food or not."

"You always order too much, so you definitely don't have to worry about that."

"Shut up and go talk to your husband, geez," she said and ended the call.

Brandon got up. He and Tommy had planned to watch the new David Simon series, but Brandon had to finish the edits on the article he and Shawn were working on, so he'd holed up in his office for a bit. Now, he was done with that, and he was free to enjoy the rest of his weekend.

He found Tommy lying on the couch with a tablet in hand, reading. He was dressed in loose jogging pants and a hoodie, and Brandon wished he could unwrap him from all the clothes, and...

And nothing.

He was going to keep his hands to himself.

“Hey, you done?” Tommy asked, resting his tablet on his chest as he met Brandon’s gaze.

“Yes, all done. We can start now,” he gestured towards the TV, “but if you want to read some more, I can do something else.”

“No, I was only killing time, it’s fine.” Tommy sat up and put the tablet away. “I was trying to distract myself from thinking about my parents.”

When Brandon stepped closer, he saw Tommy’s eyes were a bit red. “Did something happen?”

“I told them,” Tommy said as he looked down. “About the wedding, not about... everything else. I don’t want to worry them.”

Brandon leaned against the back of the couch, unsure how to approach this.

“And they reacted badly?”

“Yeah, they weren’t thrilled about the eloping, which is how I described it. My mom asked me if I’d done it because I thought they wouldn’t approve, which made my dad angry, and it became this whole... thing.”

“I’m sorry.” Brandon put a hand on Tommy’s shoulder and squeezed. “Is there something I can do?”

Tommy shook his head.

“They’re fine now, they only wish they had been there. They’ll insist on a wedding party they can attend, but that’s a problem for another time.” He stood up. “I was thinking I’d make some popcorn, what do you say?”

“Sure, that would be great,” Brandon agreed easily, letting Tommy take the reins on this, and followed him to the kitchen. “By the way, Linda called and asked about Monday. I agreed to come to her New Year’s Eve party weeks ago, so she wanted to confirm, but I told her I’ll ask you. If you have any other plans or you’d prefer to stay home, I’d tell her to count us out.”

Tommy raised his eyebrows at him.

“You’d rather stay home?”

Brandon leaned against the doorway and met his gaze.

“I’d rather spend the evening with you. If you have plans with somebody and you want to go alone, then I guess—”

“No, I don’t have any plans,” Tommy cut in, turning away to put the popcorn bag in the microwave before setting the timer. “Is it, like, a fancy party?”

“Linda’s? No, it’s a small gathering, usually a dozen or so people, up to twenty. She has enough big parties she has to show up to for work, so when it’s only family and friends, she prefers to be comfortable and low-key. No black-tie or anything.”

“Well, if she’s not going to show up here at dawn with another outfit for me, then I guess we can go,” Tommy teased.

“I’d take her keys away if she tried,” Brandon assured him and realized that he would, in fact, do that if she crossed the line again. “But she won’t. I think she learned her lesson. So, I guess we’re going?”

Tommy nodded. “I guess we are.”

“Okay.” Brandon took a step back. “I’ll text her, then.”

He went to the living room and basically flopped on the couch, cursing himself in his head.

What the fuck was that?

“So, I guess we’re going?”

Smooth, Sherwood. Really smooth.

He heard the microwave ping from the kitchen, so he pulled out his phone quickly to text Linda that they were going to be there.

Okay, she replied after barely a few seconds. **See you at 8, then.**

Brandon nodded to himself, then put the phone away and picked up the remote, instead. Tommy came in from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn right as Brandon found the show in the new additions tab.

Tommy sat on the couch next to him, putting the bowl between them on the cushion, and Brandon swallowed down his disappointment.

Of course he wasn’t going to sit closer. Of course.

Get used to it.

“You good?” Tommy asked, tilting his head, and Brandon nodded quickly.

“Yes, sorry, I spaced out.” He hit play and sat back, stretching his legs to rest his feet on the coffee table.

Tommy did the same, but his legs barely reached the edge of the table and he quickly sat up and tugged his feet under him instead.

“Do you want me to move it closer?” Brandon offered, quietly teasing, but Tommy was shaking his head before he even finished the question.

“No,” he told him, staring at the screen. “Shut up.”

“Sure.” Brandon turned to the TV again. “As you wish.”

Still, he was going to move that table the first chance he got.

* * *

“So,” Tommy began, hovering by the entrance to the master bedroom as if he wasn’t sure whether he was allowed inside.

Which was stupid, since Brandon would gladly invite him and never let him leave.

But that wasn’t the point, was it?

He needed to focus. It was just particularly hard now, with Tommy in the doorway while Brandon had nothing but the

towel on, secured around his waist when he hurried out from the bathroom when he heard a knock on his bedroom door.

“Yes?” Brandon prompted, when it felt like Tommy wasn’t going to say anything else, seemingly distracted by looking around the room.

Tommy’s gaze snapped back to his.

“Right, sorry. I wanted to clarify something. When you said your sister’s party is low-key and casual, would that be jeans-casual, business casual, or meeting the President but not in the White House casual?”

Brandon laughed. “I’m pretty sure the President isn’t coming.”

“But not sure-sure?” Tommy rubbed his forehead even as he was fighting a smile. “I know I sound ridiculous, but just... Tell me?”

“I wouldn’t go with jeans and a T-shirt, but black jeans with a shirt you’d choose to go to work in would be enough. Slacks are fine, too, if you’d like that, but no suit jacket or tie. I’m going with black jeans and a black shirt, if that helps.”

Tommy nodded, already taking a step back. “Great. Thanks. I’ll... go now.”

With that, he turned around and hurried down the corridor to his room.

Brandon watched him go, confused, but then closed the door to drop the towel and finish dressing himself.

Perhaps Tommy was nervous to meet Linda’s friends? Over the weekend, he’d asked a few more questions about

who was going to be there and whether or not these people were Brandon's friends, too. Brandon had figured it was simple curiosity on Tommy's part, but now he wondered. Maybe he'd overlooked something?

Tommy was an interesting contradiction of a self-assured man with strong opinions in one minute and a twitchy, painfully young guy who had a tendency to overthink things in another. Brandon had no idea if he was always like that or was it because Tommy was stressed about all the changes in his life and the still real, although small, possibility of being forced to leave the States.

But regardless of the reasons, Brandon felt drawn to that unsure part of him in a way that caught him completely off guard. His instincts to take care of Tommy and comfort him came up in big and small ways, and Brandon found that he relished in it, too. Sure, he found all of Tommy interesting and he was attracted to his *everything*, but that caring part, that was new.

Could it be that by always choosing highly independent, self-assured partners, Brandon had missed out on the pleasure of allowing himself—and being allowed—to care for a partner in such a way?

Or was it that he had missed something in those previous relationships, a way to take care of someone without making it feel controlling and stifling?

There was no way to know that, now. But with Tommy, it was startlingly easy, like that part of Brandon had always been there and had just been waiting to come out.

If only they had a real relationship and not a pretend one.

That would probably go over much better.

But instead, he'd mostly been taking care of Tommy by making sure not to overstep their boundaries. He kept a physical distance inside the house. He never wandered to Tommy's room. He'd suggested watching something together a few times, but always in a way that it would be easy for Tommy to back out, if he didn't feel like it.

And sure, one would say that the marriage offer and everything that entailed was the grand gesture for the ages, the biggest comfort he could've offered, but it didn't feel like that to Brandon. It was easy—easier than it had any right to be—so he didn't see it as any kind of big effort from his side.

Perhaps there would come a day when it would stop being so easy. When the closeness without intimacy would prove to be too hard, or when one of them would want to seek sex outside of their marriage. They'd touched on it that first night when they were discussing the idea, but they'd put it away for later. Back then, Brandon would have been fine with some kind of discreet arrangement, but now... Now the idea of standing back while Tommy sought out another partner, even for one night, was excruciating.

Because he knew, he *knew* they could be great together, with Tommy mouthy but pliant under his hands, melting into the mattress and opening to him, trusting Brandon to take care of him without a second thought.

Brandon inhaled sharply as he felt his body getting too interested in that line of thought.

Nothing would come from it, regardless. Because they were pretending, because they needed to present a front that

couldn't waver and crumble after a few hours of fun, and finally, most importantly, because Brandon had an unfair advantage over Tommy. There was an imbalance of power that hadn't been given with sex in mind, wasn't negotiated for that, and would be impossible to safe-word out of for the foreseeable future.

And the last thing Brandon wanted was to have sex with someone who felt obligated to it.

His body went cold at the mere idea, the stirrings of desire dissipating quickly.

Good.

As long as Brandon remembered what was at stake here, everything should be fine. Ultimately this, too, was a way of taking care of Tommy, so maybe he could find comfort in that.

Maybe.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tommy realized pretty quickly that he was the youngest person at that party, and, from the sounds of it so far, definitely the least accomplished.

About half of the guests were lawyers, including Frank, who apparently specialized in labor law and co-founded a non-profit. There was also a city council member here, two neuroscientists, one tenured history professor, and a few people Tommy hadn't learned about yet, but at this point it was clear that all of them were at the top of their game.

And then there was Tommy, barely out of his residency and forced to pretend to be a man someone like Brandon might be interested in.

To be fair, everyone was polite and welcoming, and nobody even blinked when Brandon introduced him around. A few of them teased Brandon a bit about keeping Tommy a secret, but it was all in good fun.

Mostly, though, after working through his initial nerves, Tommy spent the evening watching Brandon. It was hard to take his eyes off of him when he laughed with Frank, or discussed a movie with him and another guy, or listened and nodded as Carla, the history professor, shared a story about her recent trip to Peru.

Brandon, as it turned out, could be a people person, but he apparently needed, well, the right people and the right circumstances. Tommy wondered if it was simply the fact that

they were outside of work or if it mattered that it was a small, familiar gathering, but nonetheless, it was captivating to watch.

Up until now, Tommy thought Brandon could only relax in his own space—and certainly there was some truth to it, because Tommy noted the difference between here and back home—but there was an ease to him now that never happened in the hospital. Or at least Tommy had never seen it.

Frank pulled him out of his musings by calling him out on the staring, but, to the man's credit, he'd done it quietly enough so other people wouldn't hear.

“So,” he said after sitting next to Tommy and taking a sip from his glass, “you’ve been looking at that husband of yours the whole night. Are we that boring or is it still the honeymoon phase and he’s just so dreamy you can’t help yourself?”

Tommy snorted, but turned to Frank gamely.

“Nice of you to form your question in a way that doesn’t give me any leeway,” he told him with a half-smile. “I’m either rude or lovesick, with no middle ground.”

“What can I say, lawyers know how to ask questions.”

“And doctors know how to sidestep them, so how about this—I’m enjoying myself, both in this company as a whole, and also by watching Brandon in a new context.”

“So you haven’t hung out with other people at all?” Frank asked. “It wasn’t just us.”

Tommy took a sip of his own drink, wondering if it was a trick question or not. Still, he and Brandon rehearsed their

story from different angles, so he had an explanation ready to go.

“With both our schedules, we always felt like we hadn’t had enough time for ourselves, not to mention other people,” he said, watching Brandon, who was deep in a conversation with Carla and her husband on the other side of the room. “And there was the part about keeping it a secret for a while, too.” He turned back to Frank. “We wanted to make sure there’s something there before we started talking about it. We’d probably start coming out of our shell around now, anyway, but, well. We had to jump out of it, instead.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you two went for it,” Frank assured him. “I knew Linda was the one within weeks of meeting her, so I won’t judge anyone for moving too quickly. And I’m glad Brandon found someone who seems to appreciate him. He didn’t have much luck in that department.”

“I can hardly believe it, to be honest,” Tommy admitted. “What’s not to love about him, really?”

Frank laughed. “Okay, now you totally showed your hand. Definitely still in the honeymoon phase.”

“Perhaps,” Tommy allowed with a smile and a shrug. “I know he’s not perfect, but he’s still an amazing man.” *If only he loved me back*, he thought but didn’t say. He cleared his throat and redirected. “Although I heard you were instrumental in surgically separating the twins, so I have to say I’m grateful for that work.”

Frank raised his eyebrows. “He told you that? Huh.”

“Yeah, it came up when we were talking about how... involved the two of them can be in each other’s lives. He admitted it used to be much worse.”

“It was.” Frank glanced to the side, probably towards his wife. “I heard about her barging in, so it’s clearly still a work in progress, but it’s gotten much better. Linda was taken aback at first, when Brandon started to put some boundaries around your relationship, but she knows it’s good. She just needs to get used to it.”

Tommy’s butterflies woke up at the news of Brandon fighting for the two of them, but he tried to squash them down.

“I want to be clear that I appreciate all the time and effort Linda put in to help me with my case. If it wasn’t for her, we still would’ve been stuck, searching for a lawyer on short notice, and instead I’m already waiting for the interview date.” Tommy shook his head. “She took an enormous load off of my shoulders.”

Frank turned back to him. “That’s what she does. And it means a lot to her that she can help her brother’s partner, so it’s a win-win.”

Before Tommy could say anything else, the woman in question appeared next to her husband and sat down on the side of his armchair.

“This, right here, is a dangerous combination,” she said. “What are the two of you talking about?”

“You, of course.” Frank leaned back and put his arm around her waist. “What else?”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she told him. “And it’s why I’m butting in.”

Frank turned to Tommy then. “Like I said, still a work in progress,” he offered dryly.

Tommy laughed at that and, without thinking, looked towards Brandon, only to find him already watching them.

When their gazes met, Brandon excused himself from the conversation he’d been having, and headed towards them.

“I sense danger here,” he said as he took in their little group. “Do I even want to know what you’ve been talking about?”

Frank and Tommy exchanged knowing glances.

“You, of course,” Tommy told Brandon with a straight face. “What else?”

When Tommy and Frank started laughing, Brandon raised his eyebrows at Linda.

“Do you know what’s going on?” he asked, leaning against the back of Tommy’s armchair.

“Trouble,” she told him gravely. “We’re in trouble now.”

At that, Tommy and Frank only laughed harder.

Maybe he didn’t have to feel so out of place at this party, after all.

* * *

An hour later, as it was nearing midnight, Tommy found himself in the kitchen with Linda, dropping off a few empty plates.

“Thanks,” she told him, “but you don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no problem,” he assured her. “I’ve been well-trained as a kid and it’s hard to break out of the habit.”

“Never leave the room empty-handed?”

“Exactly!”

“My grandmother used to tell me that all the time, but I resisted, because she focused on me alone and not Brandon, which I felt was unfair.”

“And it was.” Tommy shrugged. “It was similar in most houses I’ve been to as a kid, but since I was an only child, there was no one else to teach but me.”

“Well, I appreciate the good manners,” Linda told him and he answered her smile easily. “Listen,” she added, turning away from the fridge to face him, “I’d love for you to come to the inauguration party for my new term. It’s local, so you wouldn’t have to go to DC or anything.”

Tommy busied himself by stacking the dirty plates together, not knowing what to say.

“Brandon always shows up, if he doesn’t have any hospital emergency, but I know he wants to make those decisions with you, now, so that’s why I came to you, first,” Linda went on, crossing her hands against her chest. “I’d love to have the two of you there.”

“I don’t know how it would fit into our work schedule,” Tommy told her. “And I’d of course have to talk with Brandon about this, but also...” He paused. “I’m not sure how public I should be, given my situation. Small parties like this are one thing, but a big, publicized event is something completely different.”

“You’re in the process of adjusting your status, so you’re not in danger—”

“Yes, because in those types of situations the immigration agents are known for asking questions first and acting later,” Tommy cut in with a shake of his head. “Come on, you know better.”

Linda slumped against the counter.

“It wouldn’t be like that.”

“It’s still not your call,” Brandon spoke up from behind Tommy, who turned to see him in the doorway. “And you should know better than to ambush him like this.”

“I didn’t ambush him,” Linda protested, then met Tommy’s gaze. “I didn’t mean to ambush you.”

Tommy shrugged, relieved to have Brandon at his back now.

“I can’t give you the answer now,” he told her, sidestepping the ambush issue. “I may have to be at work anyway. But I won’t hold Brandon back or anything.” Tommy nodded at him. “Of course he should be there, cheering you on.”

Before Brandon or Linda could react, Frank showed up.

“Speaking of cheering, we’re three minutes out from midnight, so how about we all go back to the living room and start preparing the toast,” he said, picking up the tray with the champagne flutes and leaving before any of them could have a chance to argue with him.

Brandon curled his arm around Tommy and pulled him to his side.

“Come on, let’s go. I want to ring in the new year properly.”

Tommy let himself be led, enjoying the closeness and the warmth of Brandon’s body touching his. They paused near the window where they could see watch the snow.

“Don’t worry about her,” Brandon whispered and Tommy turned to him, realizing suddenly how close they were standing.

His heartbeat sped up.

“I’m not thinking about her,” he whispered back. Unable to stop himself, he lowered his gaze from Brandon’s eyes to his lips. They looked so soft, so enticing...

The chorus of people started counting down the seconds, but Tommy couldn’t focus on anything but Brandon—his lips, his arm around Tommy, his gaze that seemed to see right through him.

Can you tell how much I want you? Tommy wondered. *Am I as obvious as I think I am?*

They stared at each other and Brandon didn’t move, so, when the countdown got to zero, Tommy thought, *Fuck it*, and leaned up on his tiptoes to kiss him.

The touch of their lips was electric, like it had been at the wedding, but this time Tommy didn't want it to end so soon.

He put his hands on Brandon's neck and pulled him down a bit, pressing closer, not even pretending he didn't want more. Maybe he was showing his hand, *hell*, he definitely was, but in that moment right there, he didn't care. At all.

Nothing mattered more than the taste of Brandon and the way he pulled Tommy closer against him and kissed him back.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Damn.

Brandon shouldn't, *they* shouldn't, but it felt too good to stop now. Tommy was the one who initiated the kiss, and he melted into Brandon's arms, just like Brandon had imagined it. And the taste of him...

The loud pop of a champagne cork startled them both into pulling back and the reality came crashing down on Brandon as he realized where they were and what they were doing.

He cleared his throat and released Tommy, who seemed to falter for a second but then stabilized himself.

He wasn't looking at Brandon, though.

"Here you go." Frank appeared right in front of them, handing over two champagne flutes. "Time for a toast."

They moved closer to the group to listen to Linda, who offered a short but heartfelt toast, before everyone clinked their glasses together and took a drink.

Brandon didn't care for champagne, so he only drank a couple sips, but he saw Tommy downing his champagne in a few quick gulps.

Shit.

He should've known better. He had known better, he'd told himself he wouldn't do this, but once Tommy kissed him, all bets were off.

Thankfully, it was pretty easy to get swept into the well wishes and more small talk, people shuffling around and mingling, falling into the rhythm of easy conversations and jokes.

He kept note of where Tommy was at all times, but since he never seemed to suffer from the lack of company, Brandon felt it was better to leave him be.

It wasn't until an hour and a half later, when he was coming back from the bathroom, that Linda paused on her way to the kitchen.

“Go rescue Tommy from Greg,” she whispered. “He’s two drinks past too many and he’s circling through the same anecdotes again.”

Brandon grimaced and nodded. He’d been in this situation with Greg before, so now he moved quickly towards where Tommy was gamely pretending to listen with interest.

“Excuse me, I didn’t want to interrupt the two of you,” Brandon lied through his teeth, sliding next to Tommy so that their arms were touching, “but I feel like I’m going to fall asleep soon, so we’d better head home. If that’s okay with you?” he asked Tommy, who looked back at him for the first time since what seemed like forever.

“Of course,” Tommy said before excusing himself from Greg, who waved them off with a conspiratorial smile Brandon didn’t want to think about.

They quickly made the round of goodbyes and were out of the door in less than fifteen minutes. It had stopped snowing a

while ago, but everything was still covered with a thick layer of snow, making the front porch appear pristine and beautiful.

With their ride three minutes out, Brandon closed his eyes and tilted his head back, inhaling the clear, cold air.

For the first time since that night when they had gone back to Brandon's place to talk about the spontaneous, ridiculous idea he had, the silence between them was stifling and uncomfortable. He didn't know how to change that, though.

Should he apologize? And for which part?

Before he could figure it out, he heard the car approach, and he opened his eyes as it paused a few feet in front of them.

"Come on," he offered quietly, opening the door for Tommy, who hesitated for a moment but finally slid inside.

Brandon circled the car quickly and got in, sighing when the heat enveloped him and he could feel his shoulders relax a bit.

The driver was blissfully silent, so Brandon could stare through the window at the passing views and ignore the conundrum that was Tommy right now.

He realized that he hadn't been lying when he said that he might fall asleep soon, because he could feel his eyelids drooping, and his blinking becoming slower. By the time they arrived home, he might have actually fallen asleep for a few seconds, but the car pausing brought him back awake.

Once they entered the apartment and took off their jackets and boots, Brandon thought once again about perhaps saying something, but his brain was sluggish and he didn't want to

put his foot in his mouth simply because he couldn't think straight.

Tommy paused and looked at him for a long moment before crossing his arms against his chest with a sigh.

“Goodnight, Brandon,” he whispered, then turned away and headed to his room without a backwards glance.

“Goodnight,” Brandon said after him, but it was so soft that he wasn't sure if Tommy even heard him.

With nothing else left to do, he headed to bed.

* * *

Brandon had never considered himself a coward. Quite the opposite, really—he wouldn't be half the surgeon he was if he was too afraid to go for it, to try things, to go with his instincts even when it was risky.

But now, when he was lying in his bed and staring at the ceiling instead of going out there and facing Tommy... Now, he was definitely acting like a coward.

It was that exact thought that finally pushed him to move. He took a shower, hoping it would give him the boost it sometimes did when he'd slept too little and needed some way to wake himself up besides coffee. He went through his typical morning routine and got dressed, and then he was finally ready to leave his room.

Or at least as ready as he was going to be, because at this point it was useless to hope for feeling truly prepared.

The apartment was quiet and for one, terrifying second Brandon thought Tommy had left—and not just for a walk, but for good. The instant, searing regret hit Brandon straight in the chest and he inhaled sharply before he collected himself.

Don't be stupid, he told himself, but he still quickened his pace and didn't exhale until he saw Tommy on the couch, reading.

He was turned away, so Brandon let himself slump against the doorway and simply look at him for a long moment.

It felt so right to have him here, in the apartment that had become theirs, not only his, in a stupidly short amount of time. Everything became theirs so easily—this place, the office back at the hospital, the daily routine. Brandon had expected to miss his solitary life, which was why they'd discussed their boundaries right at the start, but now he realized that he didn't, not really.

Time with Tommy didn't encroach on his alone time, because he could be quiet with Tommy. They could spend hours reading side by side, or working, or doing whatever, and it felt better than anything Brandon had thought he would miss from his bachelor days.

Sure, maybe the shine would wear off with time, but for now, he didn't want to be too far away from Tommy, ever, and if that meant... If that meant that he had to squash the desire to pin him down and have his way with him on that couch, then that was what he would do, kiss or no kiss.

Because no kiss was worth it, not even as good as the one they shared last night.

Tommy tilted his head, and then, before Brandon had time to react, turned around quickly, spotting him right away.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither saying a word.

Finally, Brandon straightened and stepped into the living room.

“Hi,” he said, voice soft and gentle as if he was trying it out on a frightened animal.

But Tommy didn’t look frightened. He kept his gaze on Brandon as he watched him approach and only nodded at him as Brandon passed him on his way to the kitchen.

“Hi,” Tommy offered then, quiet but determined. “The coffee is ready, if you want some.”

“Thanks. Did you eat?”

“Yes, an hour ago.”

Brandon nodded and left him for now, busying himself in the kitchen with breakfast as he sipped his coffee.

They didn’t have to go anywhere today, so they’d planned on finishing the series they’d started. And maybe that was what they needed—a bit of normalcy, and the routine they’d established. A free day spent sprawled on the couch, staring at the screen without needing to talk, with enough space between them to not tempt Brandon’s self-control, seemed perfect right about now.

With that thought, and a second helping of coffee, he went back to the living room and found Tommy sitting up in one

corner of the couch, one leg shoved under him and the other pulled up to his chest.

“Are you up to watching the rest of the series now or would you prefer to leave it for later?” Brandon asked before sitting down, since if Tommy preferred to read some more, Brandon would go to grab his tablet as well.

“Now is good,” Tommy said, handing him the remote.

Their fingers brushed when Brandon took it, but he tried not to show any reaction, busying himself with finding the most comfortable position.

There was no use focusing on the things he couldn't have. If he reminded himself of that enough times, it would hopefully stick, once and for all.

As it were, he was struggling to get into the episode at first, too aware of Tommy being so close. Brandon glanced at him again and again, trying not to move his head and make it obvious, but it was hard. After a while, he'd gotten into the action on the screen, as the plot reached the point of a breakthrough in the investigation the characters had been struggling with for the better part of the story. The pace sped up, so it was easier to focus on what was going on there instead of getting distracted by the guy he...

“If one of them dies, I'm staging a protest,” Tommy muttered suddenly and when Brandon looked over, he saw him hugging a couch pillow to his chest and frowning at the screen.

He cleared his throat.

“I don’t think either would die, but I do think something will happen,” he offered. “It would be too neat of an ending otherwise and these guys aren’t known for those.”

“So what do you think would happen?” Tommy asked, staring ahead at the TV.

Brandon hesitated, but since it seemed like the scene wouldn’t have dialogue, he felt comfortable expanding on his point and suggesting some options he considered most likely.

They went back and forth a while, the conversation switching on and off depending on what was happening on the screen. They paused before the last episode to eat the leftover lunch they had from yesterday, but even as they ate, they discussed what they were expecting to happen at the end of the show. None of it felt forced, which gave Brandon hope that things between them were back on track—tentatively, still, but enough that he didn’t question his every move at every second, which was good enough for now.

Maybe they could pretend the kiss hadn’t happened. He would be okay with that. He wouldn’t forget, of course, but pretending would help push it to the back of his mind where everything he didn’t want to deal with had its place.

“But if they don’t find the victim before the end, what would that mean?” Tommy wondered out loud, waving his fork. “System failing them, sure, but we’ve seen that throughout the whole thing, so it would be nice to see at least something working, you know?”

“I hear you, but I don’t know if they want to show us that. Simon is more into showing viewers how broken something is

without patting us on the back with platitudes and instead just forcing us to deal with it.”

“He could branch out into happier topics, though.” Tommy leaned over the counter as he finished his lunch. “I guess I wouldn’t mind being forced to deal with something nice for a change, you know?”

Brandon swallowed, hard, and then shoved more food into his mouth to stop himself from saying something he would regret.

Something like, *I could force something nice on you, anytime.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had been a week since the kiss at the New Year's Eve party and Tommy was ready to jump out of his skin. Brandon acted as if nothing had happened, like he hadn't just... rearranged everything Tommy thought he knew about simply kissing someone.

Because there was nothing simple about that kiss. Nothing.

One thing was certain—neither of them had been pretending anything back then. Nobody touched another person like that when they were playing a part. Brandon touched him like he owned him, like he could take over not just the kiss but Tommy's entire life, and Tommy would be grateful.

And Tommy *liked* it.

But then Brandon had acted like it was nothing, leaving Tommy to stand there as something trembled in his chest, something much bigger and more dangerous than butterflies.

He'd downed his champagne and managed to get back to the party, but he hadn't forgotten. He couldn't.

Brandon apparently could, though. He still made Tommy coffee, watched TV with him, or simply hung out in the same room. There was nothing that suggested he'd thought twice about that kiss since it had happened, aside from some fleeting moments which Tommy might have very well talked himself into seeing.

Like right now.

They were sitting in Brandon's office having a break— Brandon after operating on an infant with tetralogy and Tommy after finishing his part of the paper on the effects of pre-birth mental health support for prospective parents he was working on with two doctors from the hospital he'd done his residency at. Tommy was telling him about some of the hospital gossip he'd heard from the nurses at lunch, which Brandon only pretended not to care about, but then later remembered every detail of.

“And then Ash told him...” Tommy was saying when he glanced at Brandon and then immediately lost his train of thought.

Brandon's gaze was both fond and hungry, like he wanted to swallow him whole.

Tommy blinked and there was no trace of that look anymore. Brandon tilted his head, as if expecting to hear the rest of the story, and meanwhile Tommy's heart skipped a beat, because there it was again, that look, he couldn't have imagined it yet again... Could he?

“What did he say?” Brandon prompted. “I'm listening, I promise.”

Tommy shifted in his armchair, sitting up from the way he was sprawled sideways on it before. He cleared his throat to buy himself a bit more time to get his focus back.

“Ash told him that he wasn't working here to get laid, especially by someone who was about to become a father.”

“The guy has a partner in the maternity ward and he's cruising? What the hell?”

Tommy grimaced. “Ash said he barely resisted cursing the guy out where he stood but managed to arrange for the patient’s sister to overhear the story as he told Rebecca all about it. The sister stormed out of there like her ass was on fire.”

“Oh, someone’s ass will be on fire but it’s not going to be hers,” Brandon said. “But wow, I know some people show their true colors at the hospital, what with the stress and all, but that’s a new one.”

“Sadly, not so new to me. I heard a version of that before, but from female nurses. It was the first one from a guy.”

“One would think that the personnel would be safe from sexual advances at the freaking maternity ward, but apparently not.” Brandon shook his head. “That guy’s going up there into the top of asshole family members’ list.”

“Who else is in there?” Tommy rested his chin on his fist as he watched Brandon. He wanted to keep Brandon like this for a while longer—close, and open, and focused on him.

Was it selfish? Probably. But with everything that was going on, Tommy craved comfort and safety and Brandon provided that in spades.

They swapped stories for a little while—some truly awful ones that made Tommy wish he’d found a different topic to focus on—but then they had to split once again. Brandon had a post-op consultation and a meeting, and Tommy needed to reread the article and send it off before deciding on what tackle next.

He sighed, tugging the laptop back onto his thighs once he was alone in the office again. Although he was interested in every research project he was involved in, he was tired of reading and analyzing data all day, every day. On the flip side, he was ahead on pretty much everything now. He'd even finished that grant proposal he'd been avoiding for a while. But he missed seeing and treating patients. He missed it *a lot*.

He hoped that by February he would be back on rotation again. Their interview date was January 21st—much faster than expected, so he assumed some strings had been pulled, but he preferred not to ask. If everything went well, the hospital should allow him back out there.

The only downside would be less time with Brandon, since their schedules would for sure differ, going forward. But Tommy still couldn't wait to get back to seeing the kids and being able to help them as best he could.

After all, that was what he was doing it all for—to be able to finish his neonatology fellowship at Ruth's and continue doing what he loved.

It didn't do him any good to keep focusing on things, or people, he didn't have. He needed to fight to keep what he already had, instead.

No matter how tempting those *people* were.

* * *

His resolve was easier to hold onto at work, but home was a different matter altogether.

He couldn't not watch Brandon there, not pay attention to how beautiful he was and how secure he seemed to be in his skin, which for some reason was different than being self-assured at work. Which Brandon was, of course—Tommy hadn't yet met a surgeon who wasn't—but he handled himself differently there. At home, that confidence was softer, more subtle, but still clearly visible.

Whether it was because Tommy paid Brandon so much attention or because he was struggling with confidence himself, it was hard to say. But he noticed it, nevertheless.

And he was drawn to it, every minute of every day. He almost never stayed in his room during the day now, choosing to occupy the couch and hoping Brandon would come out, too. They'd spent a lot of quiet time together, which was nice, but with the interview approaching fast, they also needed to learn stuff about each other that would have come up if they were in a real relationship.

Which was how Tommy learned about Brandon's lack of tattoos, about his childhood dog named Rupert, and about his dream trip to Italy when he'd finished medical school.

They also talked about their previous relationships, which was much less fun but necessary.

Apparently, Brandon hadn't been in a relationship in a while and counted only two serious ones, one still in college, and the other during his thirties that lasted six years—with half of that spent on different ends of the continent.

“We finally called an end to it when we both realized we'd prefer to stay home on the weekend alone instead of making a trip,” Brandon said with a shrug. “And even before that, we

saw each other once a month or so, sometimes less. It made more sense to let go. Last I heard, he's settled in San Francisco with a husband and two cats."

"Well, your husband is allergic to cats, so that's a no-go for us," Tommy offered and grinned when Brandon laughed.

"Roger that. But I don't even want cats, so that's fine with me." He shifted on the couch, tugging one of his legs under him as he stretched the other to rest it on the coffee table.

The coffee table he had moved closer to the couch the day after he realized it was too far for Tommy to reach.

"That's it about me, though," Brandon said, pulling Tommy's attention back to here and now. "Now it's your turn."

Tommy grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. He'd prefer not to think about Paul at all, but he knew that he should talk about him, not only because of the interview, but also because of... *Well*. If he ever got his way and they became something more than fake husbands, Brandon should know the story.

"I didn't have any serious relationships in college," Tommy started. "There was a guy, Theo, who was my first, which I guess is important in a way, but we were more like friends with benefits than anything else. I mostly kept my head down, studied, and worked. Then I finished med school, graduated, and got into a residency program in New Jersey." He stared off at the wooden flooring in the hallway, trying not to think too much of what he was saying. "It was a great hospital, a great opportunity, and I figured I won the lottery, especially once I saw Paul, the chief of residents. We got together after about nine months, and I was totally into him, so

much so that I agreed not to talk about it with anybody and to keep it hidden. Or rather, ‘to ourselves’ as he kept correcting me.” Tommy grimaced. “Anyway, it lasted over two years, until I finally grew a pair and called it quits once he told me point-blank that he didn’t want anybody to know even after the end of my residency. Then there was about a month or two when I still had to see his face all the time, but by then I was already focused on getting out of New Jersey and starting over somewhere else.”

He exhaled and finally dared to glance at Brandon who was watching him with an unreadable expression.

“That’s the best I have in regard to a serious relationship, which is pretty sad when you think about it,” Tommy tried for a joke but it fell flat.

“I’m sorry your ex was an asshole,” Brandon finally said, but his voice was off for no reason Tommy could pinpoint. “He shouldn’t have gotten involved with you in the first place, but to force you to keep it hidden for over two years is just a coward’s way to have his cake and eat it too.”

“I was in it, too, though,” Tommy pointed out, even though Brandon’s fierce defense of him was like a warm blanket over his shoulders. “I wanted to be with him and agreed to the secrecy.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t the one with more power in that situation. He was.” Brandon’s nostrils flared and Tommy realized he was more upset than he’d first appeared.

“Well, it’s in the past,” Tommy offered, hoping to redirect the conversation, since he didn’t want them to dwell on Paul

any longer than strictly necessary. “I was the one who ended it, too, which gave me closure. I moved on.”

“Good.” Brandon looked away. “I’m glad.”

Tommy smiled, thinking of everything he’d gained since breaking up with Paul and leaving New Jersey behind. He’d wasted two years—almost three if he counted the crush he’d had before they’d gotten together—but maybe if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have applied to the fellowship at Ruth’s. Maybe he would’ve stayed in New Jersey, because it would have been familiar and safe.

Now, he had more than he’d thought he could have and—if the interview went well—he would get to keep it for good. Sure, he’d developed another crush on a guy he probably shouldn’t be crushing on, but at least this one wasn’t an asshole. Quite the contrary, in fact.

At least Tommy’s type had improved.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As the day of the interview drew near, Brandon continued to spend most of his time outside of work hanging out with Tommy and learning more and more about him, which made it hard to hold on to his self-control.

By this point, he felt like he was clinging to it with his nails, in danger of slipping at any moment.

That story about the terrible ex helped, though. While on one hand, Brandon was ready to tear that asshole to pieces, on the other, he saw enough similarities to the power dynamics involved in their current situation that it made him even more uncomfortable about starting something than he'd been before.

He might want Tommy. He might want him a lot. But that didn't mean that he should have him.

He had to repeat it to himself time and time again, though, because it was so hard to resist the temptation, especially once he realized that Tommy might want him back.

Still, 'might' was only an option and the risks involved remained, which meant that he had to keep his feelings to himself.

He had to.

At least until that damn interview was over with. After that, assuming it went fine, Tommy should be able to relax, to get back to work and to his routine. The two of them would have more room to breathe, too, because while they would still

be under the watchful eye of the immigration office, they wouldn't have to be so careful all the time.

And Tommy would be safer to make his own choices without feeling pressured.

Hopefully.

But for now, Brandon needed to control himself and not kiss Tommy in the morning as he handed him coffee, not press him to the counter and kiss him some more, not follow him to his bedroom and...

"Brandon?" Tommy's voice interrupted his line of thoughts, thankfully, and Brandon looked up to see Tommy frowning at him.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said I'm going to see you after lunch at the latest." Tommy fiddled with the strap of his backpack, visibly tense. "I don't know how long it's going to take."

"Hey, you're going to be fine," Brandon told him, crossing the space between them in a few long steps and putting a hand on the side of his neck without thinking. "It's simply a conversation to make sure you're as prepared as you can be before tomorrow. She's on your side, remember?"

"Y-Yeah," Tommy breathed out and, *fuck*, leaned into Brandon's hand.

Brandon flexed his hand, because he clearly wasn't thinking at all, and Tommy inhaled sharply at the increased pressure, his pupils dilating as he stared up at him through his ridiculous eyelashes.

Brandon released him quickly and took a step back, closing both hands on the edge of the counter and tightening his grip hard enough to hurt.

“She’s on your side,” he repeated, voice low and scratchy, so he cleared his throat. “You’re going to be... fine.”

Safe in her hands. That was what he was about to say, but he swallowed down the words that had no place being spoken out loud now.

Not after what just happened.

Tommy stared at him and he seemed to sway on his feet for a second there, but then his face went blank right before he turned away and walked out.

He didn’t quite slam the door on his way out, but he came close.

Shit.

Brandon sagged against the counter and closed his eyes, trying to push back the memory of Tommy’s easy submission, his reaction to Brandon’s firm touch.

Maybe he’d finally lost that grip, after all.

* * *

Emergency surgery on a five-year-old victim of a traffic accident took over all of Brandon’s focus for the rest of the day. Barely a few minutes after he entered his office, he was paged into the ER and didn’t get to slow down for even a second until hours later when the boy’s condition had finally

stabilized and he could be transferred into post-op, and then ICU.

Brandon knew he shouldn't have sat down after he cleaned himself up, but he needed a moment to breathe before walking out and getting back to his office.

Because that had been close.

That had been too close, and not because he'd done something wrong, but because the whole team had done things exactly right and they still could've lost the boy. Like they sometimes did.

But not today.

Not today.

He hung his head and stared at his shoes, alone in the room but able to hear the cleanup happening next door.

There were no easy surgeries, especially when kids were involved, but Brandon considered the emergency ones the hardest. For others, he had time to prepare, to go over every option and consider every angle. For the ones like today, he had none of that.

The boy was fine, though—or at least would be, once he recovered—and Brandon needed to take that win and move on. He hardly ever lingered on a surgery these days, after so many of them over so many years, but every once in a while, something would strike a cord and make him pause, for good or bad.

He hefted himself up and left the room, dropping by the post-op to make sure everything was fine before he headed back to his office. His mind was blank as he walked the

corridor down the familiar path, one floor up the stairs, down the corridor again, and into the office, going straight to the couch to lie down and close his eyes.

He focused on his breathing and nothing else for a while. His body was too wired up for him to fall asleep but his mind was still empty of anything aside from the rhythm of inhale and exhale.

The door opening gave an abrupt end to that, though, and he sat up straight, only to see Tommy holding two soup containers and two spoons balancing on them.

“Sorry, didn’t want to wake you,” he said quietly as he came over and put the containers down on the table.

“I wasn’t asleep,” Brandon told him, brain still working a little slower than usual. “Only resting.”

“I heard you guys pulled a hell of a save down there.” Tommy pushed one of the containers towards him. “I picked tomato soup for you, since now I know it’s your favorite.”

Brandon smiled and moved to sit at the table. The smell hit him as he opened the lid and he could feel his shoulders dropping, just like that.

“Some comforts never change, huh?” Tommy’s quiet voice washed over him, but Brandon was too focused on the soup now to do anything more than hum in agreement.

Tommy chuckled. “Good to know.”

After that, they fell into an easy silence, eating and simply being together. Brandon realized that although there had been nothing wrong with how he used to handle days like this,

spending them with Tommy was a new level of comfort he hadn't known he could reach.

He sat back when he finished the soup. "Thanks for this."

"It's only a soup," Tommy told him, but still smiled down at his own empty container.

"Not only the soup," Brandon argued and when Tommy looked up, he met his gaze straight on. "For everything."

Tommy sat back with a sigh but at least he was still smiling.

"I'm glad I could do something for you."

Brandon shook his head. "You do a lot for me."

"*You* do a lot for me," Tommy corrected, "and I let you. That's different."

"Not to me."

Tommy held his gaze for a long moment.

"I'm beginning to see that," he offered quietly. "But we should probably shelve that conversation until later, when you're more... awake."

"Tomorrow," Brandon suggested, brain still a little slow while his heart picked up the pace. "I was thinking tomorrow, after the interview."

Tommy nodded. "Perfect. Now, lie down if you want and I can wake you whenever you need."

Brandon returned to the couch and stretched with a quiet groan, melting into the cushions like he couldn't before.

“I’ll be here,” Tommy murmured somewhere close and
Brandon hummed once again.

“Good,” he told him and then went out like a light.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The office they'd been led to was cramped and in need of some renovation—or at least some paint work, Tommy noted, staring at the right upper corner, over the boxes upon boxes of papers that were stacked on top of each other above the high cabinet full of shelves filled with file folders and books.

He tried to focus on anything other than what they were here for, but he couldn't. He clung to Brandon's hand hard enough to hurt.

"Hey, breathe," Brandon whispered as he leaned in.

Tommy inhaled deeply, catching Brandon's scent. Somehow, he'd already gotten hooked on it, but he'd been missing it lately, with how careful Brandon was about keeping safe distance.

But yesterday, Tommy had finally understood that Brandon had been fighting himself, not Tommy. Oh, Brandon had tried to be careful, he'd tried to stay away, but then there would be those moments, like when he put his hand on Tommy's neck or admitted that he liked taking care of Tommy, and Tommy melted, right then and there. Because he wasn't alone in this. They both enjoyed those moments. It wasn't just Tommy.

And he wasn't going to let Brandon get away with avoiding it anymore. Once the interview was over, assuming—hoping, begging, bargaining for—a happy outcome, Tommy would allow Brandon to take him home and then he was going

to make him admit the truth. Even if Tommy had to sit on him to accomplish that.

Well, Tommy would happily sit in Brandon's lap either way, but that was beside the point.

The door to the office opened and in walked a woman around fifty, holding a file folder to her chest like a shield. Still, she reminded him a bit of Rebecca, so Tommy found himself relaxing slightly.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she said, motioning for them to stay in their seats as they started to get up, then she sat down behind the desk and put the folder down. “My name is Sybille Carlow and I'll be in charge of your case. First, I will talk to both of you, then I will conduct separate interviews, after which I may have some additional questions for either or both of you. In the end, I will tell you what my recommendation will be and what are the next steps. Is that clear?”

Tommy nodded even as he gnawed at his lower lip with his teeth.

“Dr. Medina, I presume?” she addressed him and he nodded again. “I understand that this is a stressful situation, given your current status, but let me assure you that this is simply a part of the process of asserting whether or not you meet the conditions for the green card to be issued. If you do, then you're going to get one. If you don't, I'll walk you through the next steps. But there's no 'gotcha' third option, okay?”

“Okay.” Tommy let out a shaky breath. “I'm sorry, I'm just nervous. I want to get this right.”

Sybille smiled at his slipped-out admission. “All you need to do is answer my questions. There’s nothing more to it.”

She opened her folder and Tommy held his breath again, turning to seek out Brandon who looked at him calmly and offered him a small smile.

Brandon lifted their tangled hands and dropped a kiss on Tommy’s knuckles.

“We’re ready,” he said without taking his gaze off of Tommy.

As much as we’ll ever be, Tommy thought and turned to Sybille.

“We’re ready,” he echoed, and hoped for the best.

* * *

His heart was hammering so loudly in his chest that he was half-convinced he’d need medical attention, but as he burrowed into Brandon’s arms, he didn’t care much about anything else.

He got it. He got the green card.

Brandon pressed kisses to the top of his head and squeezed him hard, pulling him completely off his feet for a moment there.

Because it had worked. Tommy had legal status again. He could stay, he could stay, he could stay!

It took them a while to separate and Tommy flushed red as he realized Sybille was still there, watching them.

“We apologize,” Brandon told her as he gestured for Tommy to take his seat again before sitting down himself. “As you can imagine, this is life-changing news. Or life-settling, as it were.”

She smiled at him. “Life-settling, I like that.” Then, she turned to Tommy. “Congratulations, Dr. Medina. I’m glad I was able to make such a call, since you’re clearly an accomplished young man with a bright future ahead of you.”

Which wouldn’t matter much if he wasn’t married to an U.S. citizen, but Tommy didn’t let that burst his bubble now. Because nobody could take him away. He was here, and he was allowed to be here, and work, and live.

He pressed his hands to his suddenly teary eyes and swallowed hard.

Dios, he had come so close to losing it all.

Brandon rubbed his back and leaned closer, murmuring that it was all going to be okay now, and Tommy suddenly wanted to be home, right this second. He inhaled deeply and straightened in his seat.

“I’m good, I’m fine,” he said, skipping the apologies. “Is there anything else we have to do, here?”

Sybille nodded and handed him a sheet she pulled out from a drawer.

“Here is the information about what to expect, moving forward. Like I’m sure you are aware, with cases like this one, our office monitors the situation for some time after the initial

decision is made, to make sure everything is still as it's been confirmed today.”

She went over the rest of the key points on the sheet—which were things Linda and the lawyer she'd recommended had already told him about—then she leaned against her desk and glanced between the two of them.

“That is all from me. Do you have any more questions?”

They shook their heads.

“Very well,” she continued. “Thank you for coming today and good luck moving forward. Oh, and congratulations on your recent marriage.”

They thanked her and said their goodbyes, and then they were on their way.

Tommy made it outside before he leaned against the building as his knees threatened to give out.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, staring at Brandon and probably looking a bit manic. “I can't believe it.”

Brandon offered him possibly the biggest grin Tommy had ever seen on his face.

“You better believe it,” he said. “You're a proud recipient of the green card and you can stay and work here without worry.”

Tommy pulled out his phone.

“I have to call HR. And text the gang at Ruth's, so they can spread the news.” He paused. “Shit, and I should call my parents and tell them everything.”

“I’ll call Linda.” Brandon took out his own phone. “If that’s okay,” he added, a question clear in his voice.

Tommy wanted to kiss him so badly.

“It’s more than okay,” he assured him. “And you can tell her we’ll come to the party on Friday.”

Brandon raised his eyebrows. “Are you certain? We don’t have to.”

“I know, but we should be there. And I don’t mind now.”

He didn’t mind *anything* right now. He was on cloud nine and he wasn’t going down for quite a while.

“Let’s start calling, then.” Brandon smiled and leaned against the wall next to him. “But I’ll order us a ride first so we can go home.”

Tommy beamed. “Yeah. Let’s go home.”

* * *

“So,” Brandon started as they sat back on the couch after the lunch they bought from the deli down the street and ate at home, laughing at silly things and buzzing with all the pent-up energy. “How do you want to spend the rest of the day, now that we got the notifications out of the way?”

Tommy turned right in time to see him lick his thumb clean and he made up his mind then and there.

“I want to talk about us,” he blurted out and shifted in his seat in the corner of the couch that had become his in barely a

few weeks. He faced Brandon straight on and didn't let himself look away. "And not the pretend part, but what's there besides that."

Brandon inhaled deeply and shifted in his seat to face him, as well.

"Okay."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "Okay? That's it?"

"Did you want me to argue?"

"No, of course not, but..." He sighed. "I want this to be a two-way conversation, not just you listening to me."

"I never do—" Brandon protested, but then paused, probably at the look on Tommy's face. "I only do that when you need to vent, but I've been a willing participant in many a conversation, so don't tell me I don't contribute."

Tommy sagged.

"You're right," he admitted, playing with the end of his ponytail. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to start off so strong, I just... I want to stop with the bullshit part and see what's real. Or what could be real, I guess."

"And you worry that I won't be honest with you?"

Brandon tilted his head. "Why?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm not sure which version is true." Tommy swallowed. "You seem into me one moment and then pull back and keep yourself away in the next, as if there was an invisible wall between us suddenly. Then you do something nice for me and I assume it's a show of affection, but I'm not sure, because for some people, they're simply nice and they

don't want anything, and I'm left wondering where you are with that. Because I can tell you like taking care of me, and I'm willing to admit that I enjoy that, but I'm in danger of possibly reading too much into it, since I want there to be more underneath it, and it's..." Tommy suddenly ran out of steam. "Hard," he added quietly.

"I don't think you're reading too much into it," Brandon offered, though it was obvious he was taken aback by the stream of consciousness Tommy let out. "But I don't know what to tell you, because on one hand, there are things that I want, and on the other, there's a clear power imbalance here and I don't—"

"Okay, but that power imbalance is going to stay, we can't get rid of it completely," Tommy cut in, sitting up. "You have to see that after today it's not that... Well, I'm not saying it's not important, but it's not as..."

"Immediate?"

"Yes, exactly! I'm safe for now. And we'll have to be careful moving forward to appear like we've been this loving-if-impulsive couple from the start, but it's not like you're going to change your testimony for the immigration office based on whether I sleep with you or not, are you?"

"Of course not!" Brandon frowned. "Of course I wouldn't do that."

"And I know that," Tommy told him firmly. "I know you're not going to hold my status over me, because I know you and I trust you. So if we both get that, where's the power imbalance here?"

“Well, you’re still the one with more to lose,” Brandon pointed out.

Tommy shrugged. “Yeah, but I’ve always been the one with more to lose and it’s not going to change whether we’re only a fake couple or not. Also, don’t pretend like you have nothing to lose here, either, because once you went on record as my loving and devoted husband, you’re liable as well. You risked a lot for me and I know that. I see that.”

“And I don’t want you to be indebted to me or *grateful*.” Brandon grimaced. “That’s a big problem for me, right there. How do I know that you really want me and not...”

“You know this by trusting me,” Tommy told him firmly. “Trusting me to know my own mind and to be honest with you.”

“I’m not suggesting you’re dishonest,” Brandon protested. “That’s not my intention, at all. But the last thing I want is to take advantage of you, in case you’re reading too much into it. You didn’t want me before this, so—”

“I did! I wanted you since the very first time I saw you on the hospital corridor!”

Brandon stared at him, obviously thrown off balance, and it took Tommy a second to realize what he’d said.

He went red and covered his eyes. “Shit.”

“You wanted me before this?” Brandon, *damn him*, asked in disbelief.

Tommy swallowed hard and met his gaze again, because he had no dignity left at this point, did he?

“Obviously,” he muttered and frowned when Brandon just kept staring. “What, like half the hospital doesn’t find you hot? Please.” He crossed his arms against his chest. “I wasn’t hoping to get anything out of the marriage deal you offered, though! Not consciously, at least,” he amended, because, well, he’d had some fantasies about how this could go. Sue him. “I was actually expecting to have to hide my heartbreak when I would undoubtedly go in too deep,” he continued in a lowered voice. “So if you want to reject me, I’ll deal with it. But then I’d ask you not to confuse me, because it’s one thing to pretend out there, and another when you’re making me believe you care when we’re here. It’s difficult to get over that.”

Brandon ran a hand through his hair and exhaled sharply.

“I had no idea,” he said quietly before clearing his throat. “I had no idea you wanted me before or that you’d expected to fall for me once we did this. That’s... I didn’t even hope for that,” he admitted. “I noticed our chemistry, of course I did, but it’s not all there is and I kept thinking about how easy it would be to get it twisted.”

“Why? Have you ever gotten it twisted with someone else?”

“No,” Brandon told him vehemently. “But I’m drawn to being the one in control. With my relationships in the past, it was mostly relegated to sex, and outside of it usually meant putting down boundaries and keeping distance, which didn’t end well. And now, with you... I’ve come to realize how good it feels to do things for you, to make various decisions, to have you look to me for answers. It could easily get addictive.”

“But I don’t mind any of these things,” Tommy pointed out, his face still hot from the embarrassment of admitting to his crush. What was one more confession, right? “I like them.”

Brandon swallowed as he shifted in his seat.

“That’s... That’s great, honestly. Still, the last thing I want is to take advantage of you.”

And Tommy could clearly see what was going on here, now. Brandon did want him. Brandon possibly wanted him more than he knew what to do with, which was perfect. But he was also scared of hurting him.

Of scaring him off.

As if, Tommy thought and made a decision.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brandon's heartbeat sped up at Tommy's admission, but he was still at war with himself, worrying about making a mistake he couldn't take back.

But then Tommy pushed up from his seat onto his knees and *crawled* towards Brandon until he slid onto his lap.

Brandon's mind went blank.

"Listen to me," Tommy whispered, putting his arms around Brandon's neck and threading his fingers through his hair. "I like giving control over to you, but that doesn't mean I'd ever let you do something to me I don't really want. Case in point," he added, brushing his lips against Brandon's jaw. "Having this whole conversation was my idea."

"I was planning on talking to you after the decision today, too," Brandon said, hands coming up to rest on Tommy's hips.

Tommy chuckled. "Great. So you can tell me all about it now." He moved his lips down to Brandon's neck. "But only the good parts. Tell me what you want me to do to you. Tell me what you want to do to *me*. Because I'm open to trying it all."

Fuck. Brandon was already getting hard and they'd barely done anything.

But just this once, he could do well with the directions given.

“Fine.” He cupped the back of Tommy’s head and guided him until he was staring back at Brandon, with his flushed cheeks, darkened eyes, and the wet lips that were *right here*. “You can sit there and listen, then,” he murmured, tightening his grip for a second and hearing Tommy’s breath catch. Brandon offered him a slow smile. “I want you to ride me on that couch sometime. Slow enough that you’re going to be begging me to come, slow enough that all your muscles will ache the next day, and you will remember it every time you move. I want you to slide down from my lap and suck my cock whenever I tell you to.”

Tommy let out a moan and his eyelids fluttered close, but one cluck of Brandon’s tongue was enough for him to open them again.

“Here you go,” he whispered. “That’s good. You have to listen carefully and pay attention. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Tommy nodded, eyes full-on black now.

Brandon exhaled slowly, trying to ignore his hardening cock. “Say it.”

“That’s what I want,” Tommy whispered, looking from Brandon’s eyes to his lips. “Can I kiss you now?”

“Depends.” Brandon tilted his head. “Do you want to hear more of my list or not?”

“I do,” Tommy said quickly. “I want to hear all of it.”

“Good.” Brandon rubbed his thumb behind Tommy’s ear and felt him shudder under his hands. “You want to be good for me, don’t you?”

Tommy inhaled sharply. “Yes.”

“Perfect. Because that’s what I want, too. I want to be so good to you—”

“You already are,” Tommy cut in, dropping his head back but not breaking eye contact.

Damn.

“I want to take you apart slowly,” Brandon continued as if Tommy hadn’t spoken, deciding to allow him that one interruption, because the words went right to his heart. “I want to fuck you slow and deep, moving in and out of you like we have all the time in the world. I want to fuck you fast and hard in the kitchen, and in the bathroom, and on any and all furniture around here that can sustain it without breaking. I want to press you down and keep you there, maybe tie you up if you’d like that.”

“I would,” Tommy breathed out, his hard cock straining his pants as he rolled his hips down.

Brandon tightened his grip again. “Well, maybe I’ll gag you, too, so you won’t interrupt me so much.”

Tommy’s moan went straight to Brandon’s cock, but he wasn’t done yet.

“I want you to tell me all the fantasies you’ve been having about me, and I’ll decide which one we’re going to start with. Then we will switch to my list, because, trust me, I’ve had some ideas over the last few weeks.” Brandon moved his hand from the back of Tommy’s neck to the side, so that he could run his thumb over the line of his jaw. “I want to leave my marks on you, even if only where nobody but us can see them.

You and I will know they're there. And maybe we'll be somewhere, out having dinner, at a party, on a walk... And I'll press my fingers over the mark just so," he murmured, digging his thumb in, and watched, more than heard, Tommy's breath hitch. "Because I'll want you to remember."

"Bran, fuck, I can't—" Tommy squirmed in his lap and dug his hands into Brandon's shoulders hard. "I want it all, I do, but please, let me come now. I'm so close," he added in a whisper. "Please, let me come."

Fuck, Brandon was not strong enough to resist the pleas. Tommy asking to come was a fantasy before, but the reality was a hundred times hotter.

He hummed, letting his hand slide slowly from Tommy's neck down his chest.

"How close are you?" he asked, pausing over Tommy's heart and hearing it hammer against his ribs.

"About to—" Tommy bucked his hips helplessly. "—come in my pants."

Brandon moved his hand further down, pausing a breath away from Tommy's visible erection.

"I guess that's fine with me," he said and moved that last inch, rubbing his hand over Tommy's cock.

It took barely a few strokes until Tommy shuddered and came with a loud moan, arching his back as he curled inwards, pressing his face to Brandon's neck as he fought to catch his breath.

"Fuck," he panted, sending warm puffs of air over Brandon's sensitive skin. "I can't believe you."

Brandon chuckled, nosing the top of Tommy's head and inhaling the sharpened scent of him, and them, and sex.

"What?" he asked quietly. "Something not up to your satisfaction?"

"Fuck you," Tommy muttered and moved to swat at him, but his arm gave up half-way through. "I'm a mess. And you've been holding out on me even more than I thought."

Brandon hid his grin in Tommy's hair even if Tommy couldn't see it.

"Well, I guess I'm not, anymore," he offered. "Or am I?" he added with a tease and laughed when Tommy groaned.

"At least let me recover, here," he said. "And then it's your turn."

"I'm not coming in my pants," Brandon told him firmly.

"No, you're not." Tommy patted him on the chest. "Because that would be a waste. I'm swallowing you whole the second I can feel my legs again."

Brandon tightened the grip he still had on Tommy's hip.
Fuck.

"I guess that's acceptable," he managed to get out, voice gruff but stable.

Tommy huffed out a laugh. "I'm sure it is."

For a minute, they simply stayed like this, and Brandon relished having Tommy so close, so pliant in his arms. Where he belonged.

Then, Tommy pulled back slightly, caught his gaze, and slid down from his lap onto the ground without breaking eye-

contact until the bulge in Brandon's pants drew his attention away.

The sight of him like this... Brandon would never get over that.

Tommy did a quick work of his pants and boxers and went at Brandon's cock like a starved man. He ran his tongue along the length of it, then took it into his mouth and moaned, sending shocks of pleasure all through Brandon's body.

"Yeah, so good," he breathed out, the tips of his fingers brushing against Tommy's cheeks. "Perfect."

Just like Tommy moments before, Brandon was wound up from the conversation and finally being able to touch, to feel that body against his, so it didn't take long to send him over the edge.

Tommy eagerly swallowed everything and seemed perfectly happy to stay like that—on his knees before Brandon, focusing on his cock as if there was nothing else that mattered—until Brandon pulled him up to taste himself on Tommy's tongue.

Tommy was even more pliant in his lap now, humming happily into his mouth as he ran his hands under Brandon's shirt.

After a while, Brandon moved them so that they were lying down, with Tommy pressed against him and dropping soft kisses along Brandon's neck.

Brandon ran his fingers over Tommy's back, then tangled them in the ends of Tommy's ponytail and tugged at it.

“Uh-oh.” Tommy closed his eyes and sighed. “You keep doing that and we’ll have to go again,” he said, even as his body relaxed fully against Brandon.

“Really?” Brandon raised his eyebrows. “I’ve thought it’s a comfort thing for you.”

“Well, it is when I do it and when it’s more, like, petting it than pulling,” Tommy muttered, voice slowing down in a way that signaled he was about to fall asleep. “But when you tug at it, especially a bit harder, then, yeah. It’s hot.”

Brandon filed it for later and settled in, hooking one leg over Tommy’s to keep him close as he drifted off and using his free hand to pick up his phone.

He intended to busy himself with some scrolling or reading, but it turned out that he much preferred to watch Tommy sleep and to think about how lucky he was.

He couldn’t say if he was more elated or relieved at Tommy’s admissions, but he was brimming with both emotions now that he’d had a moment to think. Not only did Tommy reciprocate his interest in a real relationship, he also wanted Brandon before this whole questionable plot, which meant it hadn’t been born out of obligation or gratitude.

They could actually build something out of it. And who knew, maybe it wasn’t going to work, maybe they were swept up in the honeymoon phase, and at some point down the line they would decide they didn’t want it, after all.

But maybe it *would* work. Maybe Brandon’s impulsive, out-of-character move had led him down the path to getting what he’d already convinced himself he would never have—a

happy and fulfilling relationship. One that wasn't about how much work you put into it, but that you put in the work because of how much you get out of it.

One that allowed him to be who he was, without fighting it—or fighting *about* it, like with other people he'd dated.

He knew that they had several conversations ahead of them and the one they'd just had was only a beginning, not an end.

But they had a beginning, now.

They were in it, together.

And Brandon was already looking forward to what they had ahead of them as they settled into their new life.

Their real, shared life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tommy couldn't focus on that movie to save his life.

They both had work tomorrow and with Tommy being reinstated into a regular schedule, they were going to have less time to spend together from now on, so they'd decided on a movie after dinner to have a quiet evening. It sounded like a good idea, especially after that emotional rollercoaster of the day.

But what Tommy hadn't taken into consideration was how much more of a distraction Brandon would be now, when Tommy was allowed to touch him, and be near him, and generally invade his personal space whenever he wanted.

They were curled up together in Brandon's end of the couch, with him against the cushions and Tommy tucked under his arm. And it started out okay, because it felt safe, comfortable, and good, but soon enough, it turned out to be *too* good.

Tommy's whole body seemed to be attuned to everything related to Brandon now. The weight of his arm over Tommy's back, the firmness of his chest, the way his fingers tapped some random rhythm so close to Tommy's hip... All of that, and more, overwhelmed Tommy's senses and muddled his brain until all he could think of was *Brandon, Brandon, Brandon*.

And now Brandon slid his other hand from the side cushion onto his own thigh, which was not only *right there*,

but also very close to another part of Brandon's body Tommy was very interested in.

He stared at Brandon's fingers, resting mere inches away from his crotch, and he could feel his own cock stiffening at the sight. His mouth watered at the memory of sucking Brandon's cock, licking around the head as Brandon stared down at him.

"I want you to slide down from my lap and suck my cock whenever I tell you to."

Damn.

That whole filthy *exposé* Brandon delivered, breaking Tommy apart and putting him back together while he himself seemed barely ruffled, was the hottest thing Tommy had ever experienced.

He hadn't even known he could be so overwhelmed by want, so eager to be an instrument somebody would play as if they'd been born to do it and practiced it day after day, year after year.

And they hadn't even taken their clothes off yet by that point.

Tommy's breath caught at the mere idea of Brandon spreading him naked on the bed and fucking him, driving into him like he never wanted to do anything else in his life.

He shifted his legs as he felt himself hardening even more.

Then, Brandon put his hand to Tommy's face and turned it until Tommy was looking up at him and holding his breath.

“Is there something on your mind?” Brandon asked, as if he didn’t know, as if he didn’t drag his thumb against the line of Tommy’s jaw, setting his body on fire. “You seem distracted.”

“Well, you are distracting,” Tommy offered, shifting so that he could see Brandon’s face easier. “As you’re well aware.”

Brandon raised his eyebrows. “Am I? I wasn’t doing anything.”

“That’s the thing.” Tommy glanced down at his lips. “You don’t even have to do much.”

“But I bet there’s something you’d want me to do, isn’t there?” Brandon leaned closer. “Tell me what made you hot just now,” he murmured, lips so close to his that Tommy could almost feel the press of them.

“I was thinking about the list you gave me earlier,” Tommy whispered. “And how I can’t wait for you to fuck me in your bed.”

Brandon kissed him then, hard and deep, keeping Tommy’s head in place by gripping the back of his neck. There was no hesitation, no slow exploration, no nothing. Brandon’s tongue was sweeping over his, moving surely and leaving him breathless.

“Let’s go to bed,” Brandon whispered into his mouth, barely giving him enough space to breathe, and then he was on his feet and turning the TV off while tugging Tommy with him.

They didn't kiss on their way to the master bedroom, the only point of contact being their tangled fingers, but Tommy felt on fire, as if his body couldn't hold this much desire, this much want.

He tugged his shirt off the second Brandon let go of him and he tossed it aside, impatient and hungry, before Brandon's gaze stopped him in place.

"What?" he asked breathlessly, fingers paused on the waistband of his pants.

"Nothing," Brandon told him with a tilt of his head as if he was appraising Tommy. "I'm simply looking."

"I'd like to be looking, too." Tommy waved pointedly at Brandon, but then didn't wait for him and tugged his pants off together with his underwear and socks.

Brandon took a step forward before he halted and caught the bottom of his own shirt.

"Get on the bed, then," he said before tugging it off and exposing his chest and stomach, one Tommy had wanted to put his hands and lips on ever since he'd seen Brandon in only a towel and almost embarrassed himself right then and there.

Now, he did as he was told, crawling onto the middle of the mattress and settling on his back, eager to see Brandon lose the rest of his clothes.

Because he might have seen his chest and stomach, and his cock, too, but he hadn't seen him completely naked yet, and...

Fuck.

How did Tommy get so lucky?

Even completely naked, Brandon excluded confidence Tommy could only dream of. There was no doubt in Brandon's gaze now as he watched Tommy, heat and desire overwhelming everything else.

Tommy felt wanted on a deep, molecular level, and didn't care that it made no sense, because it was still as real as it could get.

Brandon crawled on top of him but kept himself inches above Tommy, only touching his thighs as he put his knees between Tommy's legs, pushing them further apart.

Tommy had no idea one could be so exposed and feel so completely safe at the same time, but he did.

Brandon got him.

Tommy believed in that wholeheartedly and he saw it reflected in the way Brandon looked at him now—as if he was finally getting to do what he'd wanted to do for a very long time, and he came prepared.

Breaking eye contact, Brandon leaned in to nuzzle Tommy's neck, dropping soft, barely-there kisses as he did so, and Tommy tilted his head back to give him more room.

But Brandon was already moving lower, sliding his hands down Tommy's soft chest and following with his mouth. He paid close attention to Tommy's nipples, tugging at them with his teeth which made Tommy arch his back and clasp his hands over Brandon's shoulders as he hissed in part-pleasure, part-pain, then leaned in for more.

Further down, Brandon was gentle again, nosing against Tommy's stomach and inhaling him deeply as he gripped

Tommy's hips, his hands fitting there as if that was a place created just for them.

And in that moment, Tommy would say that it was.

It was his last coherent thought for a while, though, because Brandon moved lower still and then kissed the head of Tommy's cock before taking it into his mouth.

Damn.

Tommy heaved his breath and tightened his hands over the sheets, because he didn't want to come so early again. He didn't want to come before Brandon could slide into him. But it was *so good, fuck.*

"Don't," he breathed out, panting. "Don't make me come yet." The sight of Brandon's head right above his straining erection was too much for him to handle. He cursed and closed his eyes. "Fuck me, please."

Brandon slid up Tommy's body in a graceful, smooth move that shouldn't be allowed, then pressed a kiss against Tommy's mouth.

"Oh, but I am," he whispered with a wicked smile and, *Dios*, if Tommy hadn't been in love with him yet, that would have been it. That would have been the moment he'd fall hard and deep, with no way out.

But he was already there—helplessly, ridiculously in love—so he only licked his own bottom lip and mouthed, "Please," against Brandon's mouth.

"Okay, okay, I got you." Brandon dropped a soft kiss onto his heated cheek and moved to the bedside table before

returning for a longer, deeper kiss once he had lube and a condom in hand.

Yes. Finally.

“I got you,” Brandon repeated, softer, as he rolled them onto their sides and pulled Tommy’s leg up. He stretched him with sure strokes until Tommy was a panting mess, arching into his touch and begging Brandon to get his cock inside him already.

Finally, Brandon guided Tommy onto his back again, quickly put on the condom, and then he was there, situating himself between Tommy’s legs and leaning over him as he—
Fuck. Yes.

Tommy moaned as Brandon pushed inside him in one slow slide, Tommy’s legs shaking around Brandon’s hips.

He wasn’t going to survive this, but it didn’t matter, because all his senses were overwhelmed by *Brandon, Brandon, Brandon*. The sheets smelled like Brandon and now everything was amplified by the heat between them, their bodies slick with sweat. Brandon licked into Tommy’s mouth as he fucked him as if he might never get a chance to do it again, which was stupid. Honestly, Tommy was never going to leave this bed, ever.

He gasped, spilling between their bodies as his mind went blank, his orgasm taking him by surprise and overwhelming him. He shook in Brandon’s arms, his legs dropping onto the mattress because he couldn’t keep them up anymore. He could barely breathe as he floated on the wave of pleasure.

Brandon tensed right before he came, and Tommy wanted to lick every muscle of his back, taste every dip. For now, though, he only ran his hands over them as Brandon fell onto him, pinning him to the mattress as he rode his own orgasm.

Damn.

Tommy blinked up at the ceiling as he inhaled the scent of Brandon and sex, hoping to memorize it, to bottle it up in his memory and never let go of it.

He knew good sex could become better with time, but when the start was this amazing, where could they go from here?

He had no idea.

But then again, he couldn't wait to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It had been a long while since Brandon had last woken up in bed with another person, but he would have remembered if it had ever felt this good.

It hadn't.

Tommy was plastered against his side and right now he was rubbing his face against Brandon's shoulder blade.

"Good morning," Brandon said, voice low and gruff after sleep. He was thinking about rolling over onto his back, but Tommy's weight felt too nice, so he sighed into his pillow and stayed where he was.

Which was apparently the right move, since Tommy shifted to straddle Brandon's hips and lay over his back like a warm blanket as he kissed his neck.

"Good morning," he murmured. "I didn't get to do enough exploring yesterday," he added, as if he needed to explain why he was making Brandon feel good.

"Have at it," Brandon told him, still relaxed, even though he knew his cock would soon get very interested in the proceedings.

For now, though, he didn't feel like moving.

Tommy dropped kisses all along Brandon's shoulders and nape as he ran his hands up and down Brandon's back slowly. Then, he moved lower, sliding over Brandon's ass to sit on his thighs in a move that woke Brandon's cock right up.

He could feel Tommy's erection alongside the dip of his ass and while Tommy pretended to be busy kissing his way down Brandon's spine, the small movements of his hips told a different story.

They'd both put on nothing but boxers for bed, so now two pieces of fabric were the only thing separating them, creating friction against Tommy's cock, so he might be seeking that out, but if not...

"If you want to fuck me, I'm fine with you fucking my thighs or, if you've been really good, fucking my mouth, but my ass is out," Brandon said, turning his head to the side so he could catch a glimpse of Tommy's face.

Tommy hummed and moved his hands to Brandon's sides, finally resting them on the top of his hips.

"I'm not after your ass, no matter how great it is," Tommy told him. "But now I'm curious."

Brandon shrugged, relaxing back into the mattress.

"My prostate is too sensitive," he explained. "Any direct stimulation is painful rather than pleasing."

"Ah. That has to suck."

"I'm not complaining. I'm getting my pleasure somewhere else."

Tommy chuckled and then licked a stripe over Brandon's spine.

"Do you? I haven't noticed," he teased. "Maybe you could flip for me so I could explore some more and possibly find at least one of those spots."

He moved aside and Brandon readily turned over, his cock now half-hard and definitely interested.

“Be my guest,” he said, lifting his hips so that Tommy could slip his boxers off.

As Tommy leaned in and took the head of his cock into his mouth, Brandon reached down and grabbed a hold of Tommy’s ponytail. Remembering Tommy’s admission, he rolled the tail over his hand and tugged gently, at first, then a little harder.

Tommy moaned around Brandon’s cock, which made Brandon grunt.

“Yes, that’s it,” he told Tommy. “Make all the noise you want.”

They went from slow and languid to fast and hard in a blink of an eye, and Brandon came down Tommy’s throat ridiculously quickly. Tommy’s look of satisfaction was short-lived, however, because Brandon pulled him up by his hair and kissed him stupid, tasting himself as he closed his other fist over Tommy’s erection.

“You’re so good for me,” Brandon whispered as he broke the kiss and Tommy gasped. “So eager to please, too.”

Tommy closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Yeah, I’m —”

“Come on.” Brandon tightened his grip right under the head. “Come for me.”

Which Tommy did, quick and messy, breathing hard as he pressed his face against Brandon’s neck.

Brandon gentled his touch right away, pulling Tommy onto his lap and petting his back as he came down from the high.

They needed to get up soon, take a shower, and get ready for work.

But they could still take a few minutes for just this.

Just them.

* * *

Half-way through his shift, Brandon realized that considering the office theirs now, not his alone, worked way better when Tommy still spent all his time working from here. But he no longer did—he was back on rotation and attending to patients, which meant he'd most likely be too busy to come over more than once, for the lunch break they'd agreed on earlier.

And Brandon, so versed in solitary work before, was now feeling out of sorts, because he couldn't look over and see Tommy focused on a book or an article, gnawing on a pen, or furiously noting something down. He couldn't catch him looking back.

He'd gotten used to those short, barely-there breaks in his work before he'd go back to it with renewed energy. Which was why he was distracted and off his game today, working his way through the latest research on tetralogy recuperation so slowly that it was frankly embarrassing.

Half past eleven, he decided to wander up to the ICU and check on his latest patient. On his way back, he might drop by the maternity ward, maybe see how Tommy was doing.

A bit more energized, Brandon left the office and headed upstairs.

ICU was never quiet, but there was that particular, ever-present stillness there, as if they were existing in suspended time, a moment before and after everything might change. Some of the hardest losses happened there but also some of the biggest breakthroughs. One could never be sure what it would be like, each time.

Thankfully, the boy from the accident was on the mend, his stats improving daily and giving hope that in a day or two he might be moved out from the ICU onto a different floor. It also didn't seem like another surgery would be needed, which was a huge relief.

On his way out, Brandon stumbled onto the boy's parents who thanked him, again, with choked voices and eyes full of tears. He was terrible at offering comfort to family members, but he did his best, assuring them that the move would make things more comfortable not only for the boy but for them as well, since they'd have more access to their son there.

Finally, he managed to slip away and rushed towards the stairs before anyone else could stop him for a chat.

The maternity ward should at least be safe from any grateful parents, since he didn't have any patients there.

He was barely a few steps into the ward, however, when he was accosted by Rebecca, who stepped right in front of him

and offered him a grin and raised eyebrows.

“Dr. Sherwood, is there anything you need?” she asked, obviously struggling not to outright laugh at him.

Thankfully, before he was forced to admit why he was here, she waved him off and tilted her head towards the nursery.

“He’s in there now.” She stepped to the side. “We sorely missed having him around, but he definitely missed those babies more.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Brandon offered, figuring he owed her for not embarrassing him further. “He couldn’t wait to get back here to you all.”

She beamed at that and then let him go, so he followed the familiar path down the corridor. As he went, he realized the last time he’d been here was the night of the foundation’s holiday party—the night he’d come here in search of Tommy, something in him desperate to help, to try and make it right.

How things had changed in barely a month...

He reached the big window into the nursery and zeroed in on Tommy right away. He was sitting in the back, in the usual armchair, and he had two small bundles tucked into his chest, supporting them with his hands as they slept—or at least looked like they slept.

With Tommy focused on the babies, Brandon could stare to his heart’s content, leaning against the window frame and watching as Tommy smiled softly, radiating joy.

It hit Brandon that for all that Tommy had been putting on a brave face in the light of the bosses sidelining him, there had

been something missing, something Brandon could clearly see right here, right now.

Tommy lit up when he was with patients, particularly the babies. Brandon had heard through the grapevine that Tommy was well-liked by the parents as well, but that special charm he had was reserved for the little ones. And it seemed to be working in both directions.

Then, Tommy lifted his head from where he'd been staring at the babies and did a double-take, eyes widening as he met Brandon's gaze.

Brandon smiled and nodded, letting him know nothing was wrong, and Tommy answered with a grin of his own, the patented sunshine-like smile. At that, the nurse who had been previously busy with changing a diaper on one of the other kids and stood facing away from the window, glanced back and spotted Brandon there. When she turned back again, she said something that made Tommy blush so hard he went red up to his hair.

Curious but determined not to push his luck, Brandon took it as his cue to leave.

And as he was making his way back to his office—*their* office—he realized he felt better already, and looked forward to getting back to the research he'd abandoned earlier.

Apparently, Tommy-related breaks were still effective, even if Brandon had to work a bit harder to get them now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

On Friday afternoon, Tommy came to regret his spontaneous, enthusiastic decision to accompany Brandon to Linda's party celebrating the start of her new term.

A small gathering for New Year's Eve was stressful in many ways but turned out fine. The big, public event with a lot of strangers, loud music, and, last but not least, a lot of media coverage—that was something else.

And he would be there as the congresswoman's new brother-in-law, which was sure to attract more attention than Tommy would ever want.

"Hey, breathe." Brandon walked up to him from behind and met his gaze in the mirror as he circled his arms around Tommy's waist. "It's going to be fine."

Tommy turned around in the loose embrace and put his hands on Brandon's chest with a sigh.

"I guess it just hit me that somebody will likely take notice of you having a date."

Brandon lifted his eyebrows. "Wasn't that the reason why you didn't want to go to the party before?"

"Yeah, but I was focused on them discovering the illegal immigrant among them and frog-marching me out of the event."

"Frog-marching you?" Brandon pulled him even closer against his chest. "I wouldn't let them frog-march you out of

anywhere. And Linda would make a scene so big they would cover it in national news.”

“Yeah, that last part doesn’t actually make me feel better, but I appreciate the former.” Tommy rested his head against Brandon’s chest and breathed in and out slowly, letting himself be enveloped in the scent and the feel of him. “And I get that my fears seemed extreme. I know.”

“Hey, I understood your position, remember?” Brandon dropped a kiss on the top of his head. “It’s okay. Trust me, I’m glad you don’t have to be scared of anything like this anymore.”

“Now it’s all about being the brother-in-law of a rising star of the Democratic Party.”

“I’m telling Linda you called her that.”

Tommy pretended to glare. “CNN has called her that. I’m simply an informed member of society, getting my news from the mainstream media.”

“Of course, yes, I’m sure that will make all the difference,” Brandon teased. “In the story I’m definitely telling her.”

“Traitor.” Tommy pulled back a bit. “Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

“Always,” Brandon assured him and Tommy’s familiar butterflies were back. Sure, they’d been joking around, but Brandon’s easy admission still sent Tommy’s heart aflutter. “But that doesn’t mean I’d ever stop teasing you.”

“Uh-uh, I see how it is.” Tommy took a step back and tilted his head, looking Brandon up and down in a slow,

deliberate way. “So what you’re saying is, there’s no way I can convince you not to tell her.”

Brandon’s eyes flashed and Tommy’s heartbeat kicked into higher gear just from that.

“Dangerous proposition,” Brandon told him in that low voice Tommy loved. He reached out and brushed his thumb over Tommy’s lower lip, pressing in lightly for a moment, then withdrawing. “But we can’t be late tonight, so I guess you’ll have to do the convincing afterwards.”

Tommy, who stopped breathing the moment Brandon had touched his mouth, exhaled in a rush.

“Okay,” he whispered, no longer thinking about the upcoming party, but what would happen after, when they returned home. “Let’s go, then. We’ll come back to this later.”

Brandon laughed, leading him from the room.

“Oh, we definitely will.”

* * *

Of course, even Brandon’s charm couldn’t quiet Tommy’s fears and doubts forever, so as they stepped into the giant hall full of people—some in campaign merch, some in formal dress, and the majority somewhere in between—Tommy’s heart was hammering in his chest. Brandon kept him close and held his hand, which helped, but it was also sure to bring attention to them as the night progressed, which would do the exact opposite.

To put it lightly, Tommy was a mess.

His only saving grace was the fact that Brandon assured him that his nerves weren't obvious to anyone who didn't know him. Tommy could only hope it stayed true.

And not just because of the reporters.

With everything else going on, he hadn't thought earlier about the fact that at a party highlighting a huge win for Linda, Brandon wouldn't be the only family member in attendance.

In other words, he missed the fact that he was about to meet Linda and Brandon's parents tonight.

No big deal.

At all.

"It's actually not a bad place to meet them, if you think about it," Brandon said when Tommy admitted he'd only realized this. "They're going to be focused on Linda and other guests, so they won't spend too much time with us, you'll see."

He turned out to be right. Apparently, the older couple knew quite a few wealthy people in the district, so they'd been maintaining those contacts for Linda's fundraising needs. Still, Mrs. Sherwood—*call me Dora, I insist*—made sure to invite Tommy and Brandon to dinner soon.

"So we'll have time to sit down and get to know each other," she added, turning to Brandon with a lift to her eyebrows that was so similar to her son's that Tommy had to hold back a chuckle.

“Yes, Mom.” Brandon kissed her cheek and sent both parents off on their way.

Tommy allowed himself a sigh of relief as they disappeared into the crowd, but sadly, his peace didn't last long. Less than half an hour later, a tall man with dark hair and a short graying beard walked up to them and grabbed Brandon by the shoulder to turn him towards himself, completely ignoring Tommy.

“Brand, I've been hoping to find you here tonight. How are you?”

Tommy definitely didn't like the proprietary way the man was touching *his* partner, but he tried to keep his face neutral, even when Brandon smiled at the guy and pulled him into a one-armed hug.

“Leon, I had no idea you're in New York!” he said as they separated. Then, he seemed to remember he wasn't alone. “Sorry, Tommy, this is Dr. Leon Cooper, an old friend who used to work at Ruth's but left us for the sunny beaches of Southern California. Leon, this is Dr. Tomás Medina, my husband. He works at Ruth's, too.”

Leon was much worse than Tommy at hiding his feelings, it seemed, because the fleeting, dismissive glance towards Tommy was as obvious as his *intimate* interest in Brandon.

“Wow, so the rumors have been true, after all,” he said with a tilt of his head that was probably supposed to be flirty. “Brandon Sherwood has left the market.”

“I didn't consider myself on the market for a long time now, so I wouldn't say that, but yes, I'm definitely off of it

now either way,” Brandon said. “And what about you, how are things going out there? They made you the Chief Surgeon, didn’t they?”

A Chief Surgeon. Of course. Because it wasn’t enough that he was older, handsome, and obviously into Brandon.

Tommy muted them out at that, focusing on the room instead. There were posters from the campaign, old and new, and a band was setting up on the stage, since a short set was planned for after the speeches. Tommy busied himself with watching the crowd, full of unfamiliar faces, wondering who was who. Then, to the left, he saw...

No, it couldn’t be.

The man disappeared before Tommy could take a closer look, but he still froze, mind going a thousand miles an hour, wondering what the odds would be for Paul to attend a party like this. He fancied himself uninterested in politics, after all.

“Tommy?” Brandon’s voice prompted Tommy to turn around.

At least Leon was already gone. *Good riddance.*

“Sorry, I got distracted.” Tommy glanced back one more time, but there was no sight of Paul—or the man who looked like him.

“I can see that,” Brandon said, and there was something in his voice that made Tommy focus solely on him.

“What is it?”

“You tell me,” Brandon countered. “Did Leon piss you off or something?”

“I don’t know the guy and he had no interest in getting to know me, so I guess we didn’t get to the pissing off stage.”

Brandon lifted his eyebrows. “Sounds like you managed to sprint to it, after all.”

“Well, he wasn’t very subtle, either, was he?” Tommy shrugged, resisting the urge to cross his arms against his chest.

“No, he wasn’t.” Brandon put his arm around Tommy’s shoulder and brought him close. “Come on, let’s go grab something to eat before the speeches start, maybe that will cheer you up.”

I know what else would cheer me up, he thought but didn’t say. If that had been overheard at the damn political function, he would have to leave the country after all, if only out of embarrassment.

The thought alone was enough to lift his mood a bit, though, especially with what the two of them had planned for later tonight.

A little bit longer, some speeches, some music, and they would be able to sneak out.

“I need to go to the bathroom first, so meet you by the soft drinks table?” Tommy suggested and Brandon hummed in agreement.

After they separated, Tommy quickened his pace—not only had his bladder become more insistent but also wandering solo around this crowd didn’t feel all that great.

He never did well in the crowded spaces and he should have known better than to agree to come. But he really wanted

to be here for Brandon and for Linda. He wanted to offer his support back, after everything.

Thankfully, there was no one else in the bathroom, so Tommy quickly relieved himself and washed his hands, but as he was about to leave, the door opened and he came face to face with Paul.

Fuck.

Tommy took a step back on an impulse, but Paul only used it to come inside and stand there, between Tommy and the door.

“I can’t believe you,” Paul spat without so much as a greeting. “You’re married now? Really?”

“That’s none of your business,” Tommy told him, crossing his arms against his chest and lifting his chin. “Dr. Nielson.”

Paul snorted. “Oh, come off it. You’re overreacting, as usual.”

“You’re the one who followed me into the public bathroom,” Tommy pointed out. “Aren’t you worried about how that may look?”

“You’re not one of my residents anymore.”

“Last I checked, that didn’t matter to you. You made it clear that even after I finished the residency you didn’t want anyone to know.”

“Because you wanted to stay at the hospital!”

Tommy shook his head. “Whatever. I’m not doing this with you. We’re done.”

When he tried to move past him, Paul grabbed his elbow.

“What the hell are you still doing here, anyway?” he gritted out, tightening his grip enough to be painful. “After they denied you your visa, you should’ve been long gone.”

Tommy’s body went cold and he tugged his arm free at the same time as the door behind Paul opened.

Tommy barely registered Brandon coming in, too busy staring Paul down.

“You knew,” he said, keeping his voice low because otherwise he would start screaming. “You knew they denied it.”

Paul took a step back, but he still didn’t seem to notice Brandon behind him.

“Your old landlord called, searching for you. I guess you gave him my number for whatever reason,” he said accusingly, as if that mattered. “He let it slip that he opened your mail and pretended to be apologetic about it. Asked for your number and I told him I didn’t have it, but I’ll try to find out.”

“And you didn’t.” Tommy stared at him in complete disbelief. “You were willing to stand back and watch my life get destroyed because I didn’t want to be your secret anymore.”

“I didn’t have a way to contact you!”

“Of course you did. You’d have found it in less than ten minutes, if you wanted to.” Tommy was suddenly completely, utterly done with this conversation and this entire night. “Forget it. Just, leave me alone. And never follow me anywhere ever again or I’ll make life very hard for you.”

Paul reached out as if he would grab Tommy again, but Brandon caught his hand and twisted it behind Paul's back so fast Tommy barely managed to step away.

“He told you to leave him alone.” Brandon pushed Paul aside. “You better listen to him. It wouldn't look good for your career, after all.”

Paul narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth, but Brandon wasn't done.

“Also, in the future, stay away from your residents, you piece of shit. I'll be watching you,” he warned, leaning closer for a second before stepping back to make room for Paul to leave.

And he did. He tossed one more glare towards Tommy, then stormed out.

Brandon moved closer to Tommy and cupped the side of his neck.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

Tommy closed his eyes and tried to push back everything that just happened.

They were in public. They had a party to go back to.

And, judging from the noise they could now clearly hear from the monitors in the corridor, Linda was about to start her speech.

“Let's—” Tommy hesitated but then squared his shoulders. “Let's get this done and then go home.”

Brandon watched him for a moment longer before nodding.

“Okay.” He stepped back and offered him his hand, which Tommy readily took, tangling their fingers together.

They left the bathroom and headed towards the hall where everyone seemed to have come back to for Linda’s speech, because the corridor was completely empty.

On the screens they were passing, Tommy could see her on the podium already, thanking everyone for the votes and all the support. Then she paused.

“And I’m also deeply grateful to everyone who does the work most dear to my heart. There are many wonderful, extraordinary people who are with me in this fight and some of them are here tonight,” she said. *“And this week, there’s been another win, one that is special to me personally...”*

Tommy froze in the middle of the corridor, dragging Brandon to a stop as well.

“She’s not going to... Is she?”

“No,” Brandon said, but he was staring at the closest monitor now. “She wouldn’t have—”

“... because it’s someone dear to me and to my family...”

That was it. Tommy was done.

He couldn’t take anything more today.

“I have to go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brandon didn't say a word to Tommy the entire way home. He simply followed him out, caught a taxi, and spent the whole ride turning the last hour over and over in his head.

How could so many things go wrong in such a short time?

He had no answer to that.

But he sure as hell was going to have some questions for his sister because she had never said a word about family in public without clearing it with them first, and now...

Brandon hoped as hell that it was only a misunderstanding, but he was also well aware that he tended to react with built-in and well-honed protective instincts where Linda was involved and it had sometimes led to him making bad calls.

Tommy still wouldn't look at him even once they got home, but when it seemed like he would go straight to his room, Brandon finally spoke up.

"Hey, hey." He rested a hand on Tommy's shoulder, not wanting to put more force than that after what that asshole had done earlier. "Come on, talk to me."

Tommy paused and turned towards him but shoved his hands into his pockets, staring at some point behind Brandon.

"I don't know what you want me to say." Tommy gnawed on his lower lip. "This whole evening was a clusterfuck. I knew I shouldn't have come, but you guys obviously wanted me to, and..."

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Brandon protested when Tommy drifted off. “We accepted your initial decision and then it was you who changed it. And I checked with you after that, too. I get that it was hard—”

“No, you don’t get that!” Tommy cut in, his pent-up emotions seemingly bubbling over. “You don’t get any of it, because your life is completely different! The confidence, the success, the prominent family, and the exes who are still falling over you instead of trying to ruin your fucking life because you told them no!” Tommy waved his arms around the apartment as if he was showing Brandon something. “Everything is picture-perfect here, but I’m not, and I’m not going to be the poster boy for immigration initiatives or whatever, no matter how much your sister would like that. I didn’t realize I was marrying into a political family, for fuck’s sake!”

Brandon shut down his emotions halfway through that monologue, but he could feel them in there, cramping his stomach and licking his throat to give as good as he got, strike back and hit where it hurt.

But he’d never really wanted that with any of his partners, and he sure as hell didn’t want it with Tommy. While Brandon didn’t mind spirited discussions based on different opinions, he hated the fights that were designed to do nothing but hurt.

And he could tell Tommy was lashing out here, even if it didn’t really make it any easier to hear.

“Tell me what you want me to do, then,” Brandon finally said, voice appearing particularly quiet after Tommy’s loud exclamations. “Because I could argue your points, or I could

tell you I'm sorry that you had a rough evening and we could veg out on the couch. I'm open to suggestions. Just tell me what you want."

Tommy lifted his chin. "I want to be alone."

Well. Brandon had asked, hadn't he?

He had nothing to say to that, so he stayed silent and watched Tommy look at him warily before turning away and heading to his room, leaving Brandon to tend to himself.

Brandon released a slow, shaky breath once he was alone in the hallway.

That went great.

* * *

After taking a hot shower, he felt only marginally better, so he resigned himself to vegging out on the couch alone and eating reheated leftovers because he had no energy for anything else.

Once he sat down with his curry in hand, though, he checked his phone to find a few texts from Linda wondering where they were and one missed call from Frank, probably about the same.

He texted them both that he and Tommy needed to bow out early and left it at that. He hoped Linda would be too busy to investigate further tonight, but of course his sister could never leave things alone, so she called him a few minutes later.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked right away.

Brandon really didn't want to have this conversation—or any other conversation, really, he was all talked out—but he resigned himself to it, burrowing deeper into the cushions and staring ahead.

“Sorry, I didn't want you to worry,” he told her. *I didn't want you to think about us at all.* “I should've texted you earlier, but we left rather abruptly.”

“What happened? You're not in the hospital, are you?”

“No, no, no physical injuries or anything, it was...”
Brandon paused, aware of how protective Tommy was of his privacy. The last thing he would want was for more people to know about his asshole ex. “A shitty encounter that ruined the night and it was better for us to leave. We only caught the start of your speech.”

“Yeah, I wish you could've been there for it,” Linda said quietly. “I threw in a surprise.”

Brandon rubbed his eyes as he geared himself for what he was about to say. It didn't sit right with him, but... he had to ask. He owed it to Tommy to check.

“Speaking of, we did manage to catch a bit about you having a special, personal win. Did you... You didn't tell people about Tommy, did you?”

“What? No!” Linda raised her voice, then quickly pulled herself together. She was probably in some empty room at the community center, the party still going strong at this hour. “I wouldn't do that! Wait, is that why you guys left?”

Brandon hesitated for a moment too long and that was all she needed.

“What the fuck, Brandon?” She lowered her voice even more. “Since when do you storm out from a public event in a snit?”

“Hey, there,” he protested. “I told you we had a bad encounter. We only caught a part of the speech as we were walking down the corridor right after and... It would have been a bad idea if we stayed. Someone from the media would catch us with a weird expression on our faces or something, you know how that goes.”

There was a loud silence on the other end of the line and Brandon rubbed his eyes again.

“You know,” Linda started slowly, “I get that things change and shift when you are in a serious relationship, and I obviously shouldn’t be your priority, but... But it sucks that you accuse me of something you know I wouldn’t do only because you catch a sentence out of context at a bad time.”

Brandon sighed, staring at the ceiling. He was messing things up all over the place tonight.

“You’re right. I know it’s not your style and I didn’t really think you’d do that, I just... wanted to make sure. But you’re right. And I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well. Sometimes it’s best not to ‘make sure’ and at least wait a bit to find out what was going on,” she told him. “Like if I, let’s say, suspected you were lying to me about your sudden engagement, I wouldn’t confront you about it right away. Because I might have been wrong—or not, but I would still assume your best intentions.”

Fuck.

Fucking damn it.

What was he to say about that?

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have even asked. I’m sorry.” He cleared his throat. “For everything.”

There were a few long seconds of uncomfortable silence, then Linda sighed.

“Okay, okay. Chin up, buddy,” she finally said in a more upbeat tone. “You know I can’t stay angry at you for long.”

“Most of the time,” he corrected, but he still let himself relax back into the couch cushions. “And I’m even worse at it than you, so there’s that.”

“There’s that.” She paused, then huffed. “So, you didn’t ask me what that surprise was.”

Brandon snorted. “Linda, the absolute best of sisters, what was the surprise that you dropped tonight?”

“That’s better. So, the big news is... I found Juanita.”

“What?” Brandon sat up at that. “Where?”

“She’s been in Minnesota for almost a year now, they offered her a visa because the university wanted her on their research team. She’s a kick-ass biologist, apparently.” Linda sounded like a teenager again, excited for how cool her best friend was. “She stumbled onto a video of one of my speeches and looked me up. She reached out to my office and I got to talk to her a few days ago. I invited her to visit any time.”

“Wow.” Brandon couldn’t quite believe it. While he hadn’t thought about Juanita for a long time before Tommy’s

situation came to light, it had been a painful loss back then, one that casted a long shadow. “That’s amazing.”

“I know, right?” Linda had to be beaming, because her voice was full of excitement. “It feels like a dream.”

“I’m happy for her. And for you. And in case I didn’t tell you lately, I’m proud of you and I’m glad you’re out there, fighting the good fight.”

“Well, you’re out there, saving lives, so I couldn’t sit back and do nothing, could I?” Linda teased before growing serious again. “But I’m proud of you, too. You’re doing amazing things, at work and outside of it.”

“Okay, okay, now we’re pushing it. It’s only January and we’re using up the quota of compliments.”

“Maybe we should raise the limit, since we’re so awesome.”

Brandon laughed. “Sure, we can discuss it at some point, but now you should probably go and enjoy your night.”

“Yeah, I need to get back out there, but... you’re going to be okay?”

Brandon shifted in his seat and looked towards the hallway, only to see Tommy standing there, watching him.

“Yes,” Brandon told her, gaze not leaving Tommy’s. “I should be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Tommy had berated himself for unloading at Brandon pretty much from the moment he turned away from him and left, as if walking away from his primary source of comfort these days would make any of this shitty night better for him.

He was angry at himself, furious about Paul, and put out by Linda. Hell, he was irritated about Leon, too, even though it seemed like nothing, at this point.

But none of it was Brandon's fault, none of it was even directly about him, and yet he'd taken Tommy's stupid explosion on, as if that made any sense.

And maybe, to Brandon, it did. *Fuck*. Tommy had thrown a bunch of stupid shit in his face, and in turn Brandon offered ideas on how he could help.

Dios.

Tommy took a long shower where he completely lost it over the fact that the man he'd been with for two years had come close to ruining his life out of pettiness and what amounted to hurt pride.

And Tommy had been in love with that guy once. Or rather, he was in love with a version of that guy he'd imagined and built up in his head over time. He clung to every scrap of affection or interest as if it confirmed his hopes instead of reflecting on how far from that fantasy Paul truly fell.

What a scumbag.

Tommy pushed the shower stall door open a little harder than necessary and winced when it hit the wall.

He needed to calm down or he would go on destroying things tonight.

He sat down heavily on the bed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs as he stared at the floor.

He was free of Paul now and that asshole would never threaten anything in his life ever again.

Unless you let him, he told himself with a grimace. Paul wasn't the one who'd bolted out of the party and then attacked the one person who had done nothing wrong, simply because said person was there. Paul wasn't the one hiding in his room like a coward because he didn't want to face Brandon after that display.

Then, Tommy heard Brandon moving down the hall and his chest ached over how much he wanted to join him—to follow him to the couch, breathe him in, and forget everything else.

With an ear out to listen to the noises out there in the apartment—the ping of the microwave, the phone ringing, the murmur of Brandon's voice—Tommy toweled off his hair and dressed himself in the comfiest clothes, trying not to think. Finally, he took a deep breath and left the room, as ready to face Brandon as he would ever be.

As he walked towards the living room, he heard Brandon's teasing voice, and then saw him laugh right when he reached the opening into the living room space.

Brandon was sitting on the couch, staring at his lap, with the phone to his ear and that disarmed expression he often wore when he was interacting with his sister.

And Tommy might have lost his trust in Linda, but not in Brandon. He couldn't imagine Brandon being this relaxed, this friendly with her if she'd told the world Tommy's story.

Which meant that she hadn't. She had been talking about someone else in her speech, and Tommy had jumped to conclusion and made a mess.

Shit.

Tommy's list of people to apologize to suddenly grew longer.

But first things first. He had to make it right with Brandon.

As if on cue, Brandon looked up and met his gaze, pinning him to the spot.

Tommy barely breathed as he watched Brandon finish the conversation and put his phone aside without taking his eyes off of Tommy.

When the silence dragged on and it seemed that Brandon wasn't going to be the one who broke it this time around, Tommy took a deep breath before stepping closer.

"Is there—" he started quietly, then cleared his throat and tried again, a little louder. "Is that option to veg out on the couch together still available?"

Brandon nodded after one of the longest seconds in Tommy's recent memory.

“Sure,” he said and picked up the bowl from the coffee table. “I heated up some curry for myself, but there’s more in the fridge, if you want.”

“Okay.” Tommy hesitated. “Do you want me to bring you anything else?”

That earned him a soft smile.

“No, I’m good.”

Tommy heated himself the rest of that curry and as he watched the timer count off the seconds, he tried to figure out what to tell Brandon, other than *I’m sorry*.

Which, he finally decided, was a decent start, so he took his dinner and came back to the living room before tucking himself into his corner of the couch and meeting Brandon’s gaze.

“I’m sorry. I was a jerk.”

“You weren’t a jerk,” Brandon protested. “But apology accepted.”

Tommy relaxed slightly against the cushions. “I shouldn’t have taken it all on you, and I said some things I didn’t mean.”

Brandon tilted his head. “I thought you knew already that I’m far from a picture-perfect guy with a picture-perfect life.”

Tommy winced at the bowl in his hand.

“Yeah, I know. But,” he added, glancing up at Brandon through his lashes, “I do think you’re perfect for me.”

If Tommy had ever told anyone that these words—no matter how true—would melt the hell out of the man like Brandon, nobody would believe him. Absolutely nobody.

And yet, here they were, with Brandon trying, and failing, to hide his smile as he took another spoonful of his curry.

“Well,” he finally said after he swallowed the food. “I guess that’s a title I’m going to work my ass off to maintain, then.”

“I’m sorry I came after your family, too, that was uncalled for and rude,” Tommy went on. “Especially after Linda had done so much for me. I was... I was totally beyond my limits after that thing with Paul and I guess I used Linda’s words as an excuse to leave.”

“I appreciate that,” Brandon told him. “But you never need an excuse with me, okay? Nothing other than the fact that you really want to leave. That would’ve been enough. Hell, I should’ve probably insisted on that myself, after that bathroom scene.”

“No, I should’ve said something. You don’t have to always manage my reactions, even if I appreciate you trying. Besides, you did enough by intervening when you did.” That reminded him something he’d been wondering about earlier. “Why were you there, by the way?”

Brandon grimaced. “I saw him follow you out. I checked him out after you told me the story, because I wanted to know what he looked like, in case I ever ran into him at a conference or whatever. I didn’t expect to run into him at my sister’s political event, that’s for sure, but I’m happy that I recognized him. Even if he didn’t hit you—”

“He wouldn’t,” Tommy protested, then paused. “Well, who the hell knows, at this point. I wouldn’t take him for a guy

who stands by as his ex-boyfriend's life goes down in flames, either, and yet, here we are."

"He was an asshole to you and apparently found new levels of assholery after you two broke up." Brandon put his empty bowl away. "I'm sorry he hurt you again."

"I thought I was over him having any influence on my life, but—" Tommy shrugged. "—I can't say it doesn't hurt."

"Of course you're hurt." Brandon stretched his leg and nudged Tommy's foot with his. "Anyone would be."

Tommy sighed. "I know, but... On top of what he'd done, I feel like an even bigger idiot for ever trusting him, you know? I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well, he's not bad looking, if you squint," Brandon offered dryly, making Tommy snort. "But I do have to agree that your taste has vastly improved."

"Oh yeah?" Tommy grinned at that and put his bowl away. He felt lighter, the dark cloud hanging over his head dissipating finally. "Why would you say that?"

"Well, you pointed out that I'm perfect for you, so..." Brandon waved a hand over himself. "Obviously a better choice."

Tommy nodded, then shifted onto his knees and moved to straddle Brandon's lap, just like a few days ago.

"Obviously better," he whispered, running both hands through Brandon's hair and resting them at the back of his neck. "Obviously the best."

Brandon put his hands on Tommy's hips and squeezed gently.

"You're the best choice I could've made, too," he whispered back, his gray eyes shining in the dim light of the room.

Tommy's heart started hammering in his chest.

"I know it's early." He bit his lower lip. "And I don't expect anything back, but I... I love you. And I want you to know that."

Brandon's eyes widened as he stared at Tommy, who forced himself not to look away, even if a part of him wanted to run and hide.

"Jesus, Tommy," Brandon breathed out, lifting his hands to put them on the sides of his neck, delicately, as if he was handling something rare and precious. "I..."

"You don't have to say anything," Tommy rushed to say. "Like I told you, I already had a crush on you before all this, so I was half-way there already. And even with that, I get that it's fast. I'm happy to wait. And if you don't—"

Brandon cut him off with a kiss, a hard press of lips at first, then a soft, feather-like caress.

"You've turned my life around in ways I couldn't have predicted and you've filled every void, even those I didn't realize were there," Brandon whispered, his eyes so close and so earnest that Tommy's throat tightened. "I do believe you're perfect for me, so if that's not love yet, it will surely follow. Because I don't want to picture my life without you, not just now, or in two years, or however long. Sure, we have some

stuff to figure out and smooth over, but... I've never enjoyed sharing my life with anyone like this and I've never even shared so much of it before."

This time it was Tommy who leaned in for a kiss, overwhelmed by Brandon's words, his touch, his taste. He hid his face in Brandon's neck and inhaled deeply, hoping he would get to call it his safe haven forever.

Because no matter the fact that they had said their vows before they truly meant them, Tommy was now looking forward to following them through.

For all the days of his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A few weeks later

Waking up with Tommy kissing his way down Brandon's body had already solidified its position as Brandon's favorite way to start the day, but he appreciated each and every time Tommy decided to drive this point home once again.

"Good morning," Brandon muttered, turning onto his back with a nudge from Tommy, who straddled his thighs and dropped a kiss on Brandon's chest.

"I was thinking," he said as he worked his way up towards Brandon's neck, "that I could make it even better by taking a ride."

Brandon's body woke up as if a switch went off and he put his hands on Tommy's hips on a well-honed instinct.

"Be my guest," he told him and tilted his head to the side so Tommy could nuzzle into his favorite spot easily.

After about a minute of this, coupled with a lazy rocking motion of Tommy's hips, Brandon bucked under him, signaling he was more than ready for what had been promised.

Tommy huffed as he drew away from Brandon's neck, but his cock, already hard and wet with precome, told a different story.

He grabbed a condom he'd apparently prepared earlier and rolled it down Brandon's cock. Then he shifted into place and took it inside him in one slow but insistent slide.

"Fuck," Brandon muttered, anchoring his feet for leverage to better meet whatever rhythm Tommy would decide on.

"Yeah." Tommy tossed his head back, sending his ponytail flying, out of reach for Brandon, who might have developed a slight kink for holding onto it while they fucked. "I woke up early and decided to use my time wisely."

"By prepping yourself." Brandon ran his hands up and down Tommy's thighs. "Can't say I hate the results."

Tommy offered him a grin as he squeezed around him, making Brandon grunt and buck his hips again.

"You can't, can you?" Tommy teased, but then neither of them said anything for a while, slipping into a familiar rhythm of this, right here—Tommy moving slowly, picking his pace up as he grew more impatient, and Brandon meeting his every move, answering the push and pull, as they chased their orgasms together.

Tommy was beautiful like this, moving confidently and like he was owed the pleasure he was seeking. Brandon loved to watch him take it.

But then again, Brandon loved to watch Tommy do almost everything there was—from sex, through sleeping and lying around on the couch, to sitting up in the armchair at work, focused as he read or wrote. Any day now, someone would call Brandon out for staring at Tommy too much, but he didn't care.

They were married. He was allowed.

“Come on,” he told Tommy now, noting he was close already. “Come for me, just like this. I want to see you.”

Tommy inhaled sharply and pulled harder on his cock, once, twice, then he spilled over his fingers onto Brandon’s stomach with a sigh of relief.

“Here you go,” Brandon breathed out, petting Tommy’s thighs even as he pushed against Tommy’s weight, chasing his own pleasure. “Perfect.”

Tommy squeezed around him, sending him over the edge, then fell forward and leaned his head on Brandon’s sweaty chest as he caught his breath.

Brandon would gladly roll them over, get rid of the condom, and go back to sleep for a little while, but they didn’t have time for that today, so he allowed them a few minutes before prodding Tommy off his lap—and off the bed.

“Come on, a wedding waits for no man.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.” Tommy shook his head on his way to the bathroom. “Besides, we’re already married.”

“Yes, we are.” Brandon smiled at his back and got caught when Tommy glanced at him with his own grin. “But you said it yourself, your parents wanted a wedding party, so we’re doing it.”

“Your parents wanted it, too!” Tommy protested. “Not to mention Linda, who would apparently be over the moon if she could throw us a wedding party every other month.”

Linda was especially happy that she could throw them a real party, now that the whole pretend part was a thing of the past, but Brandon didn't say it. Tommy knew it, anyway.

"Sure, we can call it even," Brandon told him as he slid into the shower stall after him. "But that only makes it even more important to be on time."

Tommy sent him a knowing look.

"Keep your hands to yourself and we might," he said before turning his face towards the stream.

Brandon chuckled but dutifully kept his hands to himself... mostly. They showered and got ready right in time for Frank to pick them up.

The wedding party was held in the backyard of Brandon's family house, a huge open space that had seen bigger summer pool parties than this gathering. Both Brandon and Tommy preferred the idea of a small celebration, with only family and some friends and colleagues who hadn't been able to make it to their wedding on short notice.

Besides, it was like Tommy had said—they were already married. So today was a cherry on top, not something they wanted to make a big deal about.

And yet, as the party progressed, amongst laughter and gentle teasing, as well as some really touching toasts, Brandon was beyond grateful that they'd decided to do it. Their wedding had been rushed and stressful in many ways, even with those few small, touching moments that had been among the first signs of things turning real between them. Now, like this, the two of them had a chance to truly enjoy it, to celebrate

their marriage and their real partnership that had been born out of the most bizarre circumstances.

And as Brandon took Tommy's hand to lead him to their second first dance, he felt the same certainty he'd had about doing the right thing, but there was also so much more.

"You make me so happy," he whispered as they started swaying to the same song. "I love you."

And Tommy gave him the most beautiful smile.

"I love you, too. And I can't wait to spend forever with you."

THE END

of Tommy and Brandon's story

But there's still something else...

EPILOGUE

Shawn was utterly spent, ready to flop down onto the couch in his office and not move for at least an hour. He shared the sentiment with Brandon as they made their way from the post-op, where they'd checked in on the little girl they'd been operating on together for a better part of the day.

"I feel you." Brandon stretched his neck. "I'm ready to fall down and it's not even four yet."

"Well, let's hope for a quiet rest of the day," Shawn offered as they made their way up the stairs slowly.

Shit, maybe he was getting older. He remembered the time when he hadn't had to drag his feet back to his office after a surgery.

"Don't jinx it," Brandon grunted, sounding so familiar and yet somehow different, and Shawn realized that the man had been much happier these days, more prone to smiling or even laughter.

Marriage definitely suited him, which was probably more surprising than was fair to Brandon.

But Shawn's issues with the institution of marriage had nothing to do with his friend and everything with—

Nevermind.

As they entered their floor, Shawn saw Tommy and Kelly leaning against the wall, talking animatedly and stopping abruptly as they noticed him and Brandon walk in.

“Uh-oh,” Brandon said, sounding better just from seeing Tommy there. It would be ridiculous, if it wasn’t so sweet at the same time. “I can see you’ve been scheming. What is it?”

Tommy looked at him, then at Shawn, briefly, before glancing at Kelly, who shrugged and nodded at the same time.

“Well, there’s been some... development while you were in surgery, but it’s quite a story, so maybe we could—” Tommy waved towards Brandon’s office which was right next to Shawn’s. “—talk about it there?”

And Shawn would readily admit to being curious, since the lives of the Ruth’s personnel were much more interesting than his own, but he honestly wasn’t up for anything other than rest right now, so he excused himself quickly and headed to his office.

“Wait, Shawn,” Tommy said after him, and Shawn turned with a hand on the door handle. “There’s something you should know, first.”

Shawn frowned but decided that he wasn’t tired enough to be rude, so he finally nodded in concession.

“Fine, okay.” He opened the door. “Come in, then, and tell me all about it, as long as you don’t mind—”

He cut off abruptly, when he noticed there was a man in his office, sitting back on his couch as if he owned the place.

A man he immediately recognized, even if he hadn’t seen him in person for more than four years.

He had seen photos of him recently, though. Too many photos to count.

“Kyle,” he said, tightening his grip on the door handle.

The man in question stood up and had the gall to grin at him as if he was elated to see him.

“Shawn. I can’t believe it’s been so long.”

Not long enough, Shawn thought. *Never enough.*

THE END

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