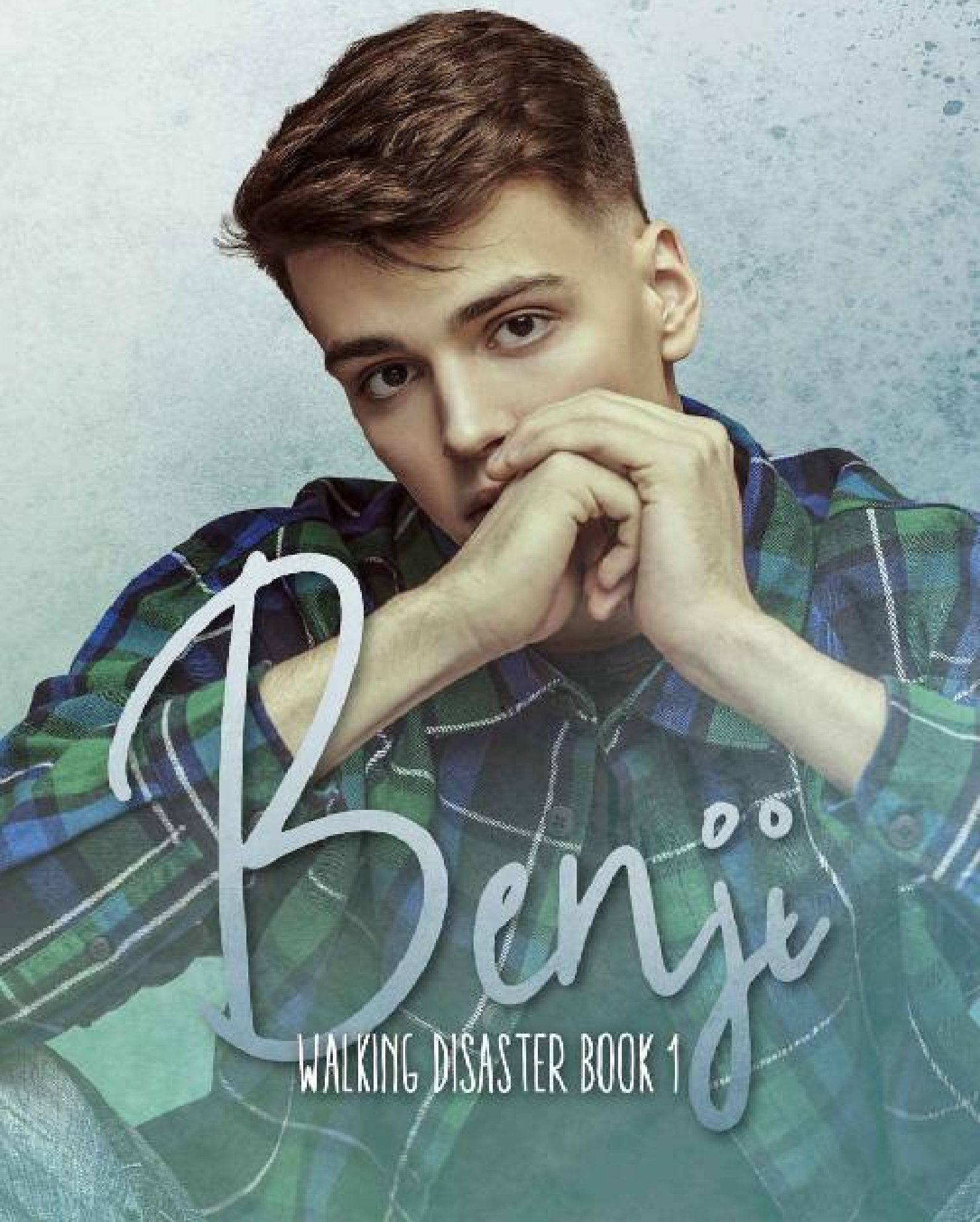


E.M. DENNING



Benzye

WALKING DISASTER BOOK 1

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Benji

WALKING DISASTER BOOK ONE

E.M. DENNING

CHAPTER 1

Benji

BENJI DIDN'T ACTUALLY BELIEVE in horoscopes, but on days when he woke up with a sense of impending doom, he avoided reading them at all costs. Either they would confirm that the day would be shit, dashing out all hope, or they'd tell him that the planets had aligned and today would be the best day of his life. When that inevitably didn't turn out to be true, Benji ended up feeling crushed.

Okay, so maybe he believed in them a little. But only a little. Especially if they were negative. The positive ones he had no trouble disregarding. *Good things are around the corner for you.* Yeah, right. He'd believe it when it happened. But if a horoscope warned him to watch for falling pianos, he'd spend the day paranoid that a baby grand would fall on his head like they did in cartoons and movies which pretended to be funny.

It wasn't that he wanted to be a pessimist, but bad things had a way of happening to Benji. The current state of his life was one example. Because his landlord sold the house that he'd been letting a room in, Benji had to look for a new place to live. But there was a rental shortage. Then there was the fact that even a shoebox studio apartment was out of his budget.

Sleeping in his car had not been a choice he made willingly, but here he was, using his gym membership for the benefit of using the shower facilities. Also, not his choice had been working as a door-to-door salesman. Okay, it was somewhat his fault. He applied on purpose, but he'd been desperate for work. Maybe he should've been a little pickier,

because on the list of things they make you do in Hell, selling security systems door-to-door would be right under boiling alive in a pit of acid, and directly above having hot needles shoved in your eyes for eternity.

Benji took a deep breath and continued up the street to the next house. Okay, so the job had perks. He got to walk a lot, which was supposedly good for you, but he low-key hated it. It wouldn't be bad except the weather was unseasonably hot for early April, making him worry that he'd sweat through his dress shirt. Lunch was a granola bar he'd stuffed in his back pocket and a bottle of water.

Even the doors that slammed in his face were okay. It meant he didn't have to talk to them. He could mark them off the map and continue to the next house and hope to get a sale. Because that was the true thing that sucked. Benji was a horrible salesman. It was easy for him to take no for an answer. He wasn't pushy or persuasive like Lauren, the lady who trained him and who had kept him on six weeks longer than she should have.

Because Benji hadn't sold a single security system and his three-month evaluation was up today. Lauren had given him all the slack she could, but if he didn't get at least one sale today, he would be let go.

Benji didn't hate Lauren for it. She'd done her absolute best to keep him on, but even as brilliant and kind and capable as she was, she couldn't move mountains or, you know, rewrite company policy.

With fifteen minutes left before Benji was inevitably fired, he put on a sunny smile, because no one bought things from people who looked like a walking tragedy and marched up to the front door.

Well, he tried. He misjudged the final stair, and his toe caught, sending him sprawling across the covered porch, face down. He wasn't hurt, not really. His pride could use a bit of first aid, but his body was intact more or less. His wrist hurt a little, and he was sure he had a sliver in his hand, but he'd deal

with those things later. Benji muttered a quiet string of obscenities, stopping abruptly when he heard a voice.

“What are you doing?” An angry voice questioned him.

Great. So his fall had been witnessed. Benji picked himself up off the porch and gathered his materials. “Sorry about that. I promise I’ve used stairs before. I’m not completely new at them, though I’m sure it appears otherwise.” Benji stood and did his best to quickly and efficiently straighten his clothes.

He lifted his gaze and came face to chest with a tall, angry man. A gorgeous angry man.

“What do you want?” The man flicked his gaze to Benji’s uniform shirt. The high visibility safety vest over top had the company logo on it. “Did you not see the no soliciting sign?”

“Actually, I didn’t. I’m terribly sorry to have bothered you. I might not have knocked had I seen it, but while I have you here, could I ask for a moment of your time to tell you about the special promotion that Sterling Security Services is offering first-time customers.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“If now isn’t a good time, I can get your name and phone number and we can schedule an appointment when it’s convenient for you.” Maybe if he could at least get a call back, Lauren could argue that he was improving enough to stay on.

“I won’t ever have time for this shit. You people should get a fucking hint, you know. Running around knocking on doors all day long, bothering people in their homes. Telemarketers are bad enough, but at least they’re not crashing around on my porch.”

Benji opened and closed his mouth, too stunned to speak. Without saying another word the man stepped back and slammed the door with more force than necessary leaving Benji standing there staring at a solid door and a metal ‘no soliciting’ sign stuck just under the door knocker.

“Have a nice day!” Benji called for good measure before turning around and walking carefully down the stairs. “Asshole.” Benji made it off the angry asshole’s property

without further injuring himself. He did, in fact, have a sliver and his wrist was swelling a bit. It was just icing on the shit cake.

Ominously, his phone rang and Benji relayed his location to Lauren, who was the crew boss today. The company he worked for dropped several door knockers in one neighborhood, sectioning it off. A crew boss picked them up at headquarters, took them to a drop off point, and collected them at the end of the day.

It was a bad sign that Lauren came for him right away. He climbed into the front seat of the minivan and buckled his seatbelt. “I’m fired, aren’t I?”

Lauren gave him a sad nod. “I have Samuel picking up the rest of the guys. I thought we could deal with your final paperwork so you can get your last check faster.”

Benji’s shoulders sank, and he leaned against the window. “I appreciate it.”

“Don’t be sad, Benji. Not everyone is cut out for sales.”

“Travis could sell security to Fort Knox.” Benji knew he sounded like a jealous little jerk, but he couldn’t help it.

“Like I said, not everyone is cut out for sales. You gave it your best shot. I’ve even typed up a letter of recommendation for you. Your work ethic is solid. You’re a good guy. You just...”

“Shouldn’t be let within twenty yards of a sales floor?”

Lauren winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure with your letter I’ll find something in no time.”

With an air of finality, Benji took off his high visibility vest and handed it in along with his map, his clipboard, and all the forms he’d never once managed to convince someone to fill out.

Lauren offered him a lift home, but he said he’d walk. It wasn’t far. It wasn’t a lie. To hide the fact that their perfectly respectable salesman lived in his car, he usually parked a few

streets away and walked the distance to headquarters for pick up.

All he wanted was a cheeseburger and a real fucking bed for once and maybe a hug. His wrist hurt like fire. He didn't think he'd broken it, but he'd definitely tweaked it in the fall. A real bed was out of the question, but he wasn't destitute yet, and could spring for a burger.

Benji turned left onto Spruce where he'd distinctly remembered there not being an ominous row of heavy construction equipment. Orange fencing blocked off the whole street.

Benji stood and stared like an idiot, as if he blinked enough times the construction zone would disappear like he'd imagined it.

Spoiler alert. It was real.

Benji walked up to the fence and peered through, desperation climbing higher, burning his esophagus.

"Can I help you?" Someone from inside the fence asked. They clearly worked for the construction company.

"My car." Benji squeaked. "I parked here this morning."

"Oh, shit." The guy looked sheepish and sad and a little nervous, like he was bracing for Benji to lose his shit. "We'd had this street marked off as no parking because we're running new water lines for the city here. We towed any vehicles that were on the street this morning."

Benji clung to the fence so hard his finger ached, but it kept him from falling to the ground because he was fairly certain he couldn't feel his legs.

"Are you okay? Dumb question. Sorry. Look, I'll talk to my boss and ask what towing company came by this morning and I'll get you their number, okay?"

"Thanks."

"What's your name?"

"Benji. Sorry. Benji Hayes."

“Okay, Benji. Take a seat on the grass over there and I’ll be right back.”

Benji walked in a daze until he got to the grassy area just off the sidewalk. There wasn’t even a bench to sit on and he plopped down on the grass, forgetting about his wrist until he put weight on it.

“Fuck.” What was he going to do? He’d have to get a lift to the tow yard and then what? What happened next? Benji tried not to panic as he cradled his wrist, but fear climbed up his insides like tiny, cold spiders.

“Benji?”

Benji looked up at the construction guy. The name Andrew was sewn onto his high visibility vest.

“Here’s the number of the towing company we use. Gold Star Towing. They have a yard across town. I don’t know how late their office is open tonight. Do you need to call anyone?”

Benji wiped a hand down his face. “Yeah. Probably. Thanks for this.”

Andrew gave Benji a look of misery and pity, and Benji forced himself to smile at the poor guy. It wasn’t his fault Benji parked there that morning.

“I’ll call the company right now. Maybe I can get it back tonight. If not, no big deal.” Benji kept his polite smile until Andrew went back to work.

The towing company answered after three rings. “Gold Star Towing.”

“Hi um. My car was towed today from Spruce Street. Could I come get it tonight?”

“Brian does the office stuff, and he’s out until the morning.”

“Is there any way he can come in? I’m in a bit of a bind.”

“Sorry, no can do. We open at nine in the morning.”

“I’ll be there. Thanks.” Benji hung up before he thought to ask how much it was going to cost him.

With nothing but the clothes on his back, Benji finally had to admit defeat. He did something he promised himself he'd never do, and he called his best friend. Oliver was overseas, working in some swanky office in London for some publishing company. It was his dream job. He'd tried to convince Benji to go with him, but Benji had no desire to follow Oliver around and let him clean up his messes.

It's how they met. College roommates. Benji was a disaster then too, one Oliver was always cleaning up after and even when Benji dropped out and Oliver kept going. Oliver kept Benji as a roommate in his off-campus apartment. When Oliver moved to a different country, Benji vowed to stand on his own two feet.

He should've known he'd fall on his face. Though he hadn't expected to last as long as he had. It had been a year and a half since Oliver had moved to London. He'd come back for visits but his last one had been almost a year ago when Benji's life had been less of a disaster.

The time difference meant Benji would be disturbing Oliver, but he didn't know what else to do.

"Benji, hey man? What's up?" Oliver sounded more excited than sleepy, so right away Benji felt his chest lighten. He hadn't disturbed him.

"Ollie..."

"Who is it, babe?" A voice in the background asked.

"It's Benji." Oliver said to whoever he was with. Oliver was popular with both genders and didn't often go too long without a partner of some sort.

"Hello, Benji." The posh voice purred through the phone.

"Oliver, um. You know how you said I could call..."

Benji didn't have time to finish his sentence.

"Whatever you need, buddy, I've got you. I can wire you some money. I've told you this."

"I don't need money, Oliver. They towed my car, and I lost my job and I hurt my fucking wrist and I'm sitting on the side

of the street almost in tears and the big construction guy looked so fucking sorry for me I want to ask him to bury me with his excavator.”

“Woah, woah, woah. Slow down. Back up. Tell me what happened.”

Benji got through the story in more or less a coherent fashion. He left out the part where he was sleeping in his car. He didn't want his friend to worry too much.

“And where are you now?”

“Like, the corner of Spruce and McLean. The towing company isn't open until the morning.”

“Can you call your roommate for a lift?” When Benji took too long to answer, Oliver sighed. “Do you still have a roommate, Benji?”

“The rental market is shit at the moment.”

“So, where have you been staying? You're staying somewhere safe, right?”

“Safe enough.”

“Benji.”

Benji sighed. “My car.”

“Benji mother fucking Hayes. I swear if I were there, I'd throttle you. How long?”

“I didn't call to get yelled at, Oliver. I'll fix my own shit. You don't need to help. I just needed to hear a friendly voice.” Benji said in a clipped tone which he felt instantly bad for. It wasn't Oliver's fault he was a walking disaster.

“Benji, I swear if you hang up on me I'll be on the next flight out of London and I will kick your sorry little ass. Where are you?”

“Spruce and McLean.”

“Stay there.”

Benji snorted. “Why? Are you going to fly here from London? Or teleport.”

“I’m sending my dad.”

Benji’s air left his lungs in a whoosh of relief and terror. He’d never met Oliver’s dad before. While they’d been friends since college and Oliver had practically begged Benji to come over for holiday celebrations, he always found a reason to make himself scarce.

“If you’re not there, Benji, I will fly home and I will find you and I will declare you as a pet and smuggle you into the UK and fucking keep you chained in a crate where you can’t get into trouble.”

“Pretty sure smuggling is a crime.”

“If I weren’t in London, Benji, I’d kick your ass for this.”

It went without saying that if Oliver wasn’t in London, Benji likely wouldn’t be in this mess.

“Thanks,” Benji said instead. Oliver stayed on the line until Benji saw a big black pickup round the corner, at which point he thanked Oliver and ended the call as he got to his feet to greet the driver.

CHAPTER 2

Leo

IT WASN'T OFTEN Oliver asked for anything. Even as a kid, he'd been very much set on doing everything himself. Had he been able to swing it, he probably would have flown in from London to collect his wayward best friend. A best friend that Leo had always thought was a myth. He'd never laid eyes on the guy before. Oliver had some blurry pictures of him on his Instagram, but they were a couple of years old now.

That Oliver called him to ask for his help warmed him up inside. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for Oliver, but the man never let him help. Leo put his truck in gear and backed out of his garage and into the street. Apparently, his friend had run into a long string of bad luck and had literally nowhere to go. Oliver was skimpy on the details but promised to fill Leo in after he collected Benji from across town.

Leo had heard of Benji over the years. Nothing bad, but nothing particularly good either. It seemed that Benji could get lost on his way to the bathroom even if you drew him a map. Oliver had a soft spot for people like that and Leo might've put his foot down and refused to help if he thought Benji was the sort to take advantage, but Oliver had called, spitting nails about how Benji wouldn't take his money. How he'd said he didn't even want help, just needed to hear a friendly voice.

And well, if he was running a con, it was a shitty one, considering he refused Oliver's money. Leo turned the music down when he came to McLean street and kept an eye out for

Oliver's friend. Spruce street came into view and a lone figure stood just off the sidewalk with a phone pressed to his ear.

Leo pulled over and rolled the window down as the guy pulled the phone away from his face. Oh shit. The door knocker. The kid he'd unfairly bit a chunk out of earlier. It hadn't even really been the guy's fault. Leo had been startled when someone face planted on his porch.

"Oh, fuck." The guy, Benji, said, tilting his face up at the sky. "Because today can't get worse."

"So, you do recognize me." Leo tried for levity.

Benji moved to meet Leo's gaze. "Of course, I do. You know, you didn't have to yell at me."

"How about we bury the hatchet and you get in the truck?"

Benji's eyes flashed with rage and his mouth set in a thin line. "I would rather die on the side of the road than go anywhere with you."

Leo's anger flared up, and he rolled up the window before pulling away from the curb, leaving Benji standing there. Alone. It would serve the idiot right if he died there. Leo didn't look back. Didn't need to. Okay, so maybe he was already feeling guilty. That was twice in one day that he let himself be an asshole to someone. Leo sighed and glanced in the rearview to see Benji walking in the opposite direction.

Leo checked for traffic and hacked a U-turn. He rolled his window down when he got to Benji, noting the way he wiped at his face.

"Benji, get in the truck."

"That didn't sound like an apology."

"Benji, I'm sorry I'm an asshole. Get in the truck." After a pause he added, "please."

"You're not even sorry." Benji grumbled as he kept walking, but Leo saw his resolve weakening with every step. It was time to pull out the big guns.

“Benji, Oliver will fly here to kill us both if you don’t get in the truck.”

Benji paused and his shoulders raised and fell a few times as he sucked in some deep breaths. Checking for traffic, Benji crossed the street and climbed into the passenger seat. He did up his seatbelt with a wince, and Leo put the truck into gear.

“This whole thing is Oliver’s fault.” Leo stated. Benji gave him a murderous look. “I mean, if he’d have introduced us already, I wouldn’t have been so quick to slam doors in your face and leave you stranded on the side of the road.”

“Only being an asshole to strangers still makes you an asshole.”

Oof. Clearly, it was going to take a bit of work to get into Benji’s good graces. “You’re right.”

“I know. So, if you just like, drop me off at a shelter or something, we can pretend this day never happened.”

“Oh, no. You’re not getting away that easily. Oliver asked me to help. Do you understand how rare that is? He never asks me for anything. I swear he could be in traction in the hospital, and he’d still find a way to scratch his own nose.”

Benji deflated a little and Leo watched him lean against the window of the truck. “He really would fly here to murder us. So, I guess you’re stuck with me, at least for the night. Or you could just take me to a hotel, preferably near the tow yard, so I can get my car first thing in the morning.”

“You’re coming home with me. I’m feeding you dinner and you’re staying in my guest room. Any friend of Oliver’s is always welcome in my home.”

Benji snorted. “Right. Because you’re only rude to strangers.” Leo thought Benji was still angry, but he glanced over and detected a hint of a smile.

Leo searched his memory for any scrap of information Oliver had told him about Benji over the years. The only things he could remember with any certainty were that Benji had a rough time, pretty much all the time. Oliver had once

described him as a tornado's only known predator. And that Benji always finished the leftovers Leo sent Oliver.

“Can we pretend that we never met before until you got into my truck? For Oliver's sake.”

Benji scowled. “Fine. I guess he doesn't need to know his dad is an ass.”

“For us to start over, you're going to have to stop calling me an ass.”

“I make no commitment to that part of the bargain. I mean, I only met you five seconds ago. It might be true.”

Leo smirked. The guy had some spunk. No wonder Oliver liked him so much. He knew his son was pansexual. Oliver had come out to him when he was still in high school. Benji wasn't bad to look at, even when he was scowling, he was kind of cute. Leo wondered why he and Oliver had never been an item.

“If memory serves me correctly, Oliver had a problem keeping leftovers when he went home from visiting me. A certain roommate of his usually pilfered them.” Leo glanced at Benji to see that the tips of his ears were red, but the rest of his face was a milky white. “I'm only teasing. I was trying to... did you have a favorite? I cook a lot and I have a bunch of things frozen that I could heat up.”

“Anything you want to make is fine.” Benji assured him quietly.

Leo turned his attention to the road and tried to puzzle out what he'd done this time to make Benji go pale and quiet. Maybe the stress of the day was catching up with him.

Leo pulled into the garage and climbed out of the truck. He unlocked the door that connected to the mudroom and invited Benji inside.

“I'll get you something more comfortable to wear and you can shower or soak in the tub while I get dinner sorted.”

Benji nodded and mumbled a quiet thanks. Leo furrowed his brow and tried to not let the sudden change in Benji bother

him, but strange as it sounded, he already kind of missed the sassy Benji that so freely gave Leo a piece of his mind.

“Follow me. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Leo led Benji through the open concept main area. The living room looked out over the backyard and the kitchen looked out over the living room. A dining table sat off to the side of the kitchen. The hallway led them to two bedrooms. The master with the ensuite was at the end of the hall and the guest room was across from the main bathroom.

Leo opened the door of the guest room. “There’s a basement with a wet bar I never use and a treadmill that most often holds laundry. You’re welcome to use either. This is your room. I’ll grab you something to wear and get out of your hair for a bit.”

Leo left Benji alone, and he rifled through his dresser, looking for something that wouldn’t look too ridiculous on Benji. He settled for a pair of sweats that he’d shrank in the wash and an old tee shirt he never wore.

When he returned to the guest room, he handed Benji the clothes. His complexion hadn’t improved, and Leo found himself feeling concerned for Oliver’s young friend.

“Are you alright?”

Benji was quick to nod. “I’m fine. It’s been a long day.”

“Okay. Right. Bathroom is across the hall. I keep the stuff Oliver likes in there, so use what you like. I’ll go get dinner going.”

“Thanks, Leo.” Benji said.

“You’re welcome, but I promise it’s not any trouble. I’m only an asshole to strangers, remember?” Leo shot Benji a grin and felt a blip of relief when he earned a tentative smile from Benji.

Leo turned to leave the room, hearing Benji’s soft footfalls behind him. Benji scurried across the hall into the bathroom and Leo went to the garage where his freezer was. Pulling out his phone, he called Oliver, as Oliver had instructed.

“I have the package.”

“Thank fucking god. Is he okay? Do I need to come home?”

“Oliver, are you sure you’ve never dated Benji? You sound like a concerned boyfriend.”

“He’s like a little brother to me, Dad. You’ve seen him. He’s so... Benji.” Oliver laughed, sounding tired but relieved.

“I don’t know anything, Oliver. I’m just a dad, standing in front of a freezer, wondering what to feed his surprise housemate.”

“He likes everything you cook. Soup is one of his comfort foods.”

“I have turkey or chicken.”

“Either is fine.”

Leo grabbed out three portions of the soup and went to the kitchen. He tore them out of the bags he froze them in and popped them into a pot on the stove to thaw.

“There, that’s dinner sorted.”

“I hope you took out extra.” Oliver stifled a yawn.

“His reputation precedes him. I took out one for myself and two for him. Should I add another?”

Oliver laughed quietly. “No, that’ll be fine. Thanks for going to get him, Dad. I swear. The minute I can get away, I’m coming home so I can wring his neck.” Oliver yawned again. “Tell the little cretin that I’ll call him tomorrow.”

“Will do. Take care, Oliver.”

“You too, Dad. Love you.”

“You too.”

The line went dead, and Leo pocketed his phone. He tended to the soup and pulled a few slices of frozen garlic bread out of the freezer. If Leo didn’t freeze stuff, it often went bad before he could finish it.

He popped the toast in the toaster oven just as the shower cut out. Leo checked on the soup and turned the burner up to heat it up faster. He turned to greet Benji, who shuffled into the room, his sweats too long for his legs, the excess fabric pooled up on top of his feet. The shirt which had been big on Leo was huge on Benji. He'd never considered himself to be a considerably large man before, but Benji looked small in his clothes.

"Better?" Leo asked.

Benji nodded, but his face still had that pinched expression.

"Why don't you have a seat and I'll check on dinner? It should be ready."

Benji looked at the stove. "Is that soup?" Leo grinned at the note of hope in his voice. Then Benji turned and Leo saw his arm.

"What happened?" Leo stared at Benji's swollen wrist.

"Oh, um. When I fell... It's not broken. I'll be fine."

"When you fell. When you fell on my front porch?" Leo stormed into the bathroom and clattered around in the medicine cabinet until he found some ibuprofen and a bandage to wrap Benji's wrist in. From the freezer, he grabbed an ice pack and wrapped it in a tea towel.

"I swear if there were an asshole Olympics I would take gold in every event." Leo pointed to the table. "Sit, please." He turned the stove down and shut the toaster oven off. Dinner would finish fine on its own while he looked after Benji.

"To be fair, you'd probably only win in door slamming."

Leo pulled a chair out and sat across from Benji. "I'm such an asshole. I owe you a far better apology than the shitty one you got earlier."

"Soup is a good start. Don't worry about it, Leo, it's only sprained."

Leo popped the top off the bottle of ibuprofen and set it on the table. "Right, you need a drink."

Benji only grinned and shook two tablets out onto the table, picked them up and swallowed them with nothing to chase them down.

“A man of many talents. I’m impressed.”

“Yes, my one real talent is swallowing.” Benji’s mouth dropped open, and his face turned cherry red. Leo took pity on the guy and hid his grin the best he could.

“Let’s ice this for a bit and get the swelling down, okay?”

Beni reached for the ice pack. “I can do it.”

“One handed?”

Benji opened his mouth, then promptly snapped it shut.

“That’s what I thought.” Leo tried not to feel like the world’s biggest asshole as he instructed Benji to rest his wrist on the ice pack.

CHAPTER 3

Benji

BENJI COULD DO lots of things one handed. That had been what he'd wanted to say, but thankfully stopped himself in time. If he made two sex jokes in a row, he might have to run away in the middle of the night, change his name and start a new life. He wouldn't even be able to be Oliver's pet after that. No one had pets that made sex jokes at their parents.

Oliver's dad was unfairly hot. That's how he'd have to think of Leo from now on. Not the grumpy asshole, because that was sort of hot, too. And not as the guy who was trying so hard to be nice now, because that gave Benji little flutters in his stomach. Nope. Leo was no longer Leo. He was Oliver's dad. That would remind Benji that he absolutely could not thirst after the man.

The cruel, evil, sadistic man who made him ice his wrist through dinner.

Leo set a bowl of soup and a plate of garlic toast down in front of Benji. "It's turkey."

"I love your soup." Benji had to stop saying things that made Leo smile. The man had a thick layer of gray scratchy looking stubble that did nothing to hide the fact that he had a fucking dimple. The dimple gene had not passed down to Oliver and Benji found himself woefully unprepared for how gorgeous it made Leo.

"Oliver has passed along all of your compliments over the years."

Benji choked and sputtered. “God, I hope not. One time I asked if you could adopt me. Another time, I vowed to be your willing slave.” *Stop. Talking.* Benji hurriedly stuffed another spoonful of soup into his mouth.

“Well, he must have paraphrased.” Leo nudged the plate of garlic toast closer to Benji. “Eat up. There’s plenty.”

Thankful for the reprieve from his motormouth, Benji kept it occupied with the best turkey soup on the planet. He dunked a slice of toast in the broth and took a bite, letting out an embarrassing little moan when he did.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, heat creeping up his face. “It’s really good. Where did you learn to cook?” There, that was a safe topic. Nothing about it could embarrass him, Benji thought.

“I taught myself. Growing up, I didn’t have a great home life. That’s half the reason Oliver exists. I was a young, confused, bisexual who tried to bury his attraction to men in as many women as possible.”

Benji wanted to die. Maybe there was a volcano nearby he could fling himself in to cool off. Leo—no—Oliver’s dad should not be talking to him about this stuff. He’d just been making polite conversation.

“Oliver said you and his Mom were never together. You still raised a good kid, though.” Benji dipped the last bite of his toast into the broth and popped it in his mouth.

Oliver was better than good. He was the best person Benji had ever known. Better than his own family, that was for damn sure. Oliver had been there for him when no one else was. After he’d dropped out of college, Oliver had made sure he still had a place to live and food to eat. He never made Benji feel bad about it, either. And when Benji took on more of the cleaning to try to make up for it, Oliver didn’t mention it. It was a silent agreement between them that Benji would contribute in his own way.

Finding a room to rent had been a saving grace when Oliver got the job overseas, and even that had been influenced by Oliver. The person Benji had rented from had been a friend

of a friend of Oliver's who was looking to rent a room. Right from day one, Oliver had been Benji's saving grace. A knight in shining armor. The best friend a guy could ask for. Were it not for the fact that they had platonic chemistry only, and that Oliver was miles out of his league, Benji would've put a ring on it by now.

But he didn't look at Oliver like that. He never had. Aesthetically speaking, Oliver was pleasing to look at. But when it came to attraction, Benji's needle spun in a different direction.

"We should get that wrist wrapped up. If it doesn't improve overnight, I'll take you to a clinic in the morning."

Benji's shoulder rose to his ear lobes as he thought of the cost of going near a clinic. There was a free one that he'd been to, but he didn't like the idea of sitting there for hours when he needed to be doing other things. Like finding work and a place to live.

"That's really thoughtful, but..."

"But nothing. And if you're worried about the money, don't. It was my step you tripped on."

"I'm pretty sure it was my feet." Benji moved his empty bowl aside and held his arm out toward Leo.

"I'm pretty sure that I'm going to get my way, because I'll sic Oliver on you if you don't give it to me. Clinic, then car."

"He's all the way in London. He can't really do much if I tell you no."

Leo raised an eyebrow. "Okay, that's fair. How about this? You let me take you to have this wrist looked at, and after we get your car, I'll make you the double chocolate chip cookies you like to steal from Oliver's secret stash."

"He liked it when I stole his cookies." Benji rolled his eyes. "Or he'd have hid them better." Sometimes Benji felt like he must have been reincarnated from his previous life as a dog. *Will do tricks for treats*. Apparently, that carried over into his current life. *Will have wrist examined for cookies*.

Leo had Benji rest his wrist on the edge of the table as he wrapped it in the tensor bandage. Benji couldn't remember the last time someone had tended to his wounds. Usually, he did it himself. He was skilled in the art of rinsing scrapes with peroxide and dressing wounds. He could've wrapped his wrist himself, even, but having Leo do it was nice. And Leo was good at it. He got the tension nice and snug without cutting off circulation to any of Benji's fingers.

"Thanks." Benji said. After giving his fingers a final wiggle, he looked at Leo. "Is there more soup?"

Leo's answering grin made Benji's stomach flip. Stupid dimple. Stupid preference for older men. Stupid Benji crushing on the one man he couldn't crush on. Oh god. Benji was cruising on Leo. And Benji told Oliver everything. Mostly. Okay, there was a lot of stuff Benji didn't tell him, but he'd always talked to Oliver about the men he liked.

Oliver had been there through Benji's professor crush phase where Benji had spent all year crushing on one professor or another. He probably had daddy issues or something. He probably had a lot of issues, but he was okay with that. His attraction to older men had never been a problem—until now. Because despite Leo being the growly man who'd slammed a door in his face, and who'd driven off and left him on the side of the road, he was also the one who came back, apologized, and filled his belly full of soup.

Besides, Leo was Oliver's dad. Benji refused to let his silly crush become a problem. It wasn't like he'd be sticking around long enough for it to become an issue. It might not even be a crush. Benji had a long fucking day and Leo was being nice to him. It was the soup talking. It wasn't the dimple or the nice smile or the broad shoulders. Okay, it might have been the hands. Leo had great hands.

Leo took Benji's bowl and refilled it for him. He took his own to the sink and rinsed it quickly before tucking it away in the dishwasher.

"What do you do again?" Benji asked. "I swear Oliver has told me, and I swear I pay attention, but I can't remember."

“I’m a planner for the city. Basically, I crunch a lot of numbers and make a lot of PowerPoint presentations. It sounds fancier than it is.”

“Don’t you have to go to work tomorrow?” Once again Benji’s ability to fuck things up reared its head. Leo was going to spend his whole morning on Benji, running him to a clinic and the tow yard.

“I work from home a lot now. Generally, I only go into the office for meetings. Most things can be done remotely.”

A small weight lifted off Benji’s shoulders. “Good. I mean, I know you’re going out of your way to help me, and I appreciate it. I’m just glad I’m not inconveniencing you even more than I already am.”

Leo shot him an admonishing look. “You’re Oliver’s best friend, Benji. I’m half ashamed that I didn’t make a point of meeting you sooner. Then I definitely would’ve been nicer to you.” Leo had a way about him that put Benji at ease. He seemed so honest and earnest in everything he said and did that it was impossible for Benji to keep his guard up around him. He shouldn’t be so willing to just roll over and accept Leo’s help. But Oliver was the same way. Apparently, Benji couldn’t resist the charms of the Spalding men.

“How’s the wrist feeling?” Leo asked as Benji finished his second bowl of soup.

“A little better, thanks. The ibuprofen helped. And this is some expert wrapping you’ve done here.” Benji held up his wrist and waved it back and waggled his fingers.

“Oliver went through a skateboarding phase. I had to get good at wrapping wrists and ankles because he’s no Tony Hawk.”

“Shut up, Oliver? On a skateboard? Oh, he’s never going to live this down. Please tell me you have pictures.”

Leo’s tragically hot dimple made another appearance. “Of course, I do. How about you sit in the living room and get comfortable. I can tidy up and get the albums out.”

“I can help.” Benji started, but Leo snatched his empty bowl away. “Benji, sit. Get comfortable. I’ll be right there.”

Benji let out a sigh and made his way to the living room. It was a nice place, Benji thought. Very bachelor, decorated in all gray furniture. A comfortable looking sectional sat across from a large flat screen television. There were a few pieces of art on the wall that didn’t look like much from far away, but when Benji wandered closer to one of them, he saw it was constructed from smaller pictures layered on top of each other to create the larger image. If you stood far away, you saw the whole picture, but if you stood close, you saw each individual component and how they worked together to create the image.

It made Benji think of Leo. How, from far away, he looked like a grumpy man who was rude to people who knocked on his door, but from close up, Benji saw all the nicer parts of him. The soup. His care about Benji’s well being. Even the fucking dimple.

Benji tore his gaze away from the piece and sat on the couch. So what if he had a crush on Leo? Most of Benji’s crushes were short-lived. This, too, would pass.

CHAPTER 4

Leo

LEO HAD no idea what to do with a houseguest. Especially one like Benji who was vibrant in unexpected ways. Even when his insecurity shone through, so did his tenacity. Benji had clearly been having a tough time for a while. Leo wanted to pry all of Benji's secrets from him. How had he ended up in his situation? Where was his support network? Why hadn't he told Oliver he was having problems?

Well, Leo could guess the answer to that last one. If Leo were in Benji's shoes, the last thing he'd want to do would be to confess his difficulties to his very put together best friend. Oliver might be half Leo's age, and his son, but he was twice as put together as Leo.

On a whim, Leo grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and joined Benji on the couch. He'd sat in the corner of the sectional and had tucked his feet up. He'd propped his cheek on his hand and blinked at Leo rather blearily as he came back awake.

Leo almost sent him off to bed. Then he caught sight of the beers in Leo's hand and his eyes lit up.

"Is one of those for me?"

Leo nodded and handed the can to Benji as he took his seat at the other end of the couch. Benji had somehow managed to steal Leo's usual spot, but that was okay. He looked comfortable.

Benji cracked the beer open with his uninjured hand. Leo watched as he tilted his head back and took a long drink.

“Aaaah,” Benji licked his lips, catching a stray drop. “Thanks. I’ve needed a beer for weeks.”

Leo was about to ask Benji to tell him how he’d ended up in such a tight spot. Benji must have seen the questions written all over Leo’s face, because his eyes widened.

“You promised me pictures of Oliver as a kid. I want all the embarrassing stories. Baby pictures. The works. The more awkward, the better.”

“Did he tell you about his Obi-Wan phase?” Leo asked as he crossed the room to retrieve the photo album he’d dedicated to Oliver.

Benji choked on his beer. “His what?”

“We marathoned the Star Wars movies when he was about eight or so, and he decided he wanted to be just like Obi-Wan when he grew up. I didn’t get my bathrobe back for a month. He broke three lamps practicing with his lightsaber.”

Leo set the thick album on Benji’s lap and took his place at the other end of the couch. But it wasn’t long before Benji had scooted closer so he could point at different shots and ask for the story behind them.

It had been a long time since Leo had looked through the album himself, let alone with someone else. And that Benji was someone who loved Oliver, almost as much as Leo did, maybe just as much in his own way produced a reaction. The happiness that bubbled up in Leo surprised him. Leo hadn’t lived the life of a monk, but he’d been choosy about who he introduced to his son, shielding him from the parade of people who were only around for a good time.

The result was that Leo couldn’t remember the last time he’d had someone to share these memories with. Certainly, never with Oliver’s mother.

Now that Oliver was a grown man, Oliver’s mom did her own thing, separate from Leo. Sometimes Oliver would update Leo on what was going on in her life, but she had her own life and relationship with their son.

“What’s going on here?” Benji asked, pointing to a picture of an upturned five-gallon bucket with a pair of stubby legs sticking out from under it.

“Oliver and I were gardening. That was back before I discovered that I’m only good at cooking food, not growing it.”

“Is he stuck in that thing?” Benji’s concern was adorable.

“Nah. He was fine. Oliver liked digging in the dirt. He was a little mud ball by the time we were done that day.”

“He still likes the dirt. In college, we played in a beer league for a while. Well, he played. I watched. The rainy days were his favorites. The muddier the better.”

“Why didn’t you play?” Leo found himself curious about Oliver’s friend.

Benji looked at Leo and arched an eyebrow. He raised his wrapped wrist. “I’m accident prone. I tried to play, but after the three games and three injuries, I knew it was time to throw in the towel.”

Benji lowered his arm and let out a big yawn.

“You look tired.”

“I think I could sleep for a week. Today was...” Benji paused and took a deep breath. He exhaled and slumped against the back of the couch, looking exhausted and defeated. “I don’t know where I’d be without you, Leo. Thank you for this. I promise I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I get my car.”

“Benji, you should stay here. I won’t pretend that Oliver is the only one who doesn’t like the idea of you living in your car. It’s not safe.”

“It’s been fine so far.” Benji bristled, but Leo could tell there wasn’t much fight left in him.

“So far. But I have room here. You can get a job faster if you have a steady address. I’ll worry less, Oliver will worry less, and you’ll be safe.”

Benji bit his lip. “I don’t mind Oliver doing things for me. He’s kind of like a brother to me. You know, the kind of overbearing but well meaning big brother who is always pulling your ass out of the fire.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Benji nodded. “I guess... After all he’s done for me, the least I can do is stay put, you know. I don’t want to be a burden or a bother. I’ll clean up after myself and I’ll contribute. You won’t even know I’m here. But...” Leo watched Benji sag into the couch as he admitted defeat. “I’d like to stay. Thank you, Leo.”

“I’m happy to have you here, Benji. Oliver’s told me so much about you over the years that it feels like we’re already friends.”

Benji’s gaze flicked up and met his. His eyes shone, and he dashed at them with the back of his hand. “Shit. Sorry. I’m so tired.”

“You should turn in. Do you need anything else? Is your room okay?”

Benji got to his feet and nodded. “It’s perfect, thank you, Leo. I don’t want to be rude, but I really am exhausted. But um, do you have an extra phone charger?”

“Wait here.” Leo didn’t have a proper office at home, but there was a corner of the living room that had a desk. He worked there when he was home. He dug around in the drawers for a minute and produced a spare charger he kept there for no other reason than it might come in handy one day.

“You can keep this one. It’s a spare.”

Benji took it carefully and nodded once, stifling another yawn. “Goodnight, Leo. Thank you.”

“Good night, Benji.”

Leo watched Benji until he slipped into the guest room and shut the door.

Oliver would be asleep by now, but he was sure he’d hear from his son in the morning. He’d want all the details. Leo

pulled out his work phone and blocked off the following morning. He doubted there'd be any last-minute meetings, but he wanted to ensure that he had time to get Benji settled.

After making sure to lock everything up, Leo turned off most of the lights, leaving the light above the stove on for Benji in case he needed anything from the kitchen in the middle of the night.

Leo showered in his ensuite, thinking of Benji the whole time. It felt inappropriate, but Leo couldn't get him off his mind. What had happened to Benji that he seemed to have only Oliver as a support network? Where was his family? Over the years that he'd been friends with Oliver, Leo had tried to meet Benji. But Benji was always busy, always denied coming for holiday visits, and Leo hadn't been one to just swing by his son's house unannounced. Then Oliver took the job overseas and Leo only heard about Benji here and there.

If he'd had made a better effort to be more involved in his son's life, maybe Benji wouldn't be in his present situation. But that was stupid, Leo told himself. Because Oliver and Benji were adults. It wasn't Leo's place to make sure he knew all his son's friends.

Leo was crawling into bed with his book, another horror novel from one of his favorite authors, when his phone buzzed.

Leo glanced at the message. It was on his personal phone, but it was from Jordan, his friend, and the mayor. Apparently, it was urgent that Leo contact him to spill the tea about the sudden morning Leo booked off.

Jordan answered on the first ring.

"Are you dying? You're dying, aren't you?" Jordan asked, sounding not at all concerned that Leo might actually die.

"I'm not dying."

"But you are taking a whole morning off."

"I am." Leo grinned, knowing that his short answers were driving Jordan insane.

“Are you for real right now? You never take time off. The last time you did was when your kid was leaving the country and you needed to drive him to the airport. Shit. Is Oliver okay?”

“Oliver is fine. A friend of his ran into some trouble and I’m helping him out.”

“Does he need bail money?”

Leo snorted. “No, it’s not that kind of trouble. He’s just hit a rough spot and needs a place to stay while he gets on his feet.”

“If this cuts into my cookie deliveries, I’ll stuff him in a crate and mail him to Bermuda.”

Leo laughed.. “You’re a glutton.”

“You’re a cookie god.”

“I gave you the recipe.”

“They’re not as good when I make them. Your magic or something.”

“Maybe you’re just lazy and want me to make them for you.”

“Maybe you’re not wrong, but still. I’d better get my double chocolate chunk delivery, or I’ll mail him to Barbados.”

“What happened to Bermuda?”

“I hear Barbados is nice this time of year. I’m not heartless.”

“Says the man who plans to ship my guest off to Barbados if he doesn’t get cookies.”

“I drive a hard bargain, but I’m fair.” Jordan laughed. “I’m kidding. Do you need any help tomorrow, or do you have everything under control?”

“We should be fine, but I’ll let you know if that changes. Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t mention it. I know I’m amazing. I’ll let you go. But if you change your mind, I’m here.”

“Thanks. Talk to you later,” Leo said as the call dropped.

Leo put his phone away, picked up his book, and tried not to think about Benji and what he could do to help him. There was nothing to be done immediately anyway. Still, that didn’t stop Benji from being the last thing Leo thought about as he fell asleep with his book on his chest, having read the same page over and over.

CHAPTER 5

Benji

BECAUSE OF THE COMFORTABLE BED,

Benji fell asleep in seconds. Despite it, he awoke in the middle of the night and found himself unable to go back to sleep. He crept across the hall and used the bathroom, then crawled back under the covers and stared at the ceiling for a while.

Maybe a better person would be thinking of ways to get out of Leo's house as soon as possible. A better person might've argued harder about why they'd be fine on their own, but Benji had done the whole 'on his own' bullshit and it was over-fucking rated. Oliver was his best friend, and part of Benji was still sad that he was in a different country. In college, Benji used to crawl into Oliver's bed and be his little spoon. Even when they lived off campus, Benji's room had been a place to store clothing. Even if Oliver was with someone, they had to understand that Benji was part of the package.

The first time Oliver broke up with someone because of Benji, he'd been a horrible combination of happy and guilty. Oliver had explained that anyone who wanted to dictate who he spent time with, and how, was a walking red flag and Oliver was better off knowing sooner rather than later.

There was never anything sexual between him and Oliver. Not even an inkling. Any hard-ons they woke with had been simple biology, not sexual chemistry. Oliver, on more than one occasion, had told Benji he was more like a brother than a

friend. Benji clung to that with both hands. He'd never had a brother before. And his family, well, he was better off in a car in a parking lot than with them.

Rolling onto his side, Benji sniffled. He missed Oliver. There wasn't another person on the planet who gave a single shit about Benji and Oliver's love made up for it ten times over. It was why he let Oliver help him, why he couldn't say no to Oliver doing his best for Benji at every turn.

Benji would never tell Leo, but Oliver almost hadn't gone to London for the job of a lifetime. He'd wanted to stay for Benji's sake. Because a job was a job, but there was only one Benji. Those were Oliver's words. And Benji had begged him to go. There had been times when he'd felt sorry for himself, but he didn't regret begging Oliver to go.

It had been the one and only thing they'd ever fought about. Oliver was going to turn it down because he couldn't take Benji with him and he didn't want to leave him behind.

Benji's phone vibrated on the nightstand, and he smiled when he saw Oliver had sent him a text. Instead of reading it, Benji opened the messaging app and started a video call with his friend. He needed to see his face.

"Benji, why are you awake?" Oliver looked concerned and surprised and like he hadn't slept much.

"I couldn't go back to sleep." Benji shoved the hair out of his face and Oliver's eyes went wide at the sight of the tensor bandage.

"What did you do?" Oliver asked. From the background of the picture, Benji could tell that Oliver was in his office at work.

"You're working. I shouldn't have bugged you."

"I texted you first. Now tell me, what you did."

"I fell. That's all. Your dad helped wrap it up." Benji rolled his eyes. "He's going to drag me to a doctor if it's not improved in the morning. But that feels dumb. What are they going to tell me? You sprained it. Ice it and be nice to it until it feels better. Which is what your dad had me do."

Oliver rolled his eyes right back at Benji. “You’re still an impossible little shit.”

Benji forced a smile as the ache from missing his friend grew. “I try.”

“I know you do, you little shit. Right now, I don’t know whether to be glad you’re in a safe place or pissed that I didn’t know you weren’t.” Oliver ran his free hand through his hair. “I worry about you.”

“I know.” Benji felt like a scolded child. “It’s why... I’m staying here for a while. With your dad. He’s putting me up in the guest room, and the implication was that I can stay for as long as I need to. Which might be a while.” Benji tried not to sound pathetic about the whole thing, but it was hard not to.

“What happened?” Oliver asked.

“The landlords sold the house. Rentals are scarce. You’d have better luck digging for gold. And I’m broke, Olly. Everything costs so much, and you know me and jobs...” Benji sighed. “The studio apartments go fast, and you can’t even get someone to go in for a bigger place and split the rent, because families tend to snatch up the bigger rentals. Which, good on them, but it leaves not a lot of options.”

“You should’ve said something.” Oliver looked tired and sad and Benji wanted to hug him. “I never should’ve taken this job.”

Benji sat up in bed. “Shut up. No. I’m glad you’re doing what you love in a place you love. It’s a dream job, Olly. I’m glad you have the chance. It’s the one thing that makes me happy no matter what, is knowing how good you’re doing. It’s why I’m going to stay put here and do my best to not worry you anymore.” Benji’s chest squeezed at the thought of Oliver quitting his job just to babysit Benji. He’d move to Seattle and live in a soggy box on the side of the road before he let that happen.

“Promise me you’ll stay with my dad.”

“Promise me you won’t quit your job for me.” Benji shot back. He’d agree to nothing until Oliver promised first.

“Fine.” Oliver’s shoulders drooped like a weight had been taken off them. “I won’t quit, and you won’t leave.”

“I’ll have to leave eventually, but not until all of my ducks are in a row.”

“And you’ll stop keeping shit from me, Benji. It hurts that you didn’t trust me with this.”

“Oli, no. It’s because I trust you that I kept it from you. You’re the one person I have. You’re the only one who, no matter what, is there for me, and I guess I wanted to try to be that for you. To show you that, yeah, I might be a walking disaster, but I can do fine on my own. I didn’t want you to worry.”

Oliver dragged a hand down his face and gave Benji a sorrowful look. “I worried regardless, Benji.” Oliver looked away from the phone and spoke to someone off camera. A door clicked shut in the background. “I have a meeting to get to and I’ll be turning my phone off, but you can fill it with as many text messages as you desire.” That was Oliver speak for I miss you. “Get some sleep, Benji. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Benji gave Oliver his best and brightest smile, and Oliver returned it as the call ended.

Benji did not go back to sleep for hours after that. When he woke hours later, the sun was up, throwing bright light through a crack in the curtains. He blinked a few times and checked the time leaping out of bed when he realized it was almost noon. He stumbled across the hall and used the bathroom, then hurried to find Leo.

Leo was at his desk in the living room, typing away on his computer. No doubt doing work. When he heard Benji, he turned and offered him a bright smile.

“You’re awake.”

“I didn’t mean to sleep in so long. You should’ve woken me up. I’ve wasted your entire morning.” Nausea swirled in Benji’s stomach, clawing at him with its icy talons. “I’ll get dressed and we can get my car.”

“It’s no rush, Benji.”

It was, though. Because Benji didn't exactly have a ton of cash available for impound fees and storage, and then there was the tow bill.

"Give me five minutes and I'll be ready." Benji practically ran back to the guest room, and he tugged on his clothes from the day before. He pulled the bandage off his still swollen wrist and rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up past his elbows.

Almost tripping over his feet, he burst into the kitchen, running his fingers through his hair. "Okay, I'm ready. Sorry you had to wait for me."

Leo leaned against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest. It was a crime how handsome he was, Benji thought. Considering he was exactly Benji's type. Tall. Strong. Confident. Broad shoulders, tapered waist. A killer smile. Fucking dimples. Dark hair. Benji had a thing for men with dark hair. His own hair was a flat, mousy brown at best. His stature, short. Nothing about his body could be considered broad.

Leo was a walking wet dream and that stern gaze he turned to Benji made his insides wobble.

"I said you don't need to rush, Benji. Let's see that arm." Leo held out his hand expectantly.

Benji shuffled closer and let Leo look. "It doesn't hurt as much."

"It's still pretty swollen."

"Can we please just get my car first? I promise I'll let you take me to whatever clinic you want afterward, if you're going to insist. But..." Benji stopped just short of begging. Everything he owned was in that car and he wasn't exactly swimming in cash. He must have used the right combination of polite and pathetic, because Leo nodded.

"Car first. Then we'll see about the wrist."

"You realize that any doctor will just say the same thing you did. Rest. Ice. Compression. I broke my wrist in the

second grade. I know what it feels like and this isn't that." Benji headed for the garage and stuffed his feet in his shoes.

"How did you break your wrist?"

"Mike Miller could swing really high, and then he'd jump off. It was the coolest thing, right. So I worked up some height and I jumped and at the moment before I let go, I hesitated a little bit. It didn't help that I closed my eyes, so I didn't see where I was in relation to the ground. *Boom. Snap.* Benji's busted up again." Benji stopped at the passenger side of Leo's truck and waited for him to unlock it.

"Sounds painful."

Benji gave Leo a half-smile. It was nice that Leo didn't default to things other people said to him whenever he told a story about one of his childhood antics. *Oh, it sounds like you were a handful. Or, Oh, you must have given your parents so many gray hairs,* were common things people said to him. He knew they meant it in a nice way. It just sucked that a story about him breaking his arm often turned into sympathy for his parents. Especially considering Benji didn't think they deserved any.

"I'll trust you about your arm, Benji. It's your body and you know it best. But please, if it bothers you, tell me. I don't mind taking you to have it looked at."

"Thanks." Benji climbed into the truck, barely able to speak. Leo trusted him. No one trusted Benji with anything. It was almost enough to make Benji agree to see a doctor just to put Leo at ease about it. Almost.

CHAPTER 6

Leo

LEO unbuckled and climbed out of the truck at the tow yard.

“You don’t need to follow me inside,” Benji tried to scowl, but he wasn’t very good at it.

“I don’t mind.” Leo said. Secretly, he had his own agenda. Leo doubted very much that Benji had the money to spare for this unforeseen set of events. And considering Leo worked for the city, he felt somewhat responsible for it happening at all. No, that wasn’t rational, but Benji made him want to be irrational. If Leo took on some of the guilt, he had to make amends. It was fair.

Leo pulled the front door open and ushered Benji inside. Benji, to his credit, didn’t throw a tantrum with the person behind the desk, as Leo had seen a lot of people do. Hell, people had come down to city hall waving receipts and demanding to be reimbursed.

“Excuse me.” Benji said to the man behind the desk. “A red Honda Civic was towed yesterday from Spruce. I’m the owner.”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry for the inconvenience. After we settle up the bill, we can walk you back.”

Benji reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Leo watched the way his fingers clenched on the worn leather. “How much is that going to be?” Benji’s voice warbled slightly.

The guy didn't answer at first. "Towing and one night storage fee, as well as impound fees, brings you to, three-hundred-thirty-seven dollars and fifty-nine cents. Will that be cash, debit, or credit card?"

Leo pulled his credit card from his wallet and reached past Benji to grab the debit machine. He slid his card into the bottom and tapped his pin number in.

"Leo, no." Benji protested. "I can't ask you to do that."

"Good, because you didn't. I offered."

"Offered? That's offering? Leo, that's not okay." Benji looked mad, but also upset, and that hadn't been Leo's intention.

"When your next check comes in, you can square up with me, okay? And I won't even drag you to a doctor about your wrist. Deal?" He said Benji's next check so as to not embarrass him any more than he probably already had. Three hundred dollars was almost nothing to Leo, but it was clearly a lot to Benji and Leo wondered if he even had that much.

Benji scowled, a real scowl this time, but tucked his wallet away. "Thank you."

Once Leo had his receipt, the guy stood up and motioned for Benji to follow him. "I'll get the gate and you can get your car. It should be near the front in the first row."

"I'll wait for you and you can follow me back."

Benji nodded, but didn't say much to Leo as he somberly followed the tow guy. Leo waited by his truck for Benji to pull out of the gated yard. Benji pulled up to a stop next to Leo's truck.

Leo put a hand on the roof of his little car and tried not to imagine how it would've been to live in the cramped space. He kept his eyes on Benji instead of taking stock of the contents of the car. There wasn't much, truthfully.

"Just follow behind me. I'll let you park in the garage. It'll be easier to get your things inside."

A furious blush crawled up Benji's face and Leo almost let himself feel bad for paying to spring Benji's car from the impound yard. Almost. It wasn't anything he wouldn't do for Oliver. If Oliver ever let him help. Oliver would've pitched a fit and sold everything he owned to get his car back himself just to prove that he could.

"See you back at the house." Leo said before he turned and got in his truck. He waited to make sure Benji was behind him before pulling out of the tow yard and onto the street.

Leo asked his phone to call Oliver, and it wasn't long before the call connected.

"Hey Dad. What's up? How's Benji? Is he settling in, okay?"

"I took him to get his car, and he's following me back right now. Oliver, where's his family? Why was he living in his fucking car?" Leo scowled and flicked on his turn signal to get into the right lane.

Oliver let out a long-suffering sigh. "Benji is the only child of a homophobic single parent. Benji came out in college just after he met me. He wasn't ready to come out, but he'd been seeing this guy for a few months and that guy convinced him that Benji didn't really care about him if he kept him a secret."

"No."

"Benji went home for Christmas. When I got back from Christmas break, I found out he'd been put on a bus back to college the day after Christmas and had spent the rest of the holiday alone. The guy he came out for lasted a month after that. Since, then, I've been all he's had."

"Jesus fucking Christ." Leo exhaled and tried to get a grip on the rage that bubbled up.

"It's not my story to tell, but it's not like Benji will tell it. I'm still pissed that he made me go to London. I should've stayed." Oliver made a frustrated sound, and Leo knew exactly how he felt. "He threatened to ghost me if I didn't go."

"That's extreme."

“That’s Benji.” Oliver took a deep breath and Leo heard it tremble out of him. “I can’t get time off until I wrap up a few projects here, but I’m coming for a visit.”

“I’d like that. So would Benji.”

“How is he, Dad? He tells me he’s fine, but it’s not like he tells me everything.” Hurt oozed from Oliver’s voice.

“He’s okay. He’s tired and I think he’s probably slightly depressed, but he’s had a couple of terrible days. So how about we circle back to this question once he has his feet under himself in a few days?”

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell me.”

“What could you have done from all the way over there?” Leo asked honestly. Oliver wasn’t to blame for this any more than Benji was. Sometimes shit happened and there was no way around it. Life didn’t always deal you the cards you wanted. But it chafed that Benji was playing his hand alone when he didn’t have to.

“I’d have sent him money. Or come home. Or something. Anything is better than sitting over here fucking doing jack shit, thinking about him sleeping in his stupid car. I want to strangle him and then wrap him in bubble wrap.”

“I know that feeling.” Leo sympathized. “And I’ve only known him a day.” Leo took another turn, which brought him into his neighborhood. “I’m almost home, so I have to go.”

“Look after the little shit for me, okay, Dad?” Leo never knew someone could infuse the words little shit with a gut-clenching level of affection. It crossed his mind that Oliver might be in love with Benji, but they’d discussed that years ago. And when Oliver had finished laughing, *if you met him, you’d know he’s not my type*. He’d assured Leo that Benji was a friend at the very least and a brother at the very most. Never anything else, anything less, and certainly not anything more.

“Promise.”

Oliver let out another heavy sigh. His relief was palpable through the phone. “Thanks, Dad. Talk to you later.”

“Talk to you later.” Leo said before ending the call.

He parked in his driveway, leaving plenty of room for Benji to scoot past him and park his car in the garage. Leo hopped out of his truck and closed the garage door behind him. Benji got out of his car looking a little better than he had in the tow yard.

He pinned Leo in place with a hard look. “I appreciate you helping me today, and I know I’m not in a position to seem ungrateful. But I really wish you’d have at least pretended my feelings mattered before you swooped in to play hero.”

Benji had every right to be angry with Leo, but he couldn’t help but picture him as a hissing kitten—all teeth and claws but ultimately easy enough to tame.

“You’re right. While my intention was kind, my execution was thoughtless. Did you need help with your things, or would you prefer to do it yourself?”

Benji’s shoulders dropped, and he looked grateful and exhausted all at once. Like he was thankful that Leo had so easily offered an apology instead of pretending that he had every right to bulldoze Benji the way he’d done.

“I don’t have much. I’ll be fine.”

“Then, I’ll do a mile or two on the treadmill before I make dinner.” He wanted to give Benji some breathing room. The last thing he wanted was for Benji to feel as though Leo were looming over him, watching his every move.

“Okay. Uh. Have fun?” Benji shot him an awkward half smile. Leo went to his room and changed into a pair of shorts and a loose shirt. He didn’t really want to use the treadmill. He’d bought it intending to try to counteract sitting at a desk all day. But it was a way to stay near if Benji needed a hand, but to give him some space as well.

He seemed nervous and a little embarrassed when Leo saw his car. Leo was more ashamed of his city and the social framework that allowed people to slip through the cracks. Until yesterday, Benji had been working. Therefore, logic

dictated that he should've been living somewhere better than his car.

Leo turned the treadmill on to a fast walk and warmed up for half a mile before he increased the pace. After another half a mile, he upped the pace again. The rhythm of running, the rote motion of one foot in front of the other, stride after stride, carried his thoughts away.

That's what he liked about it. It was like a reset button for his brain. While some people claimed to have their greatest ideas while running, Leo's mind was blissfully quiet. After clocking a couple of miles, he slowed his pace and did a cool down before stepping off. His legs trembled a bit at the knees and his shirt was soaked with sweat. There was a small chance he shouldn't have gone so hard for so long, but he felt calmer now and more capable of finding out how best to help Benji.

Unable to stand the way his shirt clung to his skin, he peeled it off, then headed upstairs for a shower. He'd just exited the stairwell when Benji appeared. Their eyes met and Benji's eyes widened. He let out a little *meep* sound as his gaze tracked down Leo's body, then back up to his face. Benji looked away, but the damage was done. His face was roughly the color of a fire truck.

Benji cleared his throat and continued to look anywhere except for Leo.

"I—" Benji cleared his throat. "I wanted to do something nice, so I ordered dinner for us."

"Thank you, Benji." Leo said. He doubted Benji had much money to his name, but Leo had paid for the tow bill, much to Benji's embarrassment. Any further argument from him would only irritate his houseguest again.

"I should shower before dinner gets here." Leo watched as Benji's blush deepened to a dark scarlet, and he took pity on the poor guy and excused himself to his room. Leo dropped his shirt in the laundry and shoved his shorts down, and climbed into a nice cold shower.

CHAPTER 7

Benji

BENJI WAS GOING TO DIE. Of embarrassment. Or lack of blood to his brain. Retreating to his room, he closed the door, pressed his back against it and closed his eyes. Fuck. Leo was hot. *No*. Not Leo. Oliver's dad. Oliver's dad was hot. *Shit. Fuck. No*. He absolutely was not allowed to crush on the man any more than he already was.

Leo was nice. Nicer if you weren't a stranger apparently, and he was kind, and good, and hot, and sweaty, and holy christ, Benji was hard. His hands fluttered at his sides as he battled with the eternal question. To jerk or not to jerk.

Benji pressed the heel of his hand into the base of his cock and took a few deep breaths. He forced his eyes open and stared at the stack of belongings on the bed. His erection wilted immediately. Someone like him had no business thirsting after someone like Leo. Not only was he a guest in Leo's home, but he was younger and messier and had nothing going for him.

Erection averted, Benji ordered dinner and worked on tucking his things away. Not that he had much. Benji had learned not to keep a lot of things, because the more you kept, the harder it was to move on. Besides, he'd already lost so much that it hurt to get things just to lose them, too.

He put his clean clothes away and set the hamper of dirty ones in the corner. The small stack of books he owned found a home on the nightstand and the battered stuffed turtle he couldn't live without was hidden away from view. Leo

probably already thought of Benji as a child. He didn't need to add to that by advertising that he had a stuffed animal.

Embarrassment wasn't enough to keep Benji holed up in his room forever, and he ventured out to wait for dinner. He heard the faint sound of a shower and swallowed the knowledge that he was in the same house as a very naked Leo. Benji didn't let himself wonder what that would look like, because then he would have to go take care of his stupid erection.

Instead, he pattered around the kitchen. He located placemats and silverware and set the table. When dinner arrived a few minutes later, he paid for it, feeling only a little strange about answering Leo's door.

Leo appeared as Benji was unboxing dinner. A freshly showered Leo was just as appealing as hot and sweaty Leo. Though he was far more dressed, Benji kept his eyes on his task and not on Leo's bare feet or his thick, strong-looking arms.

Thou shalt not perv on your best friend's dad, Benji reminded himself.

"This looks amazing." Leo said as he grabbed a couple of beers out of the fridge.

"I might have cheated and texted Oliver to see what I should order," Benji confessed.

The sound of Leo's laughter was punctuated by a beer can cracking open. "I did the same thing yesterday."

The tops of Benji's ears heated at that. "You didn't have to do that. I'll eat pretty much anything, but if Oliver has told you anything about me, it's that leftovers were never safe." The confession didn't help Benji stop blushing, but he couldn't stop himself from talking. Leo was amazing in the kitchen, and he deserved the compliments.

"I always sent extra for you. It's weird that we haven't met before." Leo sat down and loaded a few dumplings onto his plate before passing the container to Benji.

“It’s not weird. I didn’t want to intrude. I know that you and Oliver are close and you’re both so busy. I didn’t want to get in the way.”

Feeling Leo’s gaze on him, Benji had thought to meet it and offer a reassuring smile, but the intensity of Leo’s gaze rendered Benji immobile.

“You wouldn’t have been in the way,” Leo stated. His gaze lingered until Benji nodded. He’d been rendered speechless by the strength of Leo’s honest statement. It was easy for Leo to say when he’d spent all of twenty-four hours with him. The truth was that Benji was in the way. He’d somehow crash landed in Leo’s life and now he had to figure out what to do next. Before long, Benji knew he’d wear out his welcome, so it was best to get a plan in place as soon as possible.

Loading more food onto his plate gave him something to look at that wasn’t Leo as he spoke. “Tomorrow, I’ll start the job hunt and when I get my last check, I’ll pay you back for the tow bill. There’s also the matter of rent to talk about.” Benji loaded more food onto his plate than he could hope to eat, but he forced himself to stop talking.

Starting in on his dumplings, he ate a couple before Leo started talking again.

“I know we got off on the absolute wrong foot yesterday, but I want you to know you’re welcome here for as long as you need to be here.”

Benji worked up a smile and cracked his beer open.

“Besides, Oliver would kill me if I let you go before you were ready to.”

It made Benji feel stupid for allowing it to hurt him. For a moment, he thought maybe Leo might want him here for his own reasons. He’d let himself think maybe they could be friends. Whatever small scrap of hope Benji had tried not to feel died because everything Leo did was on Oliver’s behalf. Leo was nothing to him, but stupidly Benji had hoped they might be friends.

Benji forced a bright smile. “Oliver tends to get what he wants.”

“That’s true. Therefore, you’re going to stay as long as you need to and you’re going to be comfortable. You’re not going to worry about paying rent, because frankly Oliver would kill me, and I also don’t need it.”

“But I—”

Leo cut off his protest with a sharp look and a fork pointed at him. “You’ll say thank you, and then we won’t speak of money again. I have all that I need, Benji. You staying here isn’t a financial burden or any other sort of burden.”

Benji stuffed a dumpling in his mouth because he had no words. There wasn’t a single thought left in his head, in fact, besides a desperate mantra begging him not to cry in front of Leo. He could take just about anything else, he thought, but not that. Not after the horrible couple of days he’d had.

“Did you get settled in, okay?”

Benji nodded, thankful for the slight change of topic. “I did. But I have a bit of laundry to do.”

“The machines are in the basement, feel free to help yourself to whatever you need.”

Whatever you need was becoming a theme between them. It was hard not to feel like a charity case, which Benji supposed he was. He was essentially homeless, definitely jobless, and quite nearly friendless.

Leo gave him the pleasure of cleaning the table after they ate, without telling him not to. Benji cleared the dishes away, tucking them into the dishwasher. The leftovers went into the fridge for later and Benji padded out to the living room and took a seat on the far end of the couch.

After a brief discussion about what to watch, which was mostly a round of—no, you pick—Leo started an action movie. Benji made it through the first ten minutes before his eyes drooped. He shifted position and tried to stay awake, but it was like his brain knew he was safe.

It was only a few nights ago that Benji's circumstances had been far different and though nothing bad had happened to him, he'd always been hyper aware that something could. It wasn't like Benji was some big, scary looking guy. He was short and slender and had never thrown a punch in his whole life. He'd be an easy target, and he'd known it.

It made sleeping more difficult when it was hard enough to begin with. Concerned for his safety and uncomfortable in the cramped interior, he'd slept in fits and starts, never really resting. Now though, safely tucked away in Leo's living room, Benji's eyes dragged themselves shut and refused to open again.

It was some time later when Benji felt a blanket drape over him. He mumbled something incoherent and pulled the blanket up to his chin. The next thing Benji knew it, the sun washed the room in a pretty pink hue. He sat up and massaged his face. The scent of coffee reached him before the knowledge that he wasn't alone.

He blinked sleepily and sat up.

"He lives." Leo's voice was warm and laced with humor.

"I missed the movie." Benji said.

"And the next one. And the whole night. It's barely six."

Benji blinked the sleep out of his eyes. "In the morning?"

"Coffee?"

"I need to pee first. Holy shit." Benji untangled himself from his blanket burrito and scurried past Leo. When he returned to the kitchen a few minutes later, freshly washed and feeling better than he had in days, Leo was there with a cup of coffee for him.

"I'm going into the office today. Make yourself at home." Leo pulled a set of keys from his pocket. "These are yours."

He hoped his trembling hand didn't completely give away just how much this affected him. Benji remembered the miserable moment he'd spun the key off his keyring and handed it to his mom before getting on a bus and heading back

to campus. He remembered handing in his set of keys when the landlord sold the house he'd roomed in.

Here was everyone else, chucking Benji away without a care, and Leo making room for him.

“Thanks.” Benji managed to say with a steady voice. He let the keys settle in the palm of his hand and he closed his fist around them, searing the outline into his palm.

Leo drained his coffee and rattled off an alarm code, which sounded easy enough to remember. He repeated it over and over until he was sure he'd committed to memory.

Movement caught Benji's eye, and he lifted his gaze in time to watch Leo shrug into a blazer. Benji struggled to breathe for a moment. If he thought casual Leo was hot, and half dressed Leo was hotter, ready-for-work Leo was in a whole other league. He didn't wear a tie, but his crisp dress shirt was a lighter shade of blue than his blazer and the fact that ready-for-work Leo got to wear jeans had Benji salivating.

“I'll be back in time to make us dinner.”

Ready-for-work, Leo was also hot from the back. Not that Benji checked him out or anything. That would be wrong. Indecent, even. Benji had other things he needed to be doing. Like fixing his mess of a life.

CHAPTER 8

Leo

LEO DIDN'T ACTUALLY NEED to go into the office the next day, what he needed to do was give poor frazzled Benji some breathing space. He also needed to get away from him for a few hours so he could put his head back on straight.

The amount of time Leo had spent watching Benji sleep instead of watching the movie was probably creepy. But Benji looked peaceful and relaxed. When Benji was awake, Leo could practically see the anxiety pouring off him. It had to be rough, to have no one, and no resources. Leo might not have the biggest social circle, or the largest family, but he wasn't alone the way Benji was. Used to be. Benji wasn't alone anymore and wouldn't be again if Leo had anything to say about it.

He could tell every time Benji moved, he was worried about money. There wasn't an hour that didn't pass between them without Benji promising to pay Leo back or swearing that he wouldn't stay longer than absolutely necessary. If Benji was only slightly less loyal to Oliver, Leo probably would have seen the last of him after the tow yard yesterday. But Benji had sworn to Oliver that he would stay put, and that comforted Leo.

He secretly liked knowing he'd go home to find Benji there. Leo pictured him curled up on the couch the way he'd been the night before. If anyone deserved a few days of rest, it was Benji.

Leo got a few raised eyebrows when he walked into the office, and everyone took full advantage of his presence. Dropping by to ask about this or gossip about that. By lunchtime, Leo remembered why he preferred to work at home. He'd just strolled into the lunchroom to grab a fresh coffee when his cell phone rang.

A thread of panic snapped tight when he saw the name of his security company flash across his phone screen, and he nearly fumbled his phone in his haste to answer. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Macy from Ever Safe Home Security. Your home alarm has been triggered. An attempt was made to punch in a passcode. Do you need the police?"

"No, it's all right. I have a houseguest and he must've forgotten the code."

"To ensure that things are alright, I'm going to ask you to say your code phrase."

"I hear London is nice this time of year." Leo uttered as he headed for his office, where he grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair.

"Thank you, Mr. Spalding. The police will not be alerted."

Leo breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Macy."

"Have a good day, Mr. Spalding."

The call ended and Leo took the stairs down to the ground floor. He had parked just around the corner and was already kicking himself for not having Benji's phone number.

The drive home took half the time as usual. When he arrived, Benji's car was in the garage and Benji was sitting on the couch. His shoulders rounded and his head hung low. He looked like the textbook definition of miserable.

"Benji?" Leo closed the door softly and dropped his keys into the dish by the door.

Benji's head shot up and swiveled around. "I'm so sorry. I went out to run an errand, and forgot the code. I didn't want to write it down or put it in my phone just in case. And I don't

have your number, or I would've called you. And I didn't want to bug Oliver. I thought I'd remembered it, but..."

"It's okay, Benji." Leo dropped onto the couch next to his anxious houseguest.

"You rushed all the way here from work?" Benji looked stricken by this knowledge. Like Leo, leaving the office was the worst possible outcome.

"It's fine. I promise I'd rather be here." Leo offered Benji what he hoped was a reassuring smile. He dug his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Benji. "Here, put your number in. Then you can contact me if you run into trouble."

Benji sighed and sent himself a text. "You mean when I run into more trouble?"

"No, I mean if."

Benji looked at him and scoffed. "I'm sorry, have you met me? There will be more trouble."

Leo shrugged. "It's not anything I can't handle."

Benji looked skeptical, like he'd been made that promise before, but not by anyone who'd intended to keep it. How many people had let Benji down during his life? Leo had a feeling the list was long, and he promised to do his best to stay off it.

"Did you need to get back to work?"

"The office? God, no. I seldom go in unless I have meetings, but I figured you could use a bit of breathing room. It reminded me why I work remotely whenever possible. There're too many people there and they all want to talk to me."

Benji rolled his eyes and his smile returned. He still looked tense and anxious, but Leo hoped he was feeling better.

"The hardship of having people like you. Must be tough." Benji's tone was light, but his words felt sharp and tinged with jealousy.

“Did you want to make lunch with me?” Leo asked. “It looks like I have a half day free. I figured we can make lunch and then maybe there’s stuff you need help with?”

“Do you really want me in your kitchen?” Benji looked at Leo in disbelief.

“Yes, I do. Come on. You can chop and stir, can’t you?”

“The man is trusting me with knives and flames, and I can’t even remember a five-digit door code.”

“Well, that’s because it’s a six-digit door code. And you don’t have to help, but you can keep me company.” Leo went to the kitchen, assuming correctly that Benji would follow.

“What would you like?” Leo asked as he stepped into his walk-in pantry.

“Holy shit.” Benji whispered, as he followed Leo into the space. “You have a whole room of food.” He looked around at the pantry, jaw slack, and eyes filled with awe.

“It’s the reason I bought the house. A whole room of food. How could I pass that up?”

“How can I possibly decide what I want to eat?” Leo watched Benji’s eyes roam over the shelves.

“Okay, I’ll decide. Uh... how about... fries and sandwiches? I have turkey and tomato and some nice sourdough I made a couple of days ago.”

“Ugh.” Benji scoffed. “He makes his own bread. Did you raise the turkey too?”

Leo grabbed the air fryer off the shelf. He liked to keep his counters as clutter free as possible. “Yep. I have a room in the basement. A secret turkey room. I let them outside for twenty minutes a day if they promise to be quiet.”

“I knew you were a secret turkey farmer the moment I saw you.”

Leo put the air fryer on the counter and dug in the freezer for the bag of fries he’d bought last week. “No, the moment you saw me you knew I was an asshole. Let’s be honest.”

“Well, now that I’m not a stranger, you’re nicer to me.” Benji retrieved the sourdough from the breadbox without being asked, then opened and closed cupboards until he found the dinner plates.

“If you needed to use a computer for job searching, or printing off resumes or heck, just to google shit, you can use my laptop. It’s password protected, but the password is Oliver’s birthday.”

“Very secure.” Benji quipped. “But thanks. I don’t know how successful this job search is going to be. That sales job was shit, but it was literally all I could get. I’m not the most employable person.”

Leo started the air fryer, then grabbed the sandwich fixings from the fridge. “I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

Benji sighed and leaned on the counter. He hissed and pulled away.

“Your wrist still sore?”

“I just put pressure on it and it went weird. It’s fine. It’s barely swollen now.” Benji even held it out to show Leo. It looked a lot better than it had the day before. “I have bad luck with jobs. One place closed three weeks after hiring me. Another got closed by the health inspector. I couldn’t stay on at one job because I’m allergic to scents, and even though you’re not supposed to go to work smelling like the perfume aisle, that didn’t stop people. Then the security job. It was shit, and I was awful at it, but Lauren did her best to keep me on, anyway.”

Benji spread butter on the bread that Leo cut.

“The problem is that I’m not good at anything.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Benji shot him a sharp look. “I barely passed high school. I had no business going to college but didn’t know what to do next. So I went to college long enough to meet Oliver. I dropped out. I’ve worked a vast array of shitty jobs and I just seem to find more things to be bad at.”

“Well... then I guess you’re good at gathering experiences.”

Benji looked at Leo and blinked several times. “That is the biggest load of shit I’ve ever heard.”

“Thank you.” Leo grinned brightly, happy to see Benji returning the expression.

“It’s too bad that court jesters are a thing of the past, because making an ass of myself is the one thing I’m actually good at.”

Leo tried to hide his scowl.

“It’s the truth. Oh my god, you should’ve seen me when I was frantically trying to punch in the code for your security system. Which I didn’t know you had, or I wouldn’t have knocked the other day.”

God, was that only a couple of days ago? Leo thought to himself. It felt like he’d known Benji a lot longer than that, but that was likely because he’d heard about him through Oliver.

It was also easy to be around Benji. He knew it was young yet, but so far, he didn’t mind having Benji in his space. Benji picked up after himself and Leo had to admit that it was nice to cook for someone else. Cooking for one got boring and lonely. He hated to admit that second part, so he didn’t. He wasn’t lonely—he just appreciated Benji’s presence for other reasons. Because it made Oliver happy. There, that was a good enough reason. Plus, Leo wasn’t an asshole all the time. Being in the position to make a tangible difference in someone’s life felt nice.

“I can help you tweak your resume if you’d like.” Leo offered over lunch.

“Really?” Benji dunked a fry in a pool of ketchup. “I mean, there’s probably not much you can do to make me look good, but you’re welcome to try.”

“You’d be surprised what you can do.”

“You’re not going to lie, are you?” Benji grinned at him. “Because lying is bad.”

“I’m not going to lie, Benji.”

“Well, then for sure you’re not going to be able to make me look good.” Benji tried to pass it off as a joke, but Leo wasn’t laughing.

“The thing about making jokes like that, Benji, is that even if you don’t mean them to start with, eventually you begin thinking that way all the time. You’re not a lost cause.”

Benji shrugged and wouldn’t meet Leo’s gaze. For a few minutes, Leo worried that he’d overstepped. That somehow, he’d hurt Benji’s feelings without meaning to. Or had made him feel bad in some other way, but eventually Benji lifted his gaze and met Leo’s eyes with a tentative smile.

“Okay, Leo.”

“Okay.” Leo nodded and Benji went back to eating and Leo went back to watching him and wondering if he was doing enough to help Benji. Or was he doing too much? After his last comment to Benji, he had to wonder about that, as well. Because Benji was a grown man. If he wanted to mire himself in self deprecation, that was his own business. But Benji was nice, dammit, and if he was going to be nice to everyone else, he should start with himself.

“If you have a resume with you, I have time to look at it after lunch. Okay?” Leo made sure to keep his offer neutral. Benji wasn’t obligated to accept his help.

“Okay.” Benji said, smiling at Leo when their eyes met.

CHAPTER 9

Benji

NO ONE HAD EVER STOOD up for Benji. Until Oliver. And now Leo. And Leo had stood up for Benji against Benji himself. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. Oliver was a good person with tons of confidence and Leo had been the one who raised him.

After lunch, Benji tried insisting on cleaning up, but Leo smiled at him and told him to get his resume out so he could look at it. Besides, Leo had a dishwasher. It did most of the work.

Benji slunk into his room and shut the door. He leaned against it and took a few deep breaths. It was absolutely unfair of the universe to make Leo hot and nice and capable of literally anything, it seemed. And he smelled amazing, like luxury, leather, and some kind of spice Benji couldn't name.

He took his time getting the binder containing his resume out. Benji was well versed in creating the document, but he had a hard time saying no to Leo. Besides, considering how hopeless everything felt at the moment, he wasn't in a position to turn down any kind of assistance. The sooner Benji got back on his feet, the better.

By the time Benji left his room, Leo had set his laptop up at the kitchen table. He pulled a chair next to him and motioned for Benji to sit. Benji took the seat and passed the document over to him. The proximity to Leo's made Benji's heart pound, and he had to look down at his chest to make sure

it wasn't visible from the outside of his body like he was some sort of smitten cartoon character.

“This is a good start, but we can make it even better.” Leo set the paper off to the side and started typing. He asked questions of Benji, about what he did at certain jobs, what his duties had been, and from thin air he pulled out skills and words to describe Benji that he'd never thought to use himself.

“See here, if you word this in first person, it makes it sound like you're still doing this, even though the dates clearly indicate that you're no longer there.”

“What about references? I don't exactly have any good ones. I mean, one of my references is Oliver.” Benji rubbed the back of his neck. He felt stupid and small for not having people who would stand up for him and say he'd done his best, or that he was good.

“You can use me. And what about Lauren?” Leo turned to Benji, and it was hard to think when Leo met his gaze like that. Or at all. Or when Leo was anywhere near him because all Benji could think was how gorgeous Leo was. How his eyes were hazel with flecks of gold and how his stubble made him look even sexier when he'd ran his fingers through his hair a few times and mussed it up.

“Oh, she did write one for me. It's with my termination papers.”

“She'll be a good reference.”

Benji scoffed. “She liked me as a person, but I was absolute shit at the job. She said I had amazing work ethic.”

“You tried hard. That counts for more than you know.”

Benji rolled his eyes and pulled Lauren's name up in his contacts. He shot off a quick message to Lauren to thank her again for the letter of recommendation.

“Trying hard doesn't matter if you suck at everything.”

“There's a lot to say about a person who keeps showing up and doing the work. I've been working since I was fourteen

and I've come across people of all ages who don't have half of the determination you have."

When Leo talked like that, it almost made Benji believe him. But Leo didn't know him the way he knew himself. Leo's opinion was skewed by his love of Oliver, who, for some strange reason, had kept Benji around all these years.

Instead of making another comment about himself that Leo would undoubtedly disapprove of, Benji stared at his blank phone screen. "I've been getting fired since I was fourteen." Benji continued, knowing he had Leo's undivided attention.

It felt a little like how he imagined sitting in one of those little phone booths in church and confessing your sins would feel. *Forgive me Leo, for I've been fired. My first termination was at the age of fourteen.*

"I was a dog walker for all of thirty minutes. The lady across the street, her daughter was getting married, and she needed someone to look after her dogs while she was doing mother of the bride type stuff. Well, the first day it was raining, and I took the dogs, a couple of shaggy coated mixed breeds, on a walk around the neighborhood. Well, we returned to the house at the same time the mother did. Only she had her daughter with her, and they were carrying boxes full of wedding invitations they'd just picked up from the printer."

"I have a feeling none of this was your fault."

Benji cut Leo a sharp look, and he was gifted a smirk in return.

"The dogs loved the woman's daughter, and they tore out of my hands and bolted straight to her. They smashed into her at top speed, these two dripping wet beasts. She went flying. The boxes went flying. The wedding invitations scattered like confetti." Benji shrugged and forced ancient embarrassment aside. "I never knew a face could go so many shades of red all at once."

"I don't think any of that was your fault."

Benji snapped his gaze up to Leo's and gave him an incredulous look. "Of course, it was my fault. I had the dogs."

It was my job to keep them contained.”

“Were you the one who trained those dogs?”

“No...”

“Then it’s the owner’s fault for not teaching them better manners. My uncle trained dogs, and he taught me some things when I was a kid. Most of the time, the behavior of the dog is not the fault of the dog. If they’d been trained to listen to you, to be obedient on leash, then they’d have been excited, but you’d have been able to redirect them, or calm them down.”

Was Benji supposed to feel like a dog? Was that what Leo had been doing with him? Redirecting him and getting him to calm down? He felt like Leo might’ve done that earlier with Benji’s negative talk about himself.

“Why don’t you have a dog?” Benji asked. The house and yard were certainly big enough to accommodate one. Leo had experience training them if the way he talked about his uncle was any indication. He lived alone and worked from home. A dog made sense. Heck, even a cat. Cats were cute. Sure they walked on your counters, drank out of your glass when you weren’t looking, and walked on your face when you were sleeping, but Benji supposed they weren’t all bad.

“I had pets when Oliver was young, for his sake, you know. Because every kid should have a pet. But then he grew up and moved away and animals don’t last forever. I meant to get a new pet, but I think time just got away from me after a while and it seemed less important.”

Leo turned the laptop toward Benji. “What do you think?”

Benji read the document. Honestly, he hadn’t believed that Leo could do much with it, but as Benji read it over, he realized that he’d hire himself if he could. Leo had taken his knowledge and his experiences and had crafted them into a decent resume that would certainly impress people.

“It’s brilliant.”

“And I didn’t have to lie.” Leo quipped with a smile.

“And you didn’t have to lie.” Benji pushed the computer back toward Leo.

“Did you see any changes you needed or wanted?”

“No. It looks amazing.” Of course, it did. Benji quickly learned that anything Leo did ended up amazing. The image of him shirtless and sweaty popped into Benji’s head, and it made him wonder what Leo was like in bed. He’d be dynamite. Explosive. It would be transformative sex, Benji knew by looking at him that he’d fuck like a god.

Holy shit, there was definitely something wrong with Benji for his thoughts to go from resumes to raw-dogging. Benji cleared his throat and got up from the table. He needed distance between himself and Leo. His crush had quickly turned into an infatuation.

Benji had always liked older men. It made it hard to date when he was a teenager. Not only was he not out back then, but the men who were interested in teenage boys weren’t men teenage boys should be interested in. He thought his love for older men might go away when he got older, too, but it had changed right along with him. As he aged, his definition of older morphed.

When he was fifteen, thirty was practically ancient. But now that he was twenty-five, thirty was nothing. Leo was the perfect age, Benji thought. He’d have to ask Oliver exactly how old Leo was without tipping him off to the fact that he was pervy on his dad. He couldn’t ask Leo. It would be weird. It might tip Leo off to the fact that Benji couldn’t look at him without picturing him without his shirt. Strong and broad and slightly furry. Leo was gorgeous.

“How many do you want?” Leo asked, snapping Benji out of his pervy-panic.

“Sorry? How many?”

“Resumes. How many do you need? I’ll print some off for you.”

“Uh, whatever you think is good is probably good. Can you email me the file? Then I can print more when I need to.”

“Sure.” Leo typed in Benji’s email address as he rattled it off. He’d long ago changed to a first name, last name format, ridding himself of his shameless first email address, soul_destroyer. Teenage boys should never be left unsupervised.

If Leo had noticed Benji’s sudden weirdness, he did his best not to comment on it. Leo hit print and retrieved the resumes from a printer he’d disguised over at his desk in the living room.

“Here you go. I bet you have a job within the week.”

Benji had his doubts, but he kept them to himself. The last thing he needed was to protest and have Leo give him another sad, withering look. He didn’t want Leo to look at him like that. He wanted Leo to look at him with interest and hunger. Not pity or jealousy or anything else.

Well. Maybe a *little* jealousy would be fine. But there was a snowball’s chance in Hell of Leo ever looking at Benji as anything but Oliver’s friend who always needed to be rescued.

Feeling flustered and horny and a little ashamed for the latter, Benji took the resumes from Leo and made an excuse about going to put them away. Benji did his best to not be suspicious as he slipped into his room and shut the door.

He put the resumes on top of the dresser and flopped face down on the bed. Immediately, his cock throbbed, and his hips wanted to thrust. Frustrated with himself, Benji rolled over and tucked his hands behind his head. He wouldn’t touch himself. So long as he didn’t start jerking his cock while thinking of Leo and his strong hands and how they’d... *fuck*. How they’d feel on his skin.

Benji bit back a whimper and tried to adjust his rapidly thickening cock, but once he touched, he was a goner. He needed more friction. More pleasure. When you were living in your car and showering in a gym, it was next to impossible to get enough privacy to jerk-off.

Benji flicked the button of his pants open and tugged the zipper down. In a single motion, he fished his cock out of his

pants and started stroking. He bit his lip to keep from whimpering and calling Leo's name. Mortification made his cheeks burn, but it wasn't enough to make him stop. If anything, it compelled him to jerk faster, to add a twist at the head that made him slam his eyes shut tight and had his back arching.

He was in Leo's house, jerking off to the sound of his voice and the way he fucking smelled. It had been a light scent, something muted, like it wasn't cologne at all but just a really soft scented soap. The fact that the scent hadn't bothered him only proved to Benji's love-starved brain that he and Leo were meant to be.

Benji should stop. He shouldn't jerk-off while thinking of Leo, but he couldn't make himself stop. The harder he tried to tell himself to stop, the faster he stroked, as if he were trying to outrun his own thoughts.

He spread his legs and arched his back as he stroked faster, imaging how soft Leo's lips would feel on his own. Benji knew that he was safe here with Leo, though, so he had to get over this stupid infatuation or he'd ruin everything.

He tried to stop, only for his strokes to become increasingly frantic. A few needy moans escaped Benji as he came, decorating his fingers with his release. Some splattered his chest, but the bulk of his release dripped down Benji's cock.

It was the most perfect orgasm in the history of orgasms.

It was also the stupidest.

CHAPTER 10

Leo

“HOW’S THE HOUSE GUEST?” Oliver asked, as though he hadn’t talked to Benji earlier. Leo knew whenever Benji talked to Oliver, because it was practically the only time Leo saw him use his phone. It was like the device existed for the sole purpose of connecting him to his best friend.

“He seems fine.” Skittish, though. Which was a new development. Everything had seemed to go smoothly, then Leo had redone Benji’s resume for him and ever since then, Benji had been acting weird. Not noticeably weird, unless you were Leo and couldn’t help but watch Benji’s every move. He needed to stop doing that. “He’s having a rough go with the job search.”

Oliver made a frustrated sound. “I hate that I’m here doing what I’ve always wanted. I feel like an asshole sometimes. I should’ve stayed.”

“Benji would’ve hated you for it.” Leo peeked through the curtains out at the backyard where Benji had spent the past half an hour in the hammock. Leo guessed that Benji had probably fallen asleep. Again. Now that Benji wasn’t sleeping in his car, it seemed that his body wanted him to get all the sleep it could. He’d fallen asleep last night right after dinner. Leo had covered him up and let him sleep as he pretended to watch TV, but really was sitting next to Benji trying not to stare at him.

“Logically, I know you’re right. But I miss him, and I hate that he was going through all of that and didn’t tell me.”

“Everyone’s entitled to their secrets. And he told you when it really mattered. He didn’t let himself get into a worse situation. How is the dream job? Still everything you ever wanted?”

Oliver groaned. “Ugh. Yes. Which makes me feel like a huge asshole.”

“Benji’s circumstances are his own. He’s happy for you, you know. Every time we talk about you, his whole face lights up. He’s so proud of you. I am, too.” Leo added. He knew he’d said it to Oliver before, but it felt important that he let him know now.

“That doesn’t help.” Oliver groaned miserably. “My life is so good and his just isn’t and he deserves far better than he gets. It would be so much easier if we could’ve had something between us. Then I could just marry him and take care of him forever. But no, of course we have to have vastly different tastes in partners and then there’s the complete lack of chemistry issue, or it would work perfectly.”

Leo had to bite his tongue, so he didn’t ask what kind of people attracted Benji. In a lot of ways, it made Leo feel like a school kid with a crush. Yikes. What was he thinking? He wiped a hand down his face, thankful that Oliver couldn’t see his distress.

Why would Leo care what kinds of men Benji liked? Why did he want to know if he could possibly be one of them? Benji was far too young for him. Hell, Leo was, in fact, old enough to be his father. He had no business wondering what Benji’s type was. None at all.

If Leo was starting to think about a man half his age in any sort of inappropriate way, it was a clear indication that his non-existent dating life was finally getting to him.

But he wasn’t thinking of Benji inappropriately. His thoughts so far had been wholesome. Like when he’d covered Benji up with a blanket after he’d fallen asleep on the couch,

and he'd made that cute snuffling sound. Leo turned the television down so Benji wouldn't be disturbed. There wasn't anything inappropriate about that.

Or about the way Leo's heart clenched whenever he thought about how fucking alone Benji had been and how Leo had been here all along, completely unaware of his struggle. Had he known, he could've helped sooner.

Leo peeked out the window again and saw the hammock swinging back and forth gently as Benji likely dozed.

"Are you even listening?"

Leo turned suddenly and walked away from the window. "Sorry. My mind wandered. I'm sorry you're frustrated by the current situation with your friend, but I promise I'm doing my absolute best to look after him."

"I know, and appreciate it." Oliver sighed. "I'm talking to my boss about some vacation time. I know I have some coming to me, but I'm in the middle of a big project right now or I'd already be home."

"Benji is in good hands." Leo's face heated at the thought of Benji in his hands. Clearing his throat, Leo desperately tried to think of anything but the mental images he'd given himself. Benji in his hands. His soft hair. His shy smile. Leo cleared his throat. "Tell me when you get the time off and I'll make sure I plan to cook all your favorites."

"I'll talk to my boss first thing Monday morning. I know that the crisis is averted, and that he's safe, but I still want to see him face to face."

"It's okay to miss people, Oliver. You don't have to justify it to me or anyone else."

Oliver yawned, and it made Leo yawn right back at him. "Okay, time to crawl into bed. Take care of my bestie for me, okay?"

"Okay." Leo could barely get the word out and then he fumbled his phone, trying to end the call. Fucking hell, he had to get his shit together. Acting like a fool over someone he had no business acting a fool over was a new development. Leo

had been with all kinds of different people. After he finally came out as bisexual, gender ceased to be a barrier. He'd dated men, women, non-binary people and people with no gender. He'd dated professional people and working class alike. But he'd never dated someone as young as Benji, not since he, himself, had been that age.

And he wasn't starting now. Benji was a guest in his home. A vulnerable young man looking for a safe space. Leo, being a weird old man with a crush, would only jeopardize that. Ignoring the fact that he'd admitted, even only internally, that it was a crush, Leo forced himself away from the urge to look out the window again.

Leo tried to appease the slightly panicked sensation in his stomach by telling himself that he wasn't crushing on a man half his age. For starters, the word crush wasn't something Leo had used since his high school days. It highlighted the foolishness of the way he felt. Because he did feel something for Benji. He wasn't a bad-looking man, though young.

It wasn't like the youth was the appeal, or that it put him off. It was simply part of the package that was Benji. Young and desperate to be hopeful, despite shitty circumstances that followed him like a plague. He had soulful eyes the color of dark roast coffee and hair that needed a trim, because it curled slightly at the ends, but Leo almost hated the thought of Benji cutting it. It would be like chopping little bits of his personality away, which was stupid.

Leo was stupid when it came to Benji, he admitted. It wasn't a crush, but insanity. He had no business looking at Benji the way he wanted to sometimes. He didn't let himself ogle Benji, but he wanted to. He could look at Benji for hours and not get tired of it.

Desperate to think of something else that wasn't his vulnerable house guest, Leo slipped into his pantry and looked around at what he had on hand. Cooking had always been a way for Leo to escape. The act of creating something soothed him. He didn't let himself think of how he'd been told that he showed affection through food before. That wasn't what he was doing. He just needed a distraction.

It was already approaching dinnertime, but the day had been a lazy one. Benji had left early that Saturday morning to continue his job search and had returned with rumpled spirits. Leo entertained the idea of asking around at work about any openings. He'd have to ask Benji first, though. Thinking of the way Benji had stood up to Leo after the shit he pulled at the tow yard made Leo feel slightly better about his burgeoning crush. If Leo ever stepped out of line, he trusted Benji to tell him about it.

And so what if he admitted—only to himself—that he had a crush? It wasn't like anything was going to come of some silly, fleeting feelings. Because now that Leo had acknowledged them, he could work on getting rid of them.

Leo pushed any further thought of Benji out of his head until it was time to get him to come inside for dinner. The stew Leo made could happily simmer on the stove for a bit longer while Benji came inside and washed up.

Leo slipped out the back door and frowned at the sight of Benji, still in the hammock. The sun had moved around and half of Benji was now in the sun.

“Benji.” Leo said from a few feet away. Benji didn't bat an eye, forcing Leo to step closer. He put a hand on Benji's shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. “Benji.”

All at once Benji came awake in a torrent of flailing limbs. Wide eyes met Leo's and Benji gasped. The hammock reacted to the sudden movement by spinning over and dumping Benji unceremoniously on the lawn.

“Are you okay?” Leo asked.

Benji lay on the lawn, unmoving except for the rise and fall of his back as he breathed in and out.

“I'm okay.” Benji said miserably as he forced himself to his hands and knees and crawled out from under the hammock.

“Dinner's ready.” Leo did his best to act natural, if for no other reason than to ease Benji's obvious embarrassment. “Sorry I scared you.”

Benji laughed a little and dusted the grass off his knees. “It’s okay. I don’t know why I keep falling asleep all the time. I feel like an old man who needs to nap after every errand.”

“Stress is tiring,” Leo offered. “And you’ve been dealing with a lot recently.”

Benji followed Leo to the house. “But I feel bad. I should be doing more to try to get on my feet.”

“You’re doing plenty. You didn’t end up in this position overnight and it can’t be fixed overnight. I swear on Oliver’s life that I don’t mind you staying here.” Leo put his hand on the door, but turned around before he opened it. It was important to him that Benji understood. “I promise that it’s okay for you to be here for as long as you need to be.”

Benji opened his mouth like he planned to protest, but Leo sent him a withering look and Benji’s shoulders dropped as all the fight left him.

“I know. I get it, I do. Thank you.”

Leo pushed the door open and let Benji go in ahead of him.

“Oh my god, it smells amazing in here.”

“Wash up. I made fresh buns to go with dinner.” Leo grabbed dishes out of the cupboard and served them up. “Did you want to eat in the kitchen or in the living room?” They’d taken to eating at the coffee table at dinner. They were currently working on a *Schitt’s Creek* marathon. It had started when Benji confessed to never having seen the show.

Benji rolled his eyes. “The living room, of course. Maybe we can finish the first season tonight. Maybe I’ll even stay awake.”

Leo wouldn’t mind if Benji slept, but he kept that to himself.

They sat on the couch. They pulled the coffee table closer so they could use it as their dining table. Leo got the show started and Benji took a bite of his dinner. Benji moaned and Leo almost died right then. It wasn’t a sound Leo ever needed

to hear come out of Benji's mouth, but it was a sound he'd also never forget. It was burned into his brain forever now and Leo knew he'd drag up the memory later in the shower when he could do something about the throbbing erection it gave him.

Leo shifted in his seat and focused his attention on the residents of *Schitt's Creek* and pretended he didn't feel like a fifteen-year-old sitting next to their secret crush.

CHAPTER 11

Benji

We regret to inform you that the position you've applied for is no longer available.

BENJI CHECKED his email almost religiously at this point. He'd been at Leo's for over two weeks and he thought for sure in that time he'd have at least landed an interview. Somewhere. Anywhere. Benji wasn't above begging for one at this point.

He flopped back on the bed that he'd come to think of less Leo's guest room bed and more like his own. The almost nightly jerkoff sessions in it definitely helped to solidify the idea in his mind that it was his bed.

Leo had gone into the office again that morning. Benji had visited the public library for access to the computers, where he applied to any job he was even sort of half-assed qualified for. He'd take anything at this point.

Leo's magical resume hadn't helped much and were it not for the fact that Benji had Leo and Oliver's moral support, he'd probably have given up all hope. But it was hard to wash his hands of himself when Oliver refused to give up on him and had now roped his dad into the same little Benji fan club he'd started.

Despite the terrible first impression of the man, Benji had quickly come around where Leo was concerned. Were it not for Leo, Benji's current situation would be far less comfortable.

The subtle vibration of his phone distracted him from wandering down that path of terrible what-iffing. Benji grabbed his phone and answered the unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Benjamin Hayes?”

“Yes, it is.” Benji winced at the sound of his full legal name. He put it on his resumes because it sounded more grown up and professional than Benji, but he hated it. His parents had called him Benjamin. The way his mother said his name could tell Benji a lot about her mood. Most often it came with a tired sigh, indicating that she was at her wit’s end with him. Tired of him and his problems.

“This is William Sanders, head of human resources at Lochlin and Associates. You applied for the receptionist’s position. We’d like you to come for an interview if you’re available.”

“Absolutely, I am.” Benji sat up, his heart hammering in his chest. This was it. Maybe. He didn’t want to get his hopes up.

“Are you free today?”

“Today? I can absolutely be there today.” Benji eyed the clock. It was already after lunch and he’d already been out applying for jobs. He’d changed clothes when he got home, but it wouldn’t take long to change back into something decent looking.

“Great. How does three o’clock sound?”

“That’s plenty of time.” Benji stood and started pacing as William expressed his gratitude.

“Great. Just come to the front desk and tell them you’re here to see me and they’ll send you right back. I apologize for the short notice.”

“Oh, it’s okay.” Benji said brightly. “I promise I don’t mind. I’ll see you soon.” Benji ended the call and stripped out of his comfortable clothes and put his nice ones back on.

Benji wasted no time slipping his shoes back on and heading out to his car. He still had a lot of time before the interview, but he could get a coffee nearby and rehearse what he was going to say.

He climbed into his car and turned the key. When his faithful little car didn't turn over, he frowned. It wasn't the best car in the world, but up until now, it had been reliable. Benji took a breath.

"Come on, come on, come on," he whispered as he turned the key again. Nothing. Happened. Not a whisper. Not a sound. Just an ominous tightening in his chest and the jangle of keys as he tried again.

"Fuck. Shit. Okay. All is not lost, Benji." Benji pulled his phone out and called for an Uber. He'd have to take the bus home, but at least he could afford to get to the interview to begin with.

Benji sat on the front steps until the Uber pulled up. He scampered down the steps and practically flung himself into the back seat. Immediately, his eyes burned and he coughed a couple times. An array of tree-shaped air fresheners hung from the rearview mirror. Fuck. Benji couldn't afford to be late for the interview, and the ride had taken longer than he'd anticipated to show up. It felt like he had little choice but to suck it up.

After two miles, Benji's head was already pounding. He tried to unroll the back window, but the switch didn't work.

"Would you mind rolling my back window down? I'm allergic to scented things." Benji asked as he loosened his tie a little. The cloying scent of the air fresheners felt like they were winding invisible hands around his throat. He tried to breathe through his mouth, but he swore he could almost taste the mish-mash of aromas on his tongue.

"Sorry, that one doesn't roll down."

Benji wasn't sure he believed the driver. "Do any of them roll down?" He pressed his fingers against his temples and tried not to breathe, which made it both better, and worse.

The driver grumbled and cracked his window, letting a little air whistle into the car.

By the time they arrived at Benji's destination, his head throbbed, and his throat hurt from the cloying scents. There was still half an hour before his interview was slated to start, so he slipped into a coffee shop and bought a bottle of water and a cup of coffee to go. He chugged the water first, hoping that hydrating would help.

It wasn't an instant relief, but it helped Benji feel a little fresher. He slipped back out into the fresh air and checked the time again. Twenty minutes to go. Benji winced as his head throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat. He could swear that the air freshener's scents had taken up residence in his sinus cavities because he could still smell the sickening mixture of pine, vanilla, and something extremely floral.

Determined to push through the raging headache, Benji walked back toward the building that his interview was in. Turning the corner, the afternoon sun glimmered off the chrome of a passing vehicle. Benji squinted against the shiny assault. The light cut right through him, forcing him to close his eyes as he winced in pain.

Something slammed into him. Someone. Someone in a hurry, who didn't stop, not that Benji had time to chase them down and ask for an apology. Not with the hot coffee soaking through his shirt, heating his skin.

"Shit. Fuck. God dammit." Benji held his crushed cup in one hand and with the other he tugged the soaking wet fabric away from his skin. "Fuck." Benji was a wreck. His head throbbed. His hand was covered in hot coffee and his shirt was ruined. He couldn't go to the interview looking like a rat that drowned in coffee.

Benji pulled his phone out and brought up William's number. He hesitated to call, but maybe he could reschedule. Even if he could squeeze out an extra hour, he could find a place close by that sold clothes and buy a shirt. He'd have had more time if his car had started, or the Uber driver hadn't hit every red light on the way over.

Clinging desperately to his last shred of sanity and hope, Benji called William. It was a waste of time.

“I’m sorry, Benjamin,” William said, sounding not entirely sorry. “I’m crunched for time as it is, and you were slated to be my last appointment of the day before I leave for a couple weeks.”

Benji looked down at his sullied shirt and the coffee cup crumpled in his hand. “I was in a bit of an accident on the way, and I’m afraid I’m a bit of a mess. I’d hoped for a few minutes to pull myself together.” Benji tried to explain.

“I’m sorry about your accident, but I really can’t stay. I have a flight to make. Truthfully, I wouldn’t have booked the interview but my boss insisted on interviewing all the eligible candidates. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. Thanks anyway.”

“I can stay an extra ten minutes, but that’s all I can give you.”

“I’m just around the corner, but I’m afraid I look and smell like I’ve been attacked by a coffee machine.” Benji’s guts twisted and the raging headache from the air-freshener-express thumped a steady rhythm of misery. There was no way he’d get the job looking the way he did. “I can’t possibly show up soaked to the skin in coffee.” Benji sighed, feeling absolutely defeated. “If I cancel the interview, that gives you more time to get to your flight, so I hope doing so will encourage you to keep me in mind for future opportunities.”

“Are you sure?”

“Travel safe, Mr. Sanders. Thank you for the opportunity, but I’m not fit to be interviewed at the moment.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Feel better, Mr. Hayes.”

Benji mumbled a thank you and ended the call. He put his phone back in his pocket and stared at the crumpled cup in his hand. Should he have tried to make the interview, anyway? He wasn’t sure. But he looked like hell and felt like shit. He wanted his home and his bed. A dry shirt would be nice. Money for an Uber would be better. He had a bit of money

left, but he didn't know what was wrong with his car, not that it mattered. He definitely couldn't afford to fix it.

Just once, Benji wanted something to go right.

He threw the cup in a trash can and walked roughly in the direction of Leo's house. Not that he'd be able to walk that far, but it gave him a direction to wander in. After about an hour, his shirt was dry but ruined and a rainstorm was rolling in. Benji ducked into a bar to get out of the rain.

He'd have a drink, call an Uber, and get his ass home where nothing else could possibly go wrong. His head still throbbed from the air-freshener incident.

"Rough day?" The bartender asked as he poured a shot and slid it in front of Benji. "Looks like you could use this. First drink is free."

Benji looked at the shot. He wasn't much of a drinker, but today had been shit from start to finish. It didn't take much to convince himself to down that first shot. As it burned all the way down his esophagus, he shook his head and grimaced.

"That's awful," Benji said. "How much for one more?" Benji pulled his wallet out and paid for the next shot.

It was just as gross as the first, but already Benji felt warmer and softer, like the events of the day mattered just a little less. Sure, he still smelled like a cafe threw up on him and his head still ached. He was still jobless and homeless and, with Oliver an ocean away, friendless. Okay, so maybe the alcohol didn't help him feel better. That didn't stop him from switching to beer.

Sometime later, Benji's phone buzzed. He fumbled with the device as he tried to answer it.

"He—llo?" Benji's tongue felt thick and unwieldy in his mouth. Words were hard.

"Benji? Are you okay? Your car is here, but you're not. And the door wasn't locked."

"Fuck." Benji wiped a hand down his face and he tried to retrace his steps. Had he seriously left Leo's house unlocked?

“I’m sorry. I—I’m not home.”

“I know you’re not home. Where are you?”

Benji looked around until he caught the bartender’s gaze.
“Where am I?”

“You’re at a bar called Rico’s.” The bartender rattled off an address too, but Benji couldn’t grasp what it was when he tried to repeat it to Leo.

“Stay put.” Leo commanded. “I’ll come get you.”

“The only place I’m going is the bathroom.” Benji slid off the stool and shuffled his way toward the back of the bar.

“Get yourself a glass of water. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, Leo.” Benji put his phone in his pocket and steadied himself with a hand on the wall as he navigated his drunk ass to the bathroom. Benji took the world’s longest piss, ignored his reflection as he washed his hands and found his way back to his stool. There were more people in the bar than when he’d arrived, but his stool was still unoccupied so he slid back onto it. He folded his arms on the bar and rested his head.

“You can’t sleep here, buddy.” The bartender shook Benji’s shoulder until he sat up.

“My friend is on the way. Could I get some water?”

The bartender filled a glass with ice water and handed it to him. “I should’ve known you’d be a lightweight.”

Benji frowned at the water. He was sure he was being stupid, but being called a lightweight made him feel like he couldn’t even get drunk properly. Like even this stupid thing he hadn’t actually meant to do had somehow been fucked up by him. It left him wondering if there was anything he could get right.

CHAPTER 12

Leo

LEO KNEW that he didn't know Benji well enough to say what kind of person he was, but he didn't seem like the sort to be drunk by dinner time in the middle of the week. That he'd left his car in the driveway and the door unlocked had only added to Leo's worry. What had happened to Benji?

Leo found a spot near the bar so Benji wouldn't have to walk far, and then he went to collect his wayward houseguest. Upon entering the bar, Leo had to stand there and wait for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior. He spotted a forlorn-looking lump at one end of the bar. Benji's shoulders were hunched and his arms wrapped around his waist.

As Leo approached, Benji turned his head and the fucking sorrow in Benji's face was a punch to the guts. But there was more to it than simple sorrow. Benji looked defeated. His hair was short but stuck out everywhere like he'd been unable to stop running his fingers through it. Benji turned and tried to get off the stool, and a dark stain stood out on Benji's shirt.

Leo closed the distance between them and took Benji's arm to steady him. He looked at the bartender. "Is his tab closed?"

"No tab. Paid up front." Benji supplied as he gripped on to Leo for support.

"What happened?" Leo steered Benji toward the door.

Benji snorted or laughed, or maybe he'd choked back a cry. But he was quiet until they got to the truck. Benji paused

at the passenger door and looked at the seat. “I’m not going to make it.”

“You’ll get back on your feet, don’t worry so much, Benji.”

Benji scoffed and teetered as he turned and motioned to the truck all at the same time. “Not that. This. You have a tall truck and I don’t have tall legs.” Benji frowned and looked into the distance. “Tall legs?”

“I’ll help you.” Leo took Benji’s hand and put it on the door handle. “Hold here, and grab the seat. I’ll give you a boost.”

It wasn’t much of a stretch for Benji to get in the truck. He hadn’t had an issue that last time, but he’d been sober then. This time, Benji’s limbs were uncooperative, and he struggled to get himself up into the seat. Leo gripped Benji’s waist and hoisted him up into the seat.

Benji squeaked and flailed but settled into the seat with a face the color of a cherry tomato. By the time Leo shut the door and got in the driver’s seat, Benji had somehow pulled his seatbelt across and was fumbling with the final step of sliding it into the buckle.

Without thinking, Leo did it for him. Benji’s hands went still under his own as he slid the devices together. Leo almost felt himself blush, but turned his attention to other things. Like the giant coffee stain on Benji’s shirt.

“What happened?” Leo started the truck and eased it into traffic.

Benji sighed and rested his head against the passenger side window. “I had just gotten back from looking for work and I got a call for a last-minute interview. My car wouldn’t start. My Uber had seventy air-fresheners in it, which made me fucking sick. I left with plenty of time. So I got some water and a coffee, hoping the hydration and the caffeine would help me feel better in time for my interview. Then this happened.” Benji waved at the front of his shirt. “I called the guy and tried to squeeze out an extra hour, but he’s on his way to some

vacation and was just tying up some loose ends. And I couldn't go looking like this and feeling like I'd been run over."

"So you got drunk." Leo smirked.

"Not on purpose. I walked for a while and just kind of ended up there." Benji mumbled something, but Leo couldn't make out what it was.

"Sorry? What did you say?"

"Oh, I said sorry I'm a mess."

"Everyone's a mess sometimes."

"Pfffft. I doubt you've ever been a mess. You're so... not messy. You're all hot and dependable and shit."

Leo let the comment about him being hot go and focused on the more important parts of what Benji was saying.

"After Oliver moved overseas, I didn't get out of bed for three days."

Benji turned and looked at Leo with astonishment, but didn't say anything. It was like he understood exactly what Leo had felt. The emptiness—the hole that Oliver's absence left. The pride-filled ache because he was away doing something he loved.

"I'm not always a composed person, Benji. Just because most of the time I have my shit together, it doesn't mean that I never have bad days or that I never screw up."

"I miss him," Benji sniffled. "Oh great, now I'm the messy, weepy, drunk guy." He wiped the tears off his face and sucked in a few deep breaths to compose himself.

"Let's get some food into you. We can stop on the way home."

"Burgers?" Benji's eyes glimmered with hope.

"Burgers and fries. Or do you prefer onion rings?"

Benji shook his head. "No onion rings."

Leo pulled into a drive through and ordered a couple bacon-double-cheeseburger combos. He ate with one hand and drove with the other while Benji devoured his food silently in the passenger seat.

An idea struck Leo. It was innocent enough, but he didn't want Benji to get the wrong idea from it. Leo didn't even know if it was the wrong idea, and that was half the problem. Leo liked Benji. He was sweet and nice. Leo was older, not dead, and had to admit that Benji was gorgeous, with his short brown hair and his warm caramel eyes.

They were almost home when Leo convinced himself that the offer was harmless.

"I have a massive bathtub in my master suite. I also just might have a stash of bubbles under the sink. If you wanted, you could use them when we get home."

Benji gaped at him. "The guest bath is nice."

"I know it is, but my tub is better for bad days. You can use it. Whenever you want," Leo added. He made himself watch the road instead of Benji's face.

"I'd like that." Benji whispered.

By the time Leo pulled into the garage, Benji looked a little better than he had when Leo collected him from the bar.

"I'm so sorry about today, Leo." Benji slid out of the passenger door and managed to stay on his feet as he shuffled behind Leo into the house.

"It's fine, I promise. I was just worried something bad happened to you. I'm just glad you're not hurt." Leo was careful to avoid saying that Benji was okay, because he clearly wasn't. He looked like he needed a hug, a bath, and a long sleep, in that order.

Leo cleared his throat and motioned for Benji to follow him. "Come on. Get yourself something to change into and I'll get you a bath started."

Benji perked up at that, his face brightening as he smiled. "You're really going to let me use your bathroom?"

“It’s just a bathroom. It’s no big deal.” Leo said. And if Benji looked a little crestfallen at that, Leo told himself not to notice. “Just come through my room when you’re ready.” Leo told Benji.

After he started the water and checked the temperature, he put the plug in and added a generous amount of the solution to the water. Benji appeared a moment later with an armful of clean clothes. He’d already stripped himself of his shirt, and Leo’s heart thumped in his chest as Benji set his change of clothes on the counter.

He quickly turned his attention away and dug fresh towels out of the linen cupboard. “Stay as long as you want. Add more hot water if you need to.”

“That tub could fit three people.”

Leo tried to scrub that image from his mind. The picture of three people quickly turned into a mental image of him and Benji and how it might feel to cradle him close, and rain kisses up and down his neck as he reached between his legs and—nope. Leo wasn’t going there.

“Uh—anyway. I’ll go so you can enjoy it. Call out if you need anything. Okay?”

Benji nodded, and Leo made his escape. He didn’t go far. He couldn’t make himself go downstairs and run off his sexual frustration, not right after he’d told Benji to call out if he needed anything.

But he better not need anything, because he was naked. In Leo’s bathroom. Leo closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Benji had looked at Leo a few times in ways that made Leo’s blood heat. Unless he was mistaken. Even if he wasn’t, today wasn’t the day for thoughts like that. Benji was drunk and vulnerable.

Truthfully, there wasn’t a day that was appropriate for any of his thoughts about Benji. Were he not Oliver’s best friend—had they met in a bar—or some other way than the way they did, Leo might’ve made a move on him. Benji was sweet, honest, and caring. He was loyal to Oliver, which Leo loved,

because he was also loyal to his son. Which was why he poured himself a glass of water and drank it all while thinking about the current city works project running behind schedule and over budget—instead of thinking about naked Benji.

Leo busied himself with making a grocery order and reading emails. He realized that Benji had been in the bath for a long time and a cold, irrational fear swept over him. What if Benji had passed out in the water and drowned? Leo was halfway to his room and stopped. That was silly. Benji had been drunk, but not wasted. He didn't look like he was on the verge of passing out when Leo left him to his own devices.

But Leo couldn't shake the fear, so he strode to his room. He almost missed it, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw a Benji-shaped lump lying on top of his bed. Leo kept a blanket folded up at the foot of his bed and Benji had wrapped it around himself and had fallen asleep curled up on Leo's bed.

As quiet as Leo could, he crept into the bathroom and drained the tub. He tidied up the towels and Benji's discarded clothes and crept downstairs to toss everything into the washing machine.

With Benji tucked away safely in Leo's bed and dinner taken care of, Leo stretched out on the couch and watched television. He kept the volume quiet so he wouldn't disturb Benji. It had been strange to come home expecting Benji to be there and have him be gone. Logically, Leo knew the situation was temporary, but part of him was sad about that.

Coming home to an empty house hadn't always bothered Leo, but he found himself liking it less and less the older he got. Today, when he'd arrived and found everything unlocked and Benji nowhere to be seen, his mind had conjured up a bunch of worst-case scenarios.

Was he dead? Kidnapped? Kidnapped and dead? Was he out for a walk? Had he been hurt? Leo sighed and rewound his movie back to the beginning. None of his fears had come to fruition. Benji was safe at home, where he belonged.

Until he got on his feet and left. If Leo was lucky, he'd see Benji on holidays, or when Oliver was in town. Maybe he could convince him to come over for dinner sometimes? Leo sighed and did his best to stop thinking about the fact that he was crushing on an unobtainable person. Even if he wasn't a guest in Leo's home, or far too young, he was Oliver's best friend. Nothing could happen. Ever.

CHAPTER 13

Benji

BENJI WOKE IN THE DARKNESS, not fully aware of where he was at first. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and looked around the dim room. All the blood drained out of him when he realized that he'd fallen asleep in Leo's room. In his bed. Sure, that had been a secret dream of Benji's, but usually when he conjured up the image, Leo was in bed with him.

And he most certainly was not.

Benji sat in the dark for a few minutes as he recalled the events of the previous day. With a quiet groan of absolute mortification, he scrubbed a hand down his face. The bath had been nice. More than nice actually. And when Benji had got out, he'd been so tired. He could barely remember crawling into Leo's bed. He was sure he hadn't meant to stay.

The need to take a piss forced Benji out of bed. Reluctantly, he neatly folded the blanket and put it back where he'd found it before slipping out of Leo's room and using the main bathroom.

Benji padded to the kitchen after. It was well and truly the middle of the night and he should go back to bed, but so should Leo. The clock on the stove glowed in green showing a time of just a little past one in the morning.

Standing by the sink, Benji drank a large glass of water. He wasn't drunk and he didn't feel too awful. He seemed to be firm of body, though his spirit was a little crumpled. What must Leo think of him? That was the worst of it. Had Benji

been able to make the interview, he'd have at least had something good to tell Leo. Even if he didn't get the job. Getting an interview and not getting the job was better than getting an interview but not making it because you'd been assaulted by air fresheners and coffee cups.

Benji drank another glass of water then went to the living room where the flickering light of the television had given away Leo's location. The volume was down low, probably so it wouldn't disturb Benji.

Leo was an unmoving shape, peaceful in the gentle glow of the television. He had a blanket draped over him and one of his hands lay tucked under his chin. Benji knew he should stop staring. He should just go to his own bed and go back to sleep. But he couldn't make himself look away from Leo. When he was awake, it wasn't like Benji could gawk at him like this and it was nice to have the chance to look as much as he wanted.

The flickering television light was flattering on Leo, Benji thought. He looked peaceful and something unfurled in Benji. He'd had crushes before, and knew what a passing crush felt like, but this was more than that. Benji wanted Leo to look at him like he was worth something. Like he was wanted, needed even. But Benji didn't know how to make people look at him with anything but pity, misery, or disbelief.

Leo shifted and Benji held his breath, but Leo didn't wake, even when his arm slid off the couch and dangled, fingers brushing the floor. Benji frowned. If Leo slept like that, he was liable to put his arm to sleep. It certainly didn't look like it was comfortable.

Benji moved closer and held his breath. He told himself he was doing this for Leo's sake, for his comfort, and not because he just wanted an excuse to touch him. To pretend that he had any right to touch him. To let himself live a silly fantasy that this was his Leo he was looking out for and that his silly gesture would be appreciated. That should Leo discover him, the corners of his eyes would crinkle as he gave Benji the softest, sweetest smile.

Benji crouched down and gently lifted Leo's dangling arm. He held his breath as he slowly lifted Leo's arm. When his fingers brushed Leo's bare skin, he couldn't resist sliding his hand into Leo's, even briefly, just so he could know the feel of it.

Benji had Leo's arm back on the couch and he was about to slip away when suddenly the hand he was holding held his back. He gasped, looked, and nearly fell over when he found Leo awake, staring directly at him.

"Uh... hi." Benji whispered. He should let go of Leo now. But he couldn't make himself. And Leo wasn't saying anything. Why wasn't he saying anything? Why was he still holding Benji's hand?

"Are you okay? How do you feel?" Leo's whispered questions tore through all Benji's defenses. Not that he had any. Not really. Sometimes he felt like a stray, begging for scraps of affection.

"I'm okay, Leo." Benji whispered back, hoping to not break the spell. Whatever magic had possessed Benji to take Leo's hand was still working, because Leo had yet to pull away.

"That's good." Leo whispered again. "You should get some more sleep, Benji."

Benji shook his head. There was no way he was sleeping now. Not when his dick was hard enough to hammer nails. Not when his blood raced through him faster than he thought possible, aided by a wildly out-of-control heart.

The soft glow of the television washed the room in what Benji thought was a rather romantic light. He'd always liked watching the tv with someone in the dark. He wouldn't even be ashamed to admit that he missed having someone to curl up against. Oliver never minded so much. But Leo might.

Leo might mind Benji holding his hand, too, but so far he'd said nothing. In the flickering light, in the middle of the night, it gave Benji hope. It lent him bravery. There was

something in Leo's gaze that pulled at Benji, reeled him in like a helpless sailor answering the call of the siren.

Before he could think, Benji leaned down and brushed his lips against Leo's. Leo gasped in surprise and Benji kissed him again. He tightened his hold on Leo's hand, begging him without begging him, to kiss him back. Leo's lips were dry and soft and Benji ached to feel them on his skin.

For the briefest moments, Leo's lips moved against his own. A caress. A taste. A gentle return of Benji's affection. His heart soared and his breath caught, and it was that little gasp that seemed to break the spell.

"Benji," Leo whispered. Benji stopped kissing and pulled back to a respectable distance. He couldn't make himself let go of Leo's hand.

"I'm not drunk anymore, if that's what you're worried about," Benji blurted, still whispering, desperate to salvage the magic.

"Benji," Leo said again. This time his voice was thick with what sounded a lot like regret. Benji pulled his hand out of Leo's, snatching it back the way he couldn't do with the previous five minutes of his life.

"I'm sorry. That was... you didn't... and you've been so nice... I shouldn't." Benji stumbled over his words and shot to his feet. "Goodnight, Leo."

"Benji, it's okay." Leo tried to say, but Benji shook his head and, with furious determination, did not cry, though he felt like he should.

Benji tore his gaze away from Leo, who'd sat up and reached for Benji. It wasn't okay. He couldn't even leave. He was stuck here unless he wanted to live on the streets. His car was a paperweight he couldn't afford to fix. He had literally nothing going for him. It wasn't a wonder Leo wasn't interested. He was too good for Benji. Too good of a person to kiss someone who lived with him. Who had no other choice.

Oh god. Benji clapped his hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry, Leo. I shouldn't have done that."

“Are you okay, Benji?” Leo stood and Benji took a step back.

Benji nodded, then shook his head. “I think I need to go back to bed.” Benji slipped away, going the long way around so he wouldn’t have to get too close to Leo. He couldn’t hear anything past the hammering of his heart. Once he was safely in his room, he pressed his back against the door and forced himself to take several slow, deep breaths.

His stupid dick didn’t get the memo that it should be humiliated. Heck, it fucking twitched at that thought and he tried not to think too hard about what that meant. He didn’t have time or brain power for a crisis of sexuality, not when the rest of his life was upside down.

That Leo had been right and responsible to stop the kiss burned Benji. Why did Leo have to be good? Why did he have to have stupid morals and shit? Why couldn’t he have pinned Benji to the couch and kissed him senseless? Or shoved him down and used his mouth to get off.

Benji’s hand went to his cock, and he couldn’t stop himself. If he couldn’t have Leo, he could fantasize about having Leo. About his big, soft hands and his dry lips and how they’d feel on his skin. About how Leo was probably great in bed. One of those guys who’d wring Benji dry and leave him a boneless mess before he thought of seeking his own pleasure. Maybe he’d be a little rough, in a good way. Pin Benji down and make him take it.

Benji bit back a moan and shoved his hand in his pants, took hold of his cock and stroked it a few times, adding spit for a bit of lube he bit his lip and jerked furiously. He was angry at himself for the kiss. For tilting his hand and letting Leo see just how much he liked him. Benji had no business crushing on Leo, not when he’d gone out of his way to help Benji.

He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his mouth with his free hand to smother his whimpers lest Leo hear him. Benji moaned at the thought of Leo on the other side of the door, hand poised to knock. He imagined Leo hearing him and

reaching down to adjust his own erection, then being unable to stop from stroking himself to completion, listening to Benji.

Benji came so hard his knees trembled. He hadn't bothered to pull his cock out of his clothing and his poor briefs caught the mess. Benji kept stroking until his cock was tender and his balls were empty. He peeled out of his clothing and used the already sullied briefs to clean off his hand.

There was no way in hell Benji would go back to sleep anytime soon. He was also not going to chance slipping across the hall to clean himself up. He crawled into his own bed, naked, because why not, and grabbed his phone from the nightstand where he'd plugged it in before his bath.

Usually, he told Oliver everything, but he couldn't tell him this. What could he say? *I sort of kissed your dad and then jerked off while thinking about several different dirty things I'd love to have him do to me, and now I think I made everything super awkward, hope you don't mind.*

No. Benji was definitely not telling Oliver. Ever. If he told Oliver and Oliver hated him for it, Leo would have to hate him too, because loyalty extended to family first. Benji's eyes stung at the thought of losing his. Not the people who'd thrown him away, but Oliver... and now Leo.

Oh god. What had he done?

CHAPTER 14

Leo

AT FIRST, Leo thought Benji was a ghost. Or a dream. But there was nothing make-believe about the tender way Benji kissed him.

God. Benji had kissed him. And Leo had started to kiss him back. What made matters worse was that Leo regretted letting Benji run away. He was close to pulling Benji down next to him on the couch, to sliding over top of him and kissing him until he forgot his own name.

But he'd hesitated and Benji panicked. After a moment, Leo levered himself up off the couch and followed Benji to his room. He'd go apologize or let Benji know there was no reason to be upset. That the kiss hadn't been unwelcome, just surprising.

He paused outside of Benji's door when he heard a moan. Leo almost knocked, but he heard another moan and realized what was happening on the other side of the door. Leo backed away from the door and slipped into his room.

Benji was jerking off. Benji had kissed him and was now jerking off, which meant he was probably—definitely—thinking about Leo while he was doing it. Leo flopped down onto his bed and tried desperately to think of anything else. Math. Old people naked. The time he baked a frozen pizza with a plastic cutting board underneath it and made his apartment smell like toxic chemical fumes for a week.

None of these memories helped Leo's hard-on go away. It was likely the kernel of knowledge in the back of his mind that

knew Benji had been lying here just a short time before Leo.

Jesus fucking Christ on a cracker, he needed to get laid. And not by Benji. Nope. There was no way he was going to take advantage of someone so much younger and more vulnerable. Even if he wasn't Oliver's best friend.

There, that did it. Leo thought of Oliver and the disappointed look he'd be sure to get from his son if Leo fucked Benji. Then his mind conjured up the look of disappointment on Benji's face, and it gutted him.

Leo was a grown man and yet it was all he could to resist reaching into his pants and rubbing one out. It wasn't right. It wasn't. Leo's fingers twitched at his sides, and he laced his fingers underneath his head, like he didn't have a care in the world. Except he did. Fucking Benji had crawled under his skin and he couldn't scrub the image of him out of his mind. All soft eyed and sweet looking, backlit by the flickering glow of the television, he looked like an angel.

By the time Leo found sleep, the sky was leaning towards the light. When his alarm went off, he was awake in an instant. Nerves swam in his stomach. What if Benji wasn't comfortable here anymore? What if Leo's rejection drove Benji to do something drastic?

He didn't think that Benji could get into much trouble in the middle of the night, but it propelled him out of bed, anyway. Leo had a quick shower, letting the water run colder than normal. His stupid dick decided that it was interested in Benji and not even the cool water was a complete deterrent for it threatening to thicken.

Leo scrubbed his hair and stepped out of the shower. He needed to talk to Benji. Maybe he had still been drunk. He didn't seem like he was, but it was possible that alcohol played a small part in their stolen kisses.

Leo slid into a pair of jeans and hoped the rigid denim would keep any evidence of his arousal at bay. He crept down the hallway in case Benji was still sleeping, but the aroma of coffee greeted him a second before he turned the corner and

saw Benji sitting at the counter with a coffee mug in hand. A plate of half eaten toast sat in front of him.

Leo told himself to act natural. He'd been around men he'd kissed before. He knew from experience that it didn't have to be awkward.

"Good morning." Leo said, almost in a normal tone of voice, as he made a beeline for the coffeepot.

"Morning." Benji said quietly.

"How do you feel this morning?"

Benji scoffed. "Do you mean, am I hungover, or am I mortified? The answer is both."

Leo winced, grateful that his back was to Benji and he couldn't see his face. He stirred a couple spoons of sugar into his coffee, then bit the bullet and turned to face Benji.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I kissed you. I can't even say that I was drunk since I'd slept it off by then. I'm so embarrassed."

Leo wanted to reach for him and offer him some sort of comfort, but Leo wasn't sure that would be appropriate. Part of him wanted to put his coffee down and kiss the shit out of Benji. He wanted to sink his hands into the short strands of Benji's hair and discover if it was as soft as it looked, if Benji was as divine as he'd tasted.

"I understand if you want me to leave." Benji cut his gaze away from Leo.

"What the fuck?" Leo balked. "That's the last thing I want. Benji, you didn't do anything wrong, okay? In fact, if I could go back to last night," the sound of the doorbell cut Leo off. Leo looked at the time. It was barely past seven in the morning. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Benji shook his head.

"I'll be right back." Leo turned to go answer the front door when he heard the scrape of a key, and then the alarm chirping.

Oliver slipped inside and grinned at Leo as he dropped his bag. “Surprise!” Oliver casually walked over to the alarm and tapped in his code to disarm it. Then he turned and looked at Benji. “Get over here and hug me, you little shit. I flew all day, night, whatever.”

Leo watched Benji scramble off the stool and launch himself into Oliver’s arms. His heart cracked in half, watching his son hug Benji the way he wished he could. But how could he be upset? Benji was Oliver’s best friend. Not for the first time, Leo wondered if there had ever been anything between them.

Then Oliver ruffled Benji’s hair. “Let me hug the old man, then I want some of that amazing coffee while Dad makes breakfast.” Oliver wrapped his arms around Leo and squeezed. “You two are suspiciously quiet.” Oliver quipped.

“We just got up,” Benji said. He grabbed Oliver’s bag. “You can take my room while you’re here. I’ll crash on the couch.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Or we can crash together. Wouldn’t be the first time we shared a mattress.”

Leo refused to think of his son curled up with Benji. It... he was jealous, he realized as he opened the freezer. “What are you guys in the mood for? Bacon and egggers? Pancakes.”

“Yes.” Oliver said. “I plan to eat you out of house and home the three days I’m here.”

Leo cut his gaze over to Benji, who met his eyes. They were happy to see Oliver, but Leo could tell Benji felt as shaken as he was about the timing of the visit.

“How’d you swing time off?” Benji asked. “I thought you were in the middle of a big project.”

Oliver poured himself a coffee, leaving plenty of room to add way too much milk, as usual. Leo set about cooking breakfast for all of them. He listened in on Oliver’s conversation with Benji. They sounded like they’d never been apart. In no time, Oliver had Benji laughing and smiling.

Leo hated it. He tried not to, but maybe it was a sign from the universe that he was about to do something monumentally stupid. Like tell Benji that he regretted not kissing him harder, longer, deeper, last night. What business did he have going after someone like Benji? None. Zero. He'd be better off with someone like Oliver.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” Oliver asked after Benji excused himself to use the bathroom. “Are you mad that I'm here? You've barely said a word.”

Leo gaped at Oliver. “No. I'm happy you're here, Olly.”

Oliver groaned. “Not the nickname.”

Leo smiled at him. “Yes, the nickname. I'm just worried about Benji, that's all. He had a really shitty day yesterday.”

“He texted me about it last night. It was so hard to not spill the beans and tell him I'd be here soon.” Oliver narrowed his eyes at Leo. “Are you sure you're not mad?”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Yes. I'm livid,” he deadpanned. “Volcanic rage, even. I'd never not want you around, Oliver. I also slept like garbage last night, so I'm dragging ass waiting for the caffeine to kick in.”

Oliver's expression softened. “Awww, you were worried about Benji, weren't you? That's adorable.”

Benji appeared and Oliver changed the subject, but the way his gaze kept going back and forth between Leo and Benji made the hair on the back of Leo's neck stand on end.

Had Oliver already guessed that something almost happened between them? When Leo nearly burned the bacon thinking about it, he forced the thought out of his head. All he could do was concentrate on the here and now. Oliver had just arrived, there was no way he knew anything.

They sat around the kitchen table and ate. Benji and Oliver both ate twice the amount Leo did. He watched the way they interacted. They were like brothers, Leo mused to himself, the way they teased each other lovingly. Leo doubted they'd ever been together. Oliver had denied it before, and would again, and Leo would believe him.

That didn't mean he liked the idea of Benji snuggling up next to Oliver in bed and was thankful that Oliver was still losing the whole, *we can be roommates*, argument.

"Are you going into the office today?" Oliver asked.

"I don't need to, no. Why? Did you want your dear old dad to make himself scarce so you could hang with your friend?"

"Fuck no. I thought we could all go do something while I'm in town. I don't have a ton of time, and this trip is going to fuck my sleeping pattern, but it's worth it."

"What did you want to do?" Benji asked.

"Well, there's that trail at Sugar Loaf that I've always wanted to hike, but never got around to it when I lived here. I thought we could do that."

"You spent how many hours on a plane, and the first thing you want to do is hike?" Leo asked incredulously.

"Yeah?" Oliver grinned and snapped off a piece of bacon. "I have a limited time to cram in maximum fun."

Benji met Leo's gaze and gave him a worried look.

Leo groaned. "I'm tired already. You two should go on without me."

Oliver shook his head. "No way, old man. I came all the way over here. My two favorite people are *finally* in the same fucking place. I am milking this for all I can before I fly back."

Benji met Leo's gaze and all the things left unsaid sat between them, widening the gap Oliver had put there with his presence. Maybe it was for the best that Leo was to spend the next three days being reminded of the friendship between Benji and his son. Nothing could come before Oliver's happiness. Not even his own.

Was being with Benji something that could make Leo happy? He shoved a strip of bacon in his mouth and chewed on the fact that he'd never know.

CHAPTER 15

Benji

BENJI FELT like death warmed over. It wasn't the booze he drank the day before, or the fact that he was up half the night, or the unsaid things that hung between him and Leo, but a combination of all three.

The stupid sun didn't help much, either. Oliver looked back at Benji, who trailed behind the two taller men. He fell back and sidled up next to Benji, pulling the cap off his head and sticking it on Benji's.

"Get your sweaty hat off me," Benji grouched and shoved the hat off his head. "That's revolting."

"You're going to turn into a sundried tomato." Oliver gave him some serious side eye. Something he'd been doing a lot of since he appeared out of thin air. Benji almost wondered if he saw the guilt written on Benji's forehead. He felt like he had the words, *I kissed your dad, and I liked it*, printed on his forehead.

"This," Benji stopped and unscrewed the lid on his water bottle. "Was your disgusting idea of fun?" He tipped his head back and drank down the rest of his water.

"We could've done something else." Oliver put his hand on Benji's forehead. "You're pretty warm. Are you feeling okay?"

Benji rolled his eyes and batted Oliver's hand away. "Of course, I'm warm. It's unseasonably hot today, and you wanted to go hiking. And I'm a good friend. So I came." Plus, Benji had fucking missed him and wouldn't sacrifice even a

moment of his time with Oliver. If Oliver wanted to go skydiving, Benji couldn't promise to jump out of the plane, but he'd at least be willing to wait safely on the ground where people belonged.

"No, I'm serious. Hey, Dad." Oliver waved Leo over. He'd stopped up ahead, probably thinking Benji and Oliver wanted some time to chat amongst themselves. "Come here."

Leo walked back toward them, and Benji did his best not to ogle. He stared at Oliver instead, burning him a filthy look.

"Does Benji look okay to you?" Oliver asked, and Benji narrowed his eyes at his friend.

"I'm fine."

"He looks over heated." Oliver tried to put his hand on Benji's forehead, but he pushed his hand away. But when Leo reached for him a moment later, Benji couldn't make himself ask Leo to stop.

"I'm fine."

Leo's hand felt cool on Benji's skin. "Feels a bit warm, but I mean, it is hot out."

"We should head back. Dad, give me your keys. I can run ahead and get the truck's air conditioning going."

"I'm fine." Benji scowled at Oliver, who was already snatching Leo's keys from his hands. Oliver shoved his water bottle at Benji and took his empty one. "Take this. See you soon."

Before Benji could protest further, Oliver had spun on his heel and was heading back the way they came.

"Oliver, you're a shit. I'm fine."

"Sorry, can't hear you." Oliver disappeared around a corner and all the fight went out of Benji.

All morning Benji had wanted nothing more than to be alone with Leo, but now that he was, he didn't know what to say. He sighed, took a drink of Oliver's water, and started back toward the truck.

“Did you know he was coming?” Benji asked. Maybe that had been the reason Leo had stopped the kiss. Who was Benji kidding? Of course, it was the reason. Leo’s loyalty was with his kid, not that Benji blamed him for it. It made him like Leo even more, because he cared about Oliver too, but clearly, he didn’t care enough to avoid making a pass at his dad, so he probably wasn’t a very good friend.

“I didn’t. Did you?”

Benji felt Leo’s gaze on him. “No. Total shocker. But that’s Oliver. Impulsive and sweet.”

Leo made a sound in the back of his throat to indicate he agreed with Benji. Fuck if it wasn’t raspy and gravelly and did things to Benji’s insides that had no business being affected by it.

“He’s also about as subtle as a heart attack.” Leo said after they’d walked a little farther.

Benji stopped in his tracks, and he looked at Leo. “Do you think he knows...” Benji shook his head. “He can’t know. Can he? I mean... we weren’t that awkward.”

Leo arched an eyebrow at Benji.

“We were totally fucking awkward,” Benji groaned.

“He either knows, and is fine with it. Or he doesn’t know and we’re just feeling guilty.”

Benji eyed Leo from the corner of his eye. “Should we feel guilty?” Though Benji wanted the answer to be no, he knew it was a resounding yes. “Ugh. I really don’t want to talk about this.” Benji shot Leo a mournful look. He wanted the man with a desperation that was unmatched. Even now, knowing Oliver was up ahead did little to curb Benji’s thirst for Leo.

It was only made worse by the way the light filtered through the trees and danced off Leo. He looked ethereal, like he’d stepped out of a magazine, or a fantasy land. He was Benji’s knight in shining armor and Benji was clearly the damsel in distress. Okay—the dude in distress.

“We don’t have to talk about it.” Leo said. He made it sound so simple. And maybe for him it was. For the recipient of the kiss, it was probably far easier to brush off, because it didn’t mean a thing to Leo. *He* didn’t mean anything to Leo.

It shouldn’t have been some big revelation. Logically, Benji knew that he and Leo didn’t know each other very well. It still stung, though, to know that he was the one carrying torches for someone who wouldn’t light a match for him.

Benji was suddenly thankful for Oliver’s presence. He’d provided a buffer for Benji and reeled him in, preventing him from doing something stupid. Something else stupid, he corrected himself. Oliver had also provided Benji with the perfect excuse to disengage with Leo.

Oliver’s premonition of Benji not feeling well had become a self-fulfilling prophecy and by the time Benji got back to the truck, he was too hot and too tired. He climbed into the back seat, despite Oliver’s protests that he would take that seat.

“It’s okay.” Benji buckled up. “I need to rest my eyes.” Benji leaned against the window and did just that. He felt their gazes on him and could imagine the look they’d share between them of quiet concern.

When they got back to the house, Benji was quick to get out of the truck. His face burned at the sight of his stupid broken-down car sitting in the driveway like a two ton shameful reminder of his absolute inability to succeed at anything.

Once inside, Benji took his shoes off and swallowed his emotions down. “I should go lay down.” Benji motioned to the guest room. Oliver looked like he wanted to argue, but he’d started the whole, *Benji-looks-ill* situation so he couldn’t argue with it now. “You two should go do something fun, though.” Benji forced a smile. Oliver opened his mouth to protest, but Benji just smiled at him. “You’re only here for a few days. We can catch up later. I’ll feel better after I drink some water and rest for a bit.”

Benji managed a small smile for Oliver and slipped away before he made an ass of himself. Again. It wasn’t Leo’s fault

that Benji was a fucking mess. That he'd clearly misread the signals last night and had kissed Leo out of some sort of stupid, misguided attempt at wish-fulfillment. It tracked that Benji couldn't have Leo, because he never got anything he truly wanted.

Once inside the guest room, Benji flung himself down on the bed that Oliver would be sleeping in, alone, and closed his eyes. There was no way Benji could share a bed with Oliver now because he'd spend the entire night lying there thinking inappropriate things about Leo and that seemed wrong.

Briefly, he entertained the idea of climbing out the window and running away, but the fact was that Benji had nowhere to go. He rolled over onto his side and tucked his knees up to his chest. Voices came closer and Benji shut his eyes, hoping that if either of them looked in on him, he'd look like he was sleeping.

Someone knocked softly on the door before it opened. "Benji," Oliver said. "Dad and I are going shopping because I'm a pushy brat and I want him to grill for me while I'm here. Did you want anything?"

"No, thanks." Benji said. The things he wanted most couldn't be bought, anyway. It wasn't ice cream or candy bars or grilled fish that he wanted. Safety. Security. A fucking hug. To have Leo look at him like he was someone to be desired and not pitied. And those weren't things Benji knew how to get.

Oliver slipped into the room and shut the door. Benji kept his eyes shut and willed sleep to take him before Oliver could say anything, but of course he didn't get that either.

"Are you okay, Benji?" Familiar fingers brushed against his cheekbone.

"Hungover as hell and my best friend dragged me on a ten-mile nature excursion."

"It wasn't ten miles," Oliver protested. "But the hike was pretty intense for a lush."

Benji pried an eye open. “Getting drunk twice in almost two years hardly makes me a lush.”

“Twice?” He watched Oliver do the math. “That means the last time you got drunk was...”

“When you left.” Benji closed his eyes again. He didn’t want to think of Oliver leaving. It wasn’t rational for Benji to be mad about it. He’d encouraged Oliver to take the job. It was his dream and Benji knew that there were some things even the bestest of friends couldn’t share. It didn’t stop Benji from feeling abandoned, even though he’d been the one to all but force Oliver to leave.

“Benji... what’s wrong?”

“Tired.” It was the truth this time. The events of the past twenty-four hours had worn Benji down. He felt like the last tiny nub of a pencil, just a sliver of lead and a worn out eraser was all that remained of him.

“Are you sure I can’t get you anything?”

“Ice cream. Chocolate.”

“I can do that.” Oliver said. “Get some rest.” A moment later, the bedroom door shut. There were more voices in the hallway, as if Leo had been standing there waiting for a status report. He heard the front door close and the telltale sound of truck doors shutting. He didn’t expect to sleep, but it tugged him under all at once, like he no longer had a choice in the matter.

CHAPTER 16

Leo

“WHAT DID you do to my best friend?” Oliver’s question came out of nowhere. Kind of. Leo knew Oliver had been up to something when he’d all but shoved the pair of them together and scampered back to the truck.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Leo kept his eyes on the road, but Oliver kept his eyes on Leo which made it hard to concentrate. He almost missed the turn to the grocery store as a result.

“You know exactly what I mean.” Oliver scowled. “He’s all weird and quiet. I left you two alone on purpose so you could fix whatever weird vibe that was I walked in on this morning, and yet somehow you made it worse.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Except he had, hadn’t he? Benji had kissed him and he’d put a stop to it. He’d rejected him last night and before he could smooth things over this morning, Oliver had appeared. Had Oliver not appeared, Leo would’ve admitted to Benji that if he got a chance to do their first kiss over, that he’d do it differently. He’d kiss Benji back. Kiss him deeper and longer. Kiss him until he couldn’t think or breathe, until there was no room for any awkwardness between them.

“Puh-lease. The situation I walked into this morning proves otherwise. You weren’t kicking him out, were you?”

Leo snapped his attention to Oliver and stared at him in disbelief. “What? No, of course not. I’m actually insulted you’d think that, Oliver. Really?”

Leo turned into the parking lot and found a space. It was far away from the entrance, but Leo could use the distance to walk off some of his annoyance at his son.

“Well, you two were either fighting, or you were fucking, because that was some awkward... wait... were you fucking?”

“No we weren’t fucking.” Leo protested. Maybe too quickly and maybe too loudly, because Oliver gave him a weird sort of smug look.

“But you wanted to.” Oliver always had a knack for hitting the nail on the head. God, Leo had wanted to. He still wanted to, and he burned with the shame of it.

He didn’t try to apologize or protest. Nor did he confirm or deny. “We didn’t fuck.” He stated.

Oliver was quiet while they shopped. Content to run on ahead of Leo and run back with this item or that item and drop it into the shopping cart. It was the exact kind of behavior he’d discouraged in Oliver when he’d been a child, but he couldn’t say no to this adult version of his son.

Oliver tossed in a bucket of chocolate ice cream. “It’s Benji’s favorite,” he supplied, as if he knew Leo couldn’t say no if it was for Benji. “You could stand to do a lot worse than Benji, you know.”

Leo furrowed his brow. “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, discouraging your father from someone your own age?”

Oliver shook his head, but a smile tugged at his lips. “You and Benji are my two favorite people on the planet. I’m all for a Leo-Benji ship. I’m still working on your ship name. Lenji is weird but Beo might work.”

“A what name?”

“A ship? You know? Like when you’re watching a tv series and you want two specific characters to get together, you ship them. Come on, Dad, keep up. You’re not that old.”

“And you... ship us? Benji and I?”

Oliver raked his hand through his hair, something he did when he was nervous. “I mean... it wouldn’t be the worst

thing in the world. He's young and nice and you're old and nice. He loves your food and you love his best friend."

"Those aren't exactly building blocks for a long-term relationship."

"No, but you're already thinking long term, which is what Benji needs. Honestly, the two of you... I wouldn't mind. I know I'm probably supposed to be all weird and greedy and pound my chest or something, and I definitely don't want to think of you and him in a non G-rated way, but... it's not something I'd discourage. Or hate."

Leo stopped and held tight to the shopping cart, lest he topple over. "Are you giving me your blessing?"

Oliver seemed to mull this over for a moment before nodding. "I suppose I am."

Leo took a deep breath. "I'll take it under advisement."

"So what happened last night?" Oliver asked as they loaded the groceries into the back of the truck.

"Maybe you should ask Benji."

"Why? You were there, too." When Leo didn't answer right away, Oliver took it as a sign to keep prattling on in Leo's ear. "Well, whatever happened, I think you're lucky. Benji might be a bit of a mess, but he has the biggest heart. He's the nicest person you'll ever meet. He's also loyal as hell, to a fault, almost. You're exactly his type too."

"His type?" Leo's palms were suddenly sweating, and he fought the need to swipe them down his pant legs to dry them off.

Oliver rolled his eyes. "You know. Older. Hot. Established. Predictable. A bit of gray in the hair. Joints that serenade you in the morning when you get out of bed."

"I'm his type?"

"Don't sound so surprised. If you knew Benji for over five minutes, which you have, you'd know that he obviously has daddy issues."

Leo frowned. "I'm not sure what to do with that information."

"Well, do with it what you will. If you and Benji end up sending me joint Christmas cards, I wouldn't be surprised or upset. He needs someone good in his life, someone solid. Someone who can make him happy."

"Are you sure you're not in love with him?" Leo asked.

"Yes, I love him, but there's different kinds of love, obviously. There's romantic love, friend love, and familial love and I'm sure there's a ton more that I haven't experienced yet. I've been in romantic love, and that's not something I've ever felt for Benji. He's more than a friend to me. He's family. I'd throw myself in front of a bus for him and the list of people I'd do that for is alarmingly short."

Leo tried to wrap his head around all the things Oliver had said to him. It became increasingly clear that Oliver had grown up while he'd been away. Not only did he not need Leo anymore, but it was almost like Oliver was the grownup in this conversation. It left Leo feeling woefully out of his depth. It was strange for Oliver to be giving him a pep talk about going after his best friend.

"You know there's a reason most people don't want their best friends hooking up with their family members." Leo tried to be the voice of reason.

"Like?" Oliver challenged.

"What if I hurt him?"

"Would you do it intentionally?"

"Of course not."

"Then it doesn't matter." Oliver shrugged, like it was just that simple. "Other people have hurt him and will hurt him. Just like other people have and will hurt you. You can't avoid pain, because you end up avoiding good things because you're afraid of it."

At a stop sign, Leo turned his head and locked eyes with his son. "Who are you and what have you done with my son?"

“Same skin suit, same programming. I’ve just installed a few updates since moving halfway around the world.” Oliver’s sunny demeanor vanished. “I’ve really missed the both of you. It’s been... hard.” Oliver rallied and pasted a smile back on his face. “But it’s been worth it.”

“I’m glad. And I miss you, too. I almost can’t believe you’re really here.”

“I’m sorry I can’t stay longer.”

“Any time you want to come back, you don’t even need to ask. You have keys and a code to the alarm. This will always be your home.”

“I know, Dad. Thanks.” Oliver yawned. “I need to grab some sleep when we get back. Mind if I crash in your room? I think Benji would appreciate some space.”

“How was he?” Leo had wanted to check on him but had refrained and let Oliver do it instead.

“Sad and tired and a little hung over.” Oliver looked at Leo and waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe you should go ask him if you can kiss it better.”

“Maybe you should stop.” Leo pulled into his garage and killed the engine. He hoped he was sufficiently containing his excitement. Out of all the things Oliver could have said, or the ways he could’ve reacted, Leo hadn’t expected him to hand over his blessing.

Kiss it better. Leo hated that he wanted to do just that, but Oliver’s presence was both a blessing and a curse. Had Oliver never had said anything, Leo would never have brought it up at all. Had Oliver never brought it up at all... well... Leo wasn’t sure what he’d have done.

Oliver helped Leo put the groceries away. He looked like he was half dead, and Leo looked at him with concern. “You should grab a bit of sleep.”

“I only have a limited time here.” Oliver pouted but scrubbed a hand down his tired face in defeat. “Don’t let me sleep too long.”

“I’ll wake you up in a few hours.”

“That gives you plenty of time to get all this food cooked.” Oliver laughed as he headed for Leo’s room. “You don’t mind if I crash in here, right? I don’t want to disturb Benji. Which reminds me, you should check on him. Goodnight.” Oliver shot Leo a shit-eating grin as he disappeared into Leo’s room.

Leo tried to busy himself, but there was only so much he could do before dinner. The house was as clean as it was going to get. He wanted to talk to Benji, but not without knowing what he was going to say, but it felt like he couldn’t wait. Like each moment he waited was a mistake and all the sand that slipped through the hourglass turned to regret.

He had a bowl of chocolate ice cream dished out before he realized he’d made up his mind. He stuffed a spoon into the dish, took a deep breath, and knocked softly on Benji’s door. On hearing a quiet voice, he slipped inside, closing it after himself to give them some privacy. Even though Oliver was asleep, it made him feel better.

“I brought you some chocolate ice cream. Oliver says it’s your favorite.” Leo handed it to Benji, who gave Leo a sweet, but shy smile.

“Thanks.” Benji grabbed his spoon and stirred the ice cream around in the bowl. Leo watched him for several minutes. When the ice cream was smooth and resembled soft serve, Benji finally met Leo’s gaze.

“I know it’s weird, I just like it better this way.”

“There’s nothing weird about wanting something that doesn’t hurt anyone else,” Leo said, not entirely sure if he was talking about the kiss or the ice cream.

Benji nodded. “It’s smoother this way. Have you ever...”

Leo arched his eyebrow and leaned against the dresser. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Ever played with my food? Not recently.”

Benji looked like he wanted to say something, and Leo felt as if he wanted to say something. But the words were all

tangled up inside him. It had been years since he'd been interested in someone.

“I haven't done this in a while either,” Leo confessed. He waited for Benji to take the bait before he continued. Benji ate his ice cream without meeting Leo's gaze. Just when Leo was about ready to give up, Benji looked up and met his gaze.

“Done what in a while?”

“Liked someone. Tried to figure out what that meant. Tried to figure out what they thought of me.” Leo relaxed his posture and tucked his hands in his pockets to give them something to do because he felt like he was drowning.

Benji made an indignant sound. Something warm and sharp glimmered in his eyes. “I held your hand and kissed you, and you're wondering if I like you?” Benji's incredulous expression softened. “Of course, I like you, you're so... you.”

Leo laughed quietly. “You're very you, too.”

Benji rolled his eyes, but he smiled at Leo. “Well, that clears things up. You're very you and I'm very me. The question is, what do we do about it?”

CHAPTER 17

Benji

BENJI HELD a bowl of melting ice cream, and he stared at Leo, transfixed. Nerves fluttered under his skin like a thousand butterflies trying to take flight. Up until approximately fifteen seconds ago, Benji had been ready to dig a deep, deep, hole and bury himself in it. But maybe his impulsiveness hadn't ruined anything.

His question hung in the air, and he waited for an answer. It might have only been a few moments, but it felt like a lifetime as he waited for Leo to speak. Benji's mind conjured up a million things he wanted Leo to do to him. Things that made his pulse race and his palms sweat.

"I think," Leo finally said as he moved closer to Benji. The distance between them shrank and suddenly Leo was reaching for him, cupping his cheek and tilting his head up ever so slightly as he bent at the waist. "I think we should try that kiss again." Leo sounded almost shy despite the boldness of his actions, which made Benji want to reach for him all the more. It comforted him to see the carefully guarded hope in Leo's eyes.

Leo's mouth hovered achingly close. Benji didn't know whether to meet Leo's gaze or to stare at his mouth and beg for the feel of it on his skin.

The air between them crackled like static at the first touch of Leo's mouth to his. Benji shivered, the spoon slid around in the bowl, but even the sound of stainless steel scraping against

ceramic couldn't distract Benji from the soft heat of Leo's mouth on his.

Benji had been kissed before, but nothing compared to this. It built slowly, bit by bit, from that first hesitant point of contact. Benji sighed into it, giving himself over to the feeling of Leo's hand cupping his face and the flick of his tongue requesting access to Benji's mouth. He reached for Leo, grabbed a fistful of shirt, and pulled him closer. Now both of Leo's hands were on Benji's face, his tongue was in Benji's mouth, his breath in Benji's lungs.

He didn't know he could get so lust-drunk off a single kiss, not until Leo pulled back and pressed their foreheads together and Benji became aware of the throbbing between his legs and the coil of need that twisted up inside of him. Benji chased Leo's mouth, stealing another kiss.

"Don't stop," Benji pleaded. He never thought himself to be magic before, but Leo leaned in and captured his mouth in a greedier, hungrier kiss. A strong hand cradled the back of Benji's head. It would take nothing to lie back and take Leo with him. The idea of Leo on top of him, pressing his body against Benji's, chasing pleasure together, had him whimpering into Leo's mouth.

Leo laughed gently and his kiss went from hot and heavy to soft and sweet. That did nothing to douse the low thrum of arousal that coursed through Benji.

"I'm not trying to start something with my son down the hall, but I had to kiss you. The moment I pushed you away last night, I regretted it. It was all I could do to keep myself from following you to your room and begging for another chance."

A pained sound slipped out of Benji. "Oliver's going to kill me." His best friend was in the same house and here Benji was more concerned with making out with his dad than spending time with him. "I'm a terrible friend."

"He's okay with this." Leo sounded as surprised as Benji felt.

“He’s... what?” Benji reached past Leo and put the empty bowl on the nightstand. “He’s okay with this?”

“He saw right through our awkwardness today.”

Heat crept up Benji’s face, and he fought the urge to pull the covers up over his head and hide. “Oh god,” he groaned.

Leo sat on the bed next to Benji. He loved that Leo was still touching him. Was in here holding his face and kissing him and even when they weren’t kissing, they were still touching. Leo took one of Benji’s hands and tangled their fingers together. It helped Benji focus on the here and now, because if Benji tried to think of the future, of where this might go and where he might end up, he’d twist his good mood around and end up in a doom spiral.

“Oliver always was too observant for my own good.” Benji sighed and watched Leo’s thumb smooth gentle circles on the back of Benji’s hand.

“I know exactly how you feel.” Leo didn’t seem to be in a rush to go anywhere.

“Tell me what he said.”

Leo raked his free hand through his hair. “We were shopping, and he called me out for being awkward this morning. He was worried we’d been fighting and when I assured him that was the case, he said we were fighting or we were fucking. And he just sort of guessed.”

“But we haven’t been doing either of those.” He tried not to sound too grateful for one and not too disappointed about the other. They weren’t fucking, but it wasn’t for lack of want, especially on Benji’s part. He wasn’t sure how long it had been for Leo, but Benji’s last hookup had been an underwhelming encounter in the back of a club with a partner who didn’t care much about Benji’s pleasure. It felt like a lifetime ago and Benji felt like he was a whole different person now.

Benji’s heart raced, and he wiped the nervous sweat off his palms on the bedding, hoping Leo didn’t see how scared he suddenly felt. “What are we doing, Leo?”

Leo's proximity was intoxicating and part of Benji still very much wanted to pull him into another kiss before the spell wore off or the dream Benji was in ended and he woke up to realize this wasn't real. But how could the soft smile Leo gave him be anything but real when it made Benji feel bright things he hadn't known he could feel?

"What are we doing?" Leo parroted, tangling his fingers with Benji's. "Whatever we want."

What Benji wanted was for Leo to pin him to the bed and take him. If he couldn't be quiet, Leo would have to make him, and that idea had his blood running lava hot.

"Whatever we want is dangerous." Benji tugged Leo's hand, urging him closer.

"I don't think there's anything dangerous about this."

Certainly, Leo would feel that way. The risk was all Benji's. Leo was kind enough to take him in and if they started something and it didn't work out... where would he go? If things ended badly, Oliver would take Leo's side and Benji would be left with nothing. Leo would still have a home and he'd still have Oliver and Benji would leave with so much less than he came with.

Could Benji risk it? Would people just think Benji was only into Leo because he took him in? Would they think Benji was a way-too-young-for-him gold digger?

"What are you thinking?" Leo asked.

"I'm scared." Benji admitted without meaning to, but Leo made it so easy to be vulnerable. He'd never judged Benji for the state of his life, and he'd only been supportive and friendly as Benji struggled to find his way in a world that kept wanting to knock him down.

And Benji was frightened. Scared of what he felt for Leo. Terrified that it was still one sided, that Leo was just lonely and Benji was convenient and soon he'd see how useless and unworthy Benji was and...

His thoughts shattered when Leo tugged him close and slanted his mouth over Benji's. Benji whimpered against Leo's

mouth and Leo kept kissing him.

“What are you afraid of, Benji?” Leo whispered against his skin.

Losing this. Losing Leo. And Oliver. They were the only good things in Benji’s existence, and the idea of not having them turned his blood to ice and stole his breath. But the idea of letting Leo go, of being just friends, roommates, of being nothing to him, was equally painful. He’d never wanted someone as fiercely as he wanted Leo.

“What am I not afraid of?” Benji non-answered.

Leo’s smirk made him look devilishly handsome. “Should we wait until Oliver leaves to talk more about this? Because make no mistake, Benji. I want you. I shouldn’t, but I do. And if it weren’t for Oliver sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong, I might not have had the courage.”

Benji didn’t have to ask why Leo shouldn’t want him. On paper, they made no sense. An established older man with everything going for him shouldn’t want someone like Benji. A college drop-out who was better at losing jobs than keeping them. It felt like the only thing Benji had never failed at was failing itself.

On paper, they didn’t work. Couldn’t work. But it wasn’t paper that kissed Benji until his toes curled and it wasn’t paper that made his heart race and his dick get hard. It was Leo and the way the man looked at him with raw want and an affection that didn’t make sense. Of all the people Leo could have, of all the people who probably wanted Leo, he wanted Benji.

And Benji wanted him right back. It didn’t seem possible or real, but it was the most real thing Benji had ever felt. That he apparently had Oliver’s blessing didn’t shock him once he thought about it. Oliver had a big heart, and he’d once told Benji that he’d do anything to see him happy. So maybe if this didn’t work, Benji wouldn’t lose him, too.

Could Benji hinge his future on a maybe? Even before Leo kissed him again, he knew the answer. It killed him to know that he could finally have Leo, but not until Oliver was gone.

He didn't want to worry about what his best friend might hear or see if Benji jumped in with both feet right away.

"When Oliver goes home," Benji started. "When he's gone, I want to see where this goes." Benji's dick protested, and so did his heart. He didn't think Leo was a fickle person, but Benji wasn't used to getting to keep things that made him happy. Still, he trusted Leo wouldn't string him along. He wouldn't have said things he didn't mean. If Leo said he wanted Benji, he meant it. And believing in Leo was a lot easier than believing in himself.

"When he leaves, I'd very much like to take you on a real date."

"You don't have to do that."

"I do. Because you deserve to be taken out."

Benji thought of arguing, but Leo leveled a look at him that made him rethink the sense in arguing with him. Clearly, he believed what he said, and even if Benji didn't, it was nice to pretend that it was the truth.

"Okay," Benji said. "When Oliver goes home, I'll go on a date with you."

Leo kissed him like he'd just heard the best news ever. "I should check on dinner," he said as he pulled away, the expression on his face raw reluctance.

"Need help?" Benji asked.

"I'd love some." Leo got to his feet and held his hand out for Benji. Benji looked at it for a moment and it felt like being on one side of something and being asked to cross, to take that leap of faith.

Benji put his hand in Leo's. And jumped.

CHAPTER 18

Leo

LEO DIPPED a teaspoon into the sauce and held it out for Benji. Now that he felt like he could notice Benji, he couldn't stop. Everything he did only pulled Leo further under his spell. He even liked the way Benji pursed his lips and blew on the spoon before sampling the sauce.

"Good?" Leo asked.

Benji nodded. "Oh my god, so good. Where did you learn to cook?"

Leo set the spoon in the sink. "Both of my parents worked, and they left me alone a lot. I started on simple boxed dinners, but those get old. Eventually I tired of boxed mac and cheese and taught myself how to make other stuff."

"That's sad." Benji frowned at the sauce as though it had personally offended him.

"It wasn't like they meant to leave me alone as much as they did, but you know. Life happens." Leo shrugged. "Besides, I learned a lot of great skills. I taught myself how to spatchcock chicken by watching cooking shows."

Benji blinked at him. "How to *what*-cock a chicken?"

Leo laughed at the look of horror on Benji's face. "Spatchcock. Basically, you cut a chicken's spine and press on the breast to flatten it for cooking."

"Sounds violent. And delicious."

"I'll make one for you one day."

“I’d like that.”

“Like what?” Leo watched Benji jump at the sound of Oliver’s voice.

“Tomorrow night I’m going to teach Benji how to spatchcock a chicken.”

Oliver laughed as he walked to the fridge and grabbed a carton of orange juice. He opened it and had intended to drink straight from it, but Benji snatched it away.

“Use a cup, heathen.” Benji grabbed a glass from the cupboard and thrust both glass and carton back at Oliver.

Oliver grinned from ear to ear. “Sorry, Dad.” Oliver said to Benji.

Benji opened his mouth, then closed it again. “That’s not... I mean... Please don’t.”

“Too soon?” Oliver guessed as he filled his glass and subsequently drained it. “Sorry, I’ll keep the dad jokes to a minimum.”

Benji grumbled something and turned his back on Oliver to stir the sauce that didn’t need to be stirred. Leo watched the exchange, both amused and warmed by it. Without Oliver’s approval, there was no way he’d ever have crossed that line. But now it was all Leo could think about.

Leo kept quiet while Oliver crossed the kitchen and slid an arm around Benji’s shoulders. Oliver leaned in and whispered something. He squeezed Benji’s shoulder and Benji nodded.

Then Oliver was back at the fridge, rummaging through the contents as if dinner wasn’t imminent.

“I thought you’d have slept longer.” Leo said.

Oliver shot him a grin. “Disappointed?” Before Leo could formulate a response, not that he had one, Oliver continued. “I set an alarm on my phone.”

When Oliver came close to Leo, he looped an arm around his shoulders and gave him a side-hug. “Want to be a good sport and set the table.”

“I’m a guest.” Oliver pretended to be insulted, but he did what Leo asked.

Oliver’s presence had started out as a gift, but now that Leo knew he could have Benji, now that he’d tasted him, he felt horrible because he wanted to be alone with him. His stupid dick didn’t even get the memo that it shouldn’t try to get hard, because even with Oliver’s presence, it stayed at half-mast, ready to spring into action at any moment.

He foresaw many cold showers between now and when Oliver left. Wanting to be alone with Benji made Leo feel like a shitty parent, and he tucked that desire away and pretended it didn’t exist.

If he expected dinner to be awkward, it was the opposite. Benji and Oliver hadn’t had a chance to be alone and talk, but they acted as Leo assumed they’d always have acted together. They teased and joked and Benji gave as good as he got. Every so often, the conversation would lull and Oliver would give Leo a knowing look, but then he’d swiftly change the subject and sweep any lingering awkwardness away with tales of his adventures overseas.

By the end of dinner, Oliver’s energy levels had dipped again. “Why don’t you turn in for the night?” Leo suggested as Oliver yawned for a fourth time.

“Trying to get rid of me?” Oliver’s attempt at a smile was ruined by another yawn. “Okay, okay. Point taken.” Oliver gave Leo a hug and a pat on the back. It came with a look that was likely supposed to be one of amusement and acceptance, but it only ended up making Leo feel weird.

Absolutely nothing was going to happen with Benji while Oliver was here. Tempting as it was, Leo could wait until his son was on a plane before devouring Benji the way he wanted to. The way Benji deserved to be. He deserved better than some semi-secret, hushed, rushed encounter. Leo wanted to take his time.

Oliver gave Benji a hug, and he heard them make plans to do something just the two of them the next day, then Oliver was back in bed and they were alone again.

“Movie?” Benji asked.

“Sure. You pick. Do you want popcorn?”

“Sure.” Benji sat on the couch in what Leo came to think of as his corner. It was the spot where the two ends of the sectional came together and Benji had claimed it right away.

Leo liked having Benji in his house. It made him feel good that Benji had a spot on the couch and a place on the shoe rack for his shoes. Leo had begun learning what kinds of things Benji liked best and had been slowly adding more of them to the shopping.

Leo wanted this to be more than a stopover for Benji. There was a part of him he hadn't acknowledged before now. One that wanted this to be Benji's destination. The old romantic in Leo couldn't suppress the jittery feelings he got when he thought about Benji never leaving. It sounded like a romance that he'd only ever read about, but never had a chance to live. Knight in shining armor swoops in and helps the distressed love interest.

Leo had partners before. He'd fallen in and out of love before. It wasn't anything he hadn't felt before, so he thought. But Benji peeled back those initial layers and underneath, Leo found himself feeling far more protective of Benji than he'd felt about other people in his past. And Benji needed him in ways that no one had needed Leo before. Things that went beyond food and shelter. Leo had been around for some of Benji's bad days. Days when Leo could tell the stress was getting to him.

On those days, Leo made it his mission to make Benji laugh. To see him smile. He made food Benji liked all while doing his best to reassure him that all wasn't lost.

“We could do a *Top Gun* marathon.” Benji suggested, as Leo carried the popcorn into the living room. “We can start with the old one, then we can watch the new one.”

“A double feature? I like that idea.” Leo sat on the couch, nearer to Benji than he used to sit, but he did so hoping Benji might want to curl up with him.

Leo put the popcorn on the table and Benji scooted closer. It was almost like being a teenager again, the way his nerves made his palms sweat. If he was destined to feel young, he was going to act it and he stretched his arm across the back of the couch.

Benji shot him a look from the corner of his eye before moving closer, pressing himself into Leo's side. Twisting around, he grabbed Leo's wrist and pulled his arm down off the back of the couch, and wrapped it around himself.

"Is that what you were going for?" Benji asked, a hit of teasing in his voice. "I know you don't want to get carried away with Oliver down the hall, but I think we can snuggle without him overhearing." Benji leaned forward and grabbed the bowl of popcorn off the coffee table. The opening credits of the movie started to roll, and Benji snuggled deeper into Leo's side.

Leo had seen *Top Gun* half a dozen times, which was good because he wasn't paying attention to the movie. Not with Benji warm and solid against his side, happily munching away.

"Leo..." Benji broke their silence somewhere after the first hour.

"Yes, Benji."

Benji looked up and over his shoulder at Leo. "Watching a movie with someone is supposed to be code for making out. It's *Netflix* and chill, not *Netflix*, and ignore the other person."

Leo laughed. "You're impossible to ignore."

"Really?" Benji arched an eyebrow and twisted around to face Leo. "That's why you've been staring at the movie the whole time. You haven't even tried to put the moves on me."

Leo cupped Benji's cheek in his hand and drew him in for a kiss. Fuck, he was already a goner. Absolutely hooked on the taste of Benji's mouth and the way he felt lighter whenever Benji was near.

"I haven't seen a single second of that movie," Leo confessed as he let his mouth linger near Benji's. "I could

spend all night kissing you.”

A hand fisted his shirt and Benji turned, angling his body toward Leo's. “Why don't you?”

“I don't know that I could stop at just kissing,” Leo admitted.

Benji laughed quietly, and he used Leo's shirt to draw them closer together. “I'm not sure I'd mind.”

“Well, I don't want to worry about interruptions.” Leo brushed his thumb across Benji's cheek, following the path of his cheekbones. “I want to take my time with you.”

There was something freeing, but also terrifying about speaking those words into reality. Once they were out there, Leo couldn't pull them back, not even if he wanted to. Which he didn't. But he wanted everything to be perfect for Benji, who hadn't had enough perfect things in his life. More than anything, Leo didn't want to fuck up where Benji was concerned.

“I don't know what you're thinking, but I know you're thinking too much.” Benji tugged at Leo's shirt again. Gentle fingertips brushed against Leo's stubble, and he pulled Leo down to him. The soft slant of Benji's mouth lured Leo in, and it wasn't long before the movie was forgotten.

With every passing moment, Leo's desire grew until it was a wild, unwieldy thing, thrumming under his skin, making him come alive in ways he forgot he could. Kissing Benji was a main event all on its own. It was a journey and a destination. Benji didn't push for more, though Leo knew he wanted more than Leo was currently willing to give. Hell, Leo wanted more than he was currently willing to give. But Benji would be worth the wait.

Leo had been with many people over the course of his life. He hadn't brought many of them home to meet Oliver though, because kissing and fucking weren't the same as wanting to have breakfast with or wanting to build something more substantial with another.

Benji pulled away first, and he leaned forward, resting his forehead on Leo's shoulder. Leo kissed his hair as they both fought to catch their breath.

"I think I should go to bed now." Leo was reluctant to move, and Benji didn't seem keen on the idea either. He held tight to Leo, turning his head as he peppered Leo's throat with kisses.

"I know," Benji pulled away. His smile was lopsided as he leaned in to steal one more kiss.

Then one more.

And one more.

Almost an hour later, Leo finally crawled into bed, regretfully alone. But not for much longer. Sleep took forever to find him.

CHAPTER 19

Benji

BENJI SQUEAKED when Oliver tugged him into a tight, bone-crushing hug.

“I wish I could stay longer,” Oliver pulled away, still holding on to Benji’s upper arms.

Benji felt like a shitty friend because he loved Oliver but he was sort of happy to see him go. If Oliver was going to stay longer, Benji would have begged him to find a hotel for the night because if Benji didn’t get under Leo soon, he’d never get over it.

“Me too,” Benji lied.

“You don’t, but that’s okay. I understand.” Oliver ruffled his hair then turned to Leo and held out his hand. When Leo took it he used it to pull Leo into a hug.

The Uber Oliver hired pulled up. Oliver hated airport goodbyes and had spent over an hour arguing with Leo earlier about him not needing a ride to the airport. Their argument didn’t have teeth, though. It was mostly to show each other that they were going to miss being around the other person. Benji thought it was sweet and had decided against intervening.

Benji’s emotions were a tangled mess that sat low in his stomach. On one hand, he was going to miss his friend, but on the other. Benji took a deep breath to steady his sudden burst of nerves. In just a few minutes Oliver would be gone and Benji would be alone with Leo again. But everything had changed now. The looks Leo gave him were heated now. He

didn't hide the fact that he wanted him when he looked at Benji.

Oliver pulled away from Leo and climbed into the back of the waiting car. With a last wave and a knowing wink, Oliver disappeared from sight. He hadn't even noticed that Leo had moved toward him until he was right there, holding out his hand, waiting for Benji to take it.

Leo led him into the house. The butterflies in Benji's stomach had started a riot, and he was sure he'd fly apart soon if Leo didn't kiss him. Touch him. Do something to hold him together. It had been days of stolen kisses and secret not-so-secret make-out sessions. Benji had never been edged before, but if it was like this, he was sure he'd hate it. Or love it.

He hadn't made up his mind when Leo pulled him into his arms and crushed his mouth against Benji's. Benji threw himself into the kiss. He wound both arms around Leo's neck and told himself he wouldn't let go until Leo was inside of him, and maybe not even then.

Leo took a step forward and Benji took one backward. His shoulders came into contact with the wall and a needy, helpless whimper tore out of him when Leo's hard as steel cock brushed against him. Already lightheaded, the only thing that kept Benji from imagining that it was a dream was the way his cock lay painfully trapped in his jeans.

Benji ground his cock into Leo's thigh, letting his body beg for what it wanted. Friction. Affection. Orgasms. Whatever Leo was willing to give him, Benji would take. If this was a one-time thing, or a one hundred. Maybe if he was really lucky, a one-and-never-done thing, it didn't matter. Benji wanted to know what it was like to have someone like Leo.

He'd never had someone look at him the way Leo did. Even on his bad days when things went so wrong, almost laughable, if it weren't so pathetic, Leo was there to encourage him. To make him laugh. And now Leo's tongue slid against his own. Their breath mingled and Benji ground himself against Leo again, whimpering like a shameless little slut.

“Bed,” Leo said as he pulled away.

“God. Finally,” Benji didn’t let go of Leo. He wasn’t afraid that Leo would change his mind, but he didn’t want to give him the chance.

Leo half walked, semi-jogged his way through the house, opened his bedroom door and tugged Benji inside. Not a moment was wasted before he pulled Benji into his arms and kissed him again. Deep and needy and desperate. His hands traveled over Benji’s body in a lusty but also reverent way, like Benji wasn’t the only one who could scarcely believe this was happening.

Leo rucked up the bottom of Benji’s shirt and slid his hands underneath the fabric. Nothing felt as good as Leo’s bare hands on his skin did at that moment. One hand roamed the expanse of Benji’s back, the other slid down and cupped his ass, squeezing as he pulled Benji even closer.

Benji was lost in Leo’s embrace. He kissed him back, sliding his tongue against Leo’s in an urgent way that he hadn’t allowed himself until now. Their previous kisses had been guarded because they knew they could only go so far. But now there was no limit and Benji could writhe and grind and kiss to his heart’s content.

Leo walked him backward until his legs hit the bed before he pulled away. Benji’s chest heaved, and he watched Leo grin at him as if he was a wolf and Benji prey. He felt sort of like prey. But prey that wanted to be eaten.

Benji lifted his arms and Leo removed his shirt. It disappeared somewhere that didn’t matter because Leo was urging Benji to lie back on the bed.

“I’ve thought of nothing else for days.” Leo’s voice sounded thick and husky, and it sent a thrill through Benji. His already hard cock twitched, and he inhaled sharply when Leo leaned down and put his mouth on Benji’s nipple.

“Holy shit,” Benji didn’t know whether to lean into the sensation or pull away from it. No one had licked his nipples before. There were a lot of things he hadn’t done before, but

none of them mattered, because Leo was here doing them. Marking items off a list Benji hadn't known existed.

Leo switched to the other side and reached up with his fingers, gently teasing the nub. Benji's butterflies were gone, replaced by a violent storm of need and nerves. He sank his fingers into Leo's hair and dragged him back up into a kiss. If he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think. Not thinking was good.

Leo settled some of his weight on Benji and fuck if that didn't make him want to writhe and moan and hump himself to completion right in that very moment. But the pressure eased off and Leo's mouth abandoned Benji's in favor of kissing Benji's bare skin. The side of his neck. The hollow of his throat and all the way down his chest. Benji laughed and squirmed when Leo kissed his belly button. His cock throbbed and ached and finally, Leo popped the button of Benji's jeans and yanked the fly open.

When Leo leaned down and Benji felt the heat of his mouth wrap around the head of his cock through his underwear, he went boneless, except for that one, and exhaled a laugh that was half relief, half nerves.

"Finally."

Leo returned Benji's laugh, but he didn't move from his position between Benji's legs. A hand roamed up Benji's body. Smoothing over his chest, Leo's thumb brushed Benji's nipple. His cock twitched in response, as though the two were connected.

Leo continued to torture him with his mouth and Benji dug his hands into the blankets and twisted up handfuls of the fabric as Leo tortured him.

"Leo... Leo please." Benji felt desperate, to the point of insanity now.

Leo tugged Benji out of his pants and his briefs. Leo grabbed condoms and lube from his bedside table and tossed them on the bed. While Leo stripped out of his shirt, Benji peeled his socks off. The whole time, staring at Leo, afraid to blink and miss something. Like the way Leo popped the button

on his pants, then kneeled on the bed again, returning to Benji inch by inch.

Benji's cock would never be a point of excessive pride for him. It wasn't horse-dick huge, but it was nicely average. A good five or six inches. Six on a good day. Today was a great day.

Leo's mouth proved to be the stuff dreams were made of. Wet dreams. Warm, wet dreams. Benji arched off the bed, gasping as Leo wrapped his hand around the base of Benji's dick and licked a trail up the underside. He panted and leaked as Leo's tongue swirled over the head of his cock. Leo looked up at Benji. From here, Benji couldn't tell what color Leo's eyes were anymore, they were just dark pools of lust and self-satisfaction at the way Benji writhed and moaned as Leo took him down to the root.

Benji propped himself up on his elbows so he wouldn't miss a minute of Leo sucking his dick. God, he'd imagined it, though. A million times. No dream compared to the talent of Leo's tongue as it laved and teased as Leo sucked.

He didn't just suck Benji's dick though, he licked at his balls and sucked them, too. It wasn't anything anyone had done for Benji before and it wasn't something he thought he'd ever ask of someone, but he would definitely ask for a repeat of that. Of everything.

"Leo... Leo, fuck. Oh, my god." Benji was aware he was talking. And moaning. And writhing. Leo slung an arm over Benji's mid section, pinning him to the bed as he took Benji's cock back into his mouth. He didn't stop until he buried his nose in against Benji's pubic hair.

"Leo, I'm close," his warning came a half second before the main event, because Leo hummed and Benji shot like a rocket. He sank his hands into Leo's hair and was careful not to hold him down, but he needed to touch him, to feel anchored to him in some way while he came apart.

If Benji had been under the impression that Leo would stop after a simple blow job, the best and only one he'd ever been on the receiving end of, he was mistaken, because Leo's

hands tugged at him, urged his legs to open wider. Leo rolled Benji upward, sticking his ass up in the air a little. He gave Benji a mischievous look and Benji nearly hit the ceiling when Leo's tongue came into contact with Benji's hole.

Screwing his eyes shut, he fisted the bedding. Aware that he'd just come, and that his dick was already rallying for another round. He needed Leo to fuck him. To take him and make him his in all the ways. But he couldn't speak or think past the sensation of Leo's mouth on his hole. On that secret part of him, that no one had ever touched before. And there was Leo, licking and laving and spearing him open with his tongue.

The crack of a lube bottle cap opening sent fresh shivers through Benji. Leo kept his mouth on Benji, to keep him rolled up and under his spell as he fiddled with the lube.

Then, the slide of a finger, thick and foreign and better than anything Benji had ever felt. The only person who'd been in Benji's ass until that moment had been Benji himself. Because he'd never had privacy, he never had toys, and Leo's fingers were deliciously thick compared to his own.

Benji knew that he was babbling and writhing. He fucked himself on Leo's finger and begged him for another. Because one was good, but holy shit, he needed more. Needed to be stretched and filled.

"Leo, please. I need you. Need you in me." Benji prayed Leo wouldn't make him wait much longer.

CHAPTER 20

Leo

LEO HAD LEFT his pants on because he wanted this to last, but once Benji started to beg, he regretted that particular decision. Fucking hell, his cock was hard, and his hands didn't want to work right as he fumbled his way through undressing and tearing the condom open.

He rolled it down his shaft with hands that shook and gave away his nerves, but Benji didn't say a word. He waited for Leo to get ready. Leo was aware of the way Benji looked at him while he lazily stroked his cock. With a sigh of relief, he finished rolling the condom on and added some extra lube.

The nice thing to do would've been to ask how long it had been for Benji and if he needed more prep, but Benji was spreading his legs and jerking his dick and looking at Leo with a soft sort of lusty affection that flayed Leo open.

He inched closer to Benji, laying on top of him, kissing him while being careful not to crush him. Benji wrapped his legs around Leo and tugged him down, though, and held him there.

"Leo, please," Benji laughed, and he sounded soft and desperate, but also kind of crazed. "I've waited long enough."

Leo returned Benji's laughter, but it died when he lined the head of his cock up with Benji's hole and pressed inside. It was a long, slow slide, and he gave Benji time to breathe and adjust to the intrusion, but the moment Leo was all in, Benji moaned, wrapped his arms around Leo, and kissed him deeper. He plunged his tongue into Leo's mouth. Fingers dug into his

scalp. His back. Heels bit into Leo's ass until Benji tilted his head back and took a deep breath.

“Move, god, Leo, please, fuck. Move, Leo.”

Benji was gorgeous this way. Patience stretched thin, lust making him bossy and demanding. Leo had no choice but to obey.

Benji bent like a bowstring when Leo pulled out, and shuddered when Leo pressed his way back inside. He did it that way a few times, working Benji open, loosening him up. He lowered himself down and buried his face in the crook of Benji's neck and drove home hard and fast.

Benji cried out and clung onto Leo as he let his lust take over. He hammered into Benji over and over again. Leo turned his head and caught Benji's mouth with his and he swallowed down every whimper and every sound he pounded out of Benji.

“Harder, Leo. Want to feel you... feel you later.”

Leo grinned and slid his hands underneath Benji. From behind, he grabbed his shoulders, pulling Benji down as he thrust up. Benji's back arched. He tipped his head back and Leo kissed his throat as he hammered into Benji over and over.

“Fuck, you're so tight. God, Benji.” He stopped himself from saying *love this* in case he said *love you*, because he wasn't sure where those thoughts or feelings had come from and how long they'd been there. And if Benji didn't feel the same way, he didn't want to terrify him.

Benji keened and Leo reached between them and wrapped his hand around Benji's cock. It didn't take much for Benji to chant Leo's name like it was a prayer and an answer all in one as he came all over his stomach.

Leo's orgasm was almost there, and he thrust harder and faster as he chased it down. It hit him like lightning, causing him to lose rhythm and sense. He clung to Benji as hard or harder than Benji had clung to him, and he shook and quaked

through the aftershocks of an orgasm that left him absolutely ruined.

Leo relaxed his weight on Benji, who oomphed, but then hummed in approval and dragged his fingertips up and down Leo's back. After a minute or so, Leo eased up. He kissed Benji as he carefully pulled out. After removing the condom and tying it off, he kissed Benji again.

"I'll be right back." In the bathroom, Leo ditched the condom in the trash, washed his hands, and got a cloth to clean Benji up with. When he returned, he gently mopped the mess off of Benji's stomach and tossed the cloth in the laundry.

Benji reached for him and tugged him back down onto the bed. Leo lay on his side and smiled at the way Benji smiled at him. It was shy and sweet, but he also looked smug and satisfied.

Leo dragged his fingers up and down Benji's arm. Benji snuggled closer and gave an experimental thrust of his hips, bumping his semi hard cock against Leo's.

"You'll need to wait a few minutes if you want me to go again. This old man can't come twice in twenty minutes."

"It was longer than that," Benji argued.

"I bet Oliver isn't even at the airport yet."

Benji wrinkled his nose. "New rule. No mentioning my best friend when we're naked."

"I think I can live with that."

Benji burrowed closer. Tucking himself under Leo's chin, he slid an arm around Leo's waist. Benji mumbled against Leo's chest.

"What's that?"

"I said," Benji paused and took a deep breath. "You were amazing."

Leo mumbled an appropriate thank you and kissed Benji's hair. Having him there felt right, Leo thought. They ended up

drifting off for a while and Leo woke to the sensation of a warm hand on his cock and a wet mouth on his chest.

“Insatiable thing.” Leo wrapped his arm around Benji and slid it down until he cupped his ass.

“Can’t help it. I had to wait days. Days and days and days.” Benji breathed the words against Leo’s skin. He closed his eyes and let Benji have him. He gave himself over to Benji’s ministrations, to the lubed up stroking of his cock and the playful way he nipped at Leo’s skin.

If you’d have asked him earlier, he’d have said there was no possible way he could go twice in one day, but already his dick was hard and ready in Benji’s hand. He bit back a laugh that would’ve been directed at himself, but that Benji might’ve taken to heart. It was alarmingly refreshing how awake and alive he felt around Benji.

Benji kissed his way lower, and Leo sank his fingers into Benji’s hair. Because he wanted to. And because he finally could. When gentle breaths puffed closer and closer to Leo’s rigid cock, he stilled Benji with a light tug of his hair.

“You don’t have to.” He wanted Benji too, though. Desperately, he was ashamed to admit. It seemed especially salacious that Benji was all he’d been able to think about these past few days.

Benji rolled his eyes. “I know that. But I really fucking want to, if that’s okay.”

The way Benji looked at him sliced Leo through to his core. Leo could deny him nothing. Benji lifted the corner of his mouth in a victorious smirk. He looked young, but not too young, with his dusting of a beard that trailed down his jaw the way it did when he hadn’t shaved in a couple of days. When he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkled and sometimes Leo saw thin, fine lines there. Leo hadn’t had the privilege of growing older with anyone, and he already had a head start on Benji. It wasn’t something he should want. And yet.

And fucking yet, it was all he could think about. Benji’s tongue poked out of his mouth and he flicked it over the head

of Leo's cock. Leo pressed the back of his head into his pillow and stared up at the ceiling. If he watched, he'd come and if he came it would already be over and Leo wanted to drag every second out, stretch all the moments he could. Milk every last drop of joy out of whatever this was.

Benji did something with his tongue, some sort of amazing, twisting, undulating thing that had Leo's hand tightening in Benji's hair.

"Shit, sorry." Leo loosened his grip.

Benji pulled back and took a breath. Leo felt him exhale, air puffing out, caressing Leo's cock. The words came so quietly that Leo almost missed them.

"Don't be sorry."

Leo looked down and met Benji's gaze as he tightened his fist in Benji's hair again. Lust flashed in his eyes and his lips parted. A surprised—oh—sound tumbled out of his mouth and Leo wondered for the briefest of moments if Benji knew all the things he liked.

A little flame of possessiveness flared up in Leo at the thought that Benji might not know everything he liked, and maybe Leo could be the one to teach him. He took his cock in his other hand, the one that wasn't holding tight to Benji. It was a silly idea, and he let it drift away in favor of the reality of Benji's warm mouth.

"Open for me," he commanded. God, the thrill that shot through Leo in that moment would've knocked him off his feet had he been standing. Not only could he not recall the last time he'd been this aroused, but he also didn't think anyone else would've compared.

Benji whimpered as Leo dragged his cock across his parted lips. A pink and eager tongue poked out, licking the head.

"Open wider. There... that's good," Leo said as he guided Benji, making him take more and more of his cock.

The naked trust Benji showed him in that moment shot an arrow through his heart. If someone had told Leo a couple of months ago that he'd fall for a man his son's age, he'd have

laughed at them. Even now, it seemed impossible. But even before Benji had gathered all the courage that Leo didn't possess and made that first move, there had been something between them that Leo had been trying to ignore.

Benji hummed and Leo tightened his grip on Benji's hair. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to come," Leo warned. He had to fight to keep his hips on the bed. They kept wanting to buck, to chase Leo's pleasure down Benji's throat.

Wandering hands caressed Leo's skin, painting him with affection. He chanced a look down at Benji, because somewhere along the way he'd closed his eyes again, overcome by the sight.

"You're fucking gorgeous," Leo ground out as his balls tightened and another orgasm threatened to erupt. "I'm fucking close. So close."

Benji closed his eyes and redoubled his efforts. For a moment, it felt like he was trying to suck Leo's brains out through his dick. In the next moment, it felt like he was succeeding. Then a delicate finger wriggled back behind Leo's balls and gently pressed against his hole. The idea of Benji bending him over and feeding his dick into Leo was what sent him careening over the edge.

Leo gripped Benji's hair and let his hips thrust and fuck as his balls emptied. Leo lost himself for a moment. There was only Benji's mouth and his orgasm and nothing else. And it was enough. It was far more than that, but words were gone. Leo's brain was soupy as he urged Benji to stop sucking his cock and dragged him up into his arms.

He pulled Benji down into a kiss, one hand cupping the nape of his neck. The other reached down and cupped the cheek of Benji's ass. God, it was a nice ass, too. Firm and tight and soft and perfect.

As they kissed, Benji wriggled around and pressed his cock into Leo's groin. Leo was only half hard, but he liked how Benji felt, how rigid and hot he still was. He swallowed down every whimper that spilled out of Benji's mouth as he used Leo's body to get off.

And that was hot, too. Benji fucking himself to completion against Leo, coming all over his stomach and his hip like he was a giant fuck toy. Leo almost thought Benji was going to keep going and wring another orgasm out of himself, then he whimpered again and abruptly stopped.

Their kisses slowed, and eventually Benji pulled back and laid down on top of Leo. He peppered little kisses against any patch of skin that was convenient for him to reach without moving too much.

“I got you sticky,” Benji grumbled when he moved his hand and accidentally smeared it through his release.

“I don’t mind.” Leo kissed the top of Benji’s head. “I liked it.”

“Give me five minutes and I can do it again.”

“You’re more than welcome to use my body, but it’s going to be a one-way street. I’ll need far longer than five minutes.” Leo dragged his hands down Benji’s bare skin. It was hard not to think that Benji should be with someone his own age. Someone who could fuck him as many times a day as he wanted to. A younger someone who would be around longer than Leo would. Someone he could grow old with, because Leo had a hell of a head start.

But then Benji’s lips brushed against his skin, and he traced little heart shapes in Leo’s chest hair, and Leo knew Benji was right where he belonged.

CHAPTER 21

Benji

BENJI WANTED to freeze time and live in this moment. Because when this moment was over, and he was out of Leo's bed, he'd have to think about things. He'd have to find answers to questions—for instance, what were they doing? And how could he date a man who was kind enough to let him stay under his roof? What bed would Leo want Benji to sleep in tonight?

If time moved forward and Benji got out of Leo's bed, he'd have to face the reality that he still had no job and he still was relying on the generosity of someone else. Leo's kindness was part of what drew Benji to him. Well, after their initial rocky meeting. He liked how nice Leo was. The kind way he had of existing. How he went out of his way to make Benji feel better. He could tell that Leo wanted to do more to help him but didn't want to overstep.

Sometimes Benji wished he would. It wasn't like Benji had done a great job running his own life so far. It might be nice if he had someone to boss him around a bit. That was probably the wrong term for it, but sometimes life exhausted Benji. For every step forward he took, life seemed to knock him back a dozen.

Fingertips grazed Benji's cheek, tucked under his chin, and Leo tilted Benji's head and looked him in the eyes.

"I can hear you thinking." Leo dusted a kiss against Benji's mouth. "Penny for your thoughts?"

“Will you give me a quarter if they’re dirty?” Benji rolled onto his stomach and propped himself up on an elbow. He gazed down at Leo and didn’t let himself think too much about what would come next for them. There were too many unknowns for Benji to guess. But for now, he had Leo, and they were still naked and Benji was going to do his best to keep them that way for as long as possible.

“Be serious, Benji,” Leo tried to scold him, but there was too much mirth in his expression. It pleased Benji to know he was the one responsible for it. Maybe there was one thing he could do right after all.

“I am serious. The only thoughts in my head right now are dirty mental images of what I could do to you in a shower. I’ve always wanted to get dirty and get clean at the same time.”

“You haven’t showered with anyone before?” Leo’s brow furrowed. His disbelief was endearing and Benji stretched up to kiss the corner of his mouth.

“There’re lots of things I haven’t done. Though there are a couple less now.” Benji’s hole felt different. Not different bad, necessarily, but he could tell he’d had a dick in his ass. Finally. Sometimes he worried that he’d have died a virgin. And yeah, yeah, he knew there was more than one way to not be a virgin. He’d sucked far too much cock to be considered pure, but Benji hadn’t trusted anyone enough before now.

“What things did we do that you hadn’t done before?”

There was a wary tone in Leo’s voice that Benji wasn’t too fond of.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, trying to move in for a kiss, but Leo dodged him.

“It matters to me.” Leo’s grip on Benji tightened at the same time the line of his mouth flattened. “What things hadn’t you done before?”

Benji only barely managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Were it not for the ironclad grip Leo had on him, one arm slung around his waist, trapping him in place, Benji might have scrambled away, but he felt trapped. And judged. He

dared not look down to see if he could see his heart thump wildly in his chest in case Leo saw it.

“Well, most of it, to be honest. I mean. I wasn’t a total virgin. I’d given more than a few blow jobs and I was the recipient of some fumbling hand jobs, but nothing to write home about.”

“You were a virgin,” Leo stated, seemingly dumbstruck.

A sudden flare of self consciousness had Benji pulling away. He should’ve guessed that nothing he did, or didn’t do as it turned out, was right.

“I was, yes. It’s not like I planned to save the all important anal cherry, it just sort of happens when you’re a fuck-up who no one wants to fuck with.” He couldn’t stop the bitter tone from seeping into his voice.

“You’re not a fuck up.” Leo snapped at Benji, and he sort of fell in love with him a little for the vehemence in his tone. It was sweet that Leo believed it. “I wish I’d have known.” Leo reached for Benji, but he flinched away.

“Why? So you could’ve rejected me in advance?”

Benji waited for Leo to dispute his words, to argue. To look like he wanted to argue, but acceptance and agreement were the only things in Leo’s expression. Then Leo ducked his head, and he looked sheepish. Guilty, even.

Benji’s stomach rioted, and he quelled the urge to be sick. The afterglow hadn’t even started to dim and already Leo regretted him.

“That’s not it.” Leo said after an eternity.

“Then what is it? You’re going to have to explain it to me, Leo, because right now I don’t know whether to be irate or inconsolable.”

“I wish I’d have known it was your first time, so I could’ve made it special for you,” Leo reached for Benji and tangled their fingers together. He slowly reeled a dumbstruck Benji back in and held him close. “I would’ve been, I don’t know, nicer.”

“Are all people your age this ridiculous? Leo, you’re sweet and kind and that was the best thing I’ve ever felt. And my ass. I swear to god, I never knew it was going to feel that amazing. And that thing you did there, with your tongue. *Ohmygod*. No one has wanted me around long enough to want to know me. When they figure out that I don’t just drop my pants and bend over any old bar stool, they move on. I’ve never been someone anyone wants to know before. What you did was perfect.”

“It wasn’t special though,” Leo said with his big sad eyes shining at Benji showing him the softness of his heart. God, it gutted Benji in the best way to see this wonderful, sexy, intelligent man get upset about a perceived slight.

“What would you have done? Lit candles? Spread rose petals on the bed?”

“Well... probably.” It might’ve been the light, but it looked as though Leo might’ve been blushing. “I would’ve made it special for you.”

“It was special because it was you and that’s the truth. I don’t know what this is between us. I can’t say where we will end up, but this was an amazing place to start. Don’t you think?” Benji relaxed and let his body mold to Leo’s shape again. Leo’s arms twined around Benji again and their legs tangled together.

There wasn’t a single thing about this that Benji deserved, but he wanted it, so he was going to take it and hope that one day he’d deserve it.

“I didn’t plan to save myself for you,” Benji kissed Leo, “but I’d like to think that’s exactly what happened. That this was meant to happen this exact way.”

“You mean the way that I could have had more regard for your comfort?”

Benji rolled his eyes at that. “I mean how you’re the only one who knows what it feels like to be inside of me. The only one who knows what I look like after I’ve been freshly and expertly fucked. And you’re definitely the only one who has

had their tongue in my ass. We are so doing that again, by the way.”

Leo looked like he might want to say something, but Benji wasn't done so he put a hand over Leo's mouth. The scowl that earned him was adorable.

“If you want, later we can role play and you can take my virginity all over again. You can take it a hundred times. You can be my dirty daddy, my improper principal, my...” Benji tried and failed to think of a third scenario, so he gave up. “I think you get the point. And I haven't role played either, so there're tons of things you can be my first for.”

Leo mumbled something and raised his eyebrow at Benji until he removed his hand.

“Are you disappointed?” Benji blurted. “That I don't have more experience?”

“No,” Leo didn't hesitate, which made Benji feel slightly better about his sudden panic. “Of course not. Nothing, not a single thing we did, was anywhere near to being disappointing.”

Benji would work on believing him later. “Can we please not talk about this anymore, then? I'd really like to get back to those nice shower thoughts.”

There wasn't anything Benji liked more in that moment than Leo's smile. He liked Leo's smile lines on his face and the smattering of silver in his hair. Perhaps his favorite thing was the fine lines that lived in the corners of Leo's eyes that deepened when he smiled.

Leo gripped Benji by the nape of the neck and pulled him down into a kiss. It had lost the immediate desperate lust from before, but the passion was still there, muted now, simmering below the surface like a promise of good things to come later.

“I'm not sure I have anything left in me for your shower thoughts,” Leo winced, and Benji realized maybe he was as sensitive about being too old as Benji was about being too young.

“I don’t care if we don’t do anything, but I’d like to wash your back. Maybe make out a little.”

“I do like kissing you.” To prove his point, Leo tugged Benji into another one.

It was another half an hour before Benji urged Leo out of bed and tugged him into the bathroom. What Benji liked the most about the experience so far was that Leo couldn’t seem to stop touching him. Now that they had permission, it seemed Leo couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Not that Benji was much better.

Leo’s shower was huge. Hell, it was probably bigger than some of the bathrooms he’d used in the past. Even with all the available room and two shower heads, Benji and Leo stood close and used the same one.

Benji washed his own hair, but Leo scrubbed his back for him and even worked the soap down between the cheeks of Benji’s ass.

He laughed and tried to squirm away, but Leo slung an arm around him and kissed his cheek. “How do you feel? Not sore?”

“I’m perfect,” Benji answered, and for the first time in his life, he actually meant it.

CHAPTER 22

Leo

LAST NIGHT, Benji had seemed shy and uncertain about where he should sleep. For someone who was as bold as Benji could be sometimes, his courage seemed to ebb and flow in ways Leo couldn't make sense of yet. He'd figure Benji out, he just needed more time. And more sleep. They'd laid awake past midnight, talking and kissing, and not fucking because Leo still couldn't quite wrap his head around the fact that Benji had been a virgin.

It pleased his lizard brain to know this, even though he knew it shouldn't. Virginity was a social construct. Something invented by man to control people. Despite knowing this, it made Leo happy to know that he'd been the first man to be inside Benji. Maybe it was because, after knowing Benji for a while, Leo didn't trust the world to be nice to him. If his first experience with penetration was with Leo, then at least he'd made it good for Benji.

Leo buried his face in the back of Benji's neck and breathed deep. When it came time to turn in last night, Leo had taken Benji by the hand and led him in here, stripped him naked and tucked him into bed. There was something satisfying and almost primal about seeing Benji in his bed.

It was still early, and Leo didn't have to be up for an hour or so and it was tempting to just sink inside Benji and take him again. He might've done it had it been something they'd discussed or had Benji had a little more experience in that regard.

Waking up before Benji gave Leo time to think about the man in his arms and how weird it was that this wasn't weird at all. There were times when Benji would do or say something and remind Leo of how much older he was. But apparently Leo was Benji's type. Whatever that was.

It had been a long time since Leo had anyone he wanted more with. His last relationship had been more like a fling of convenience that ended when it stopped being convenient. Leo didn't mind that it had run its course. It wasn't like he didn't know how to be by himself, but he had to admit that his house had been quiet and lonely before Benji arrived.

Now signs of life were everywhere. Benji could never seem to remember to put his coffee cup in the dishwasher, but it always made it to the sink. The stray mug might have bothered other people, but to Leo it was a sign of life. It was irrefutable proof that someone was there with him.

With ten minutes to spare before his alarm went off and woke them, Leo slipped out of bed and crept into his bathroom. After he took care of his bladder and his morning breath, he started the shower. He thought he'd clean up quickly and then maybe whip up breakfast for them both before he had to get to work.

After taking a few days off for Oliver's surprise visit, Leo had work to do and, unfortunately, he had to go into the office to do it. He had to meet with the mayor and go over the plans for the proposed public works building update.

"You started without me."

Leo turned his head at the sound of a sleepy voice. Benji stood in the doorway and padded over to the shower. He stepped into the spray with Leo and wrapped his arms around him.

"Good morning. I wanted to let you sleep a bit. I was going to make breakfast and serve you in bed." Leo brushed his mouth against Benji's.

"The bed is big and cold without you. Besides, no rest for the jobless. I have a list of places I need to follow up with

today.”

Leo had warred with himself about whether or not to offer, because Benji seemed fiercely independent sometimes, but he wondered how much of that was out of pure necessity. “You know, I can talk to some people I know. Put out some feelers. See if there’s someone I know who’s hiring.”

Benji rested his forehead against Leo’s chest. “Maybe in a week or so if I don’t have any luck.”

“The offer’s open. Just say the word.”

“I appreciate that.”

After they’d showered, Benji slipped back to his room to dress, and Leo did the same. They met in the kitchen, where Benji was starting a pot of coffee.

“Bacon and eggs? Omelet?” Leo started pulling ingredients from the fridge.

“You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I know I don’t have to. I like to. So, what will it be? Fried or scrambled? Cheese or no cheese.”

“Pfffft. Cheese is always the answer.”

“Good man.” Leo grabbed the block of cheddar just as his phone rang. A glance at the caller ID made him smile, and he put Oliver on speakerphone. “Good morning, son. I take it you made it home, okay?”

“Yes, thanks for not checking on me. Seriously, have you even come up for air since I left? I know I’ve only been gone for twenty-four hours, but you could have at least sent me a text.”

“Good morning, Oliver.”

“Don’t good morning, Benji. You didn’t answer any of my text messages.”

“Well, you see, I was a bit preoccupied.”

“Okay, scrubbing this conversation from my brain. I called to ask if I left my electric razor. It was on the dresser in the

guest room. I set it down with full intentions of popping it into my suitcase, but I don't think I got that far."

"I think I saw it this morning when I was getting dressed," Benji said.

"Did you want me to box it up and send it to you?" Leo asked.

"No, it's fine. I can buy one here for less than it would cost you to ship it over to me. I just didn't want to spend the next two days wondering if I brought it and left it behind or dropped it behind my ass somewhere in my flat."

Benji laughed at that. "You sound so British when you say stuff like my flat."

"It's what they call them here. Me using one slang word doesn't make me sound British. Anyway, I should go. I have a meeting in five minutes, and I need to get my ass in gear. Answer your fucking text messages, Benji. Don't make me come back there and kick your ass."

"Yes, boss. Get back to work. Go get that promotion."

"Yeah yeah. Love you Benji. Love you, Dad. I'll call you later."

"Love you too, Oliver," Leo said, then the line went dead.

"I didn't mean to monopolize your phone call. Sorry," Benji said, looking contrite.

"It's okay," Leo promised. Forgetting the ingredients on the counter, he pulled Benji into his arms. "We're new at this. There's going to be strange conversations or times when one or the other hangs out or talks with Oliver without the other one. It's okay. He's still your best friend, and he's still my son, and there's nothing that's going to change either of those things."

Fear flashed in Benji's eyes. "Well... that's not exactly true, because you'll always be Oliver's dad. I'm just the best friend. If something happens with us, we both know he'll choose you."

Leo cupped Benji's cheek. "If something happens with us, Oliver will be there for you. He won't ever push you away. I can guarantee it."

Benji frowned and put his hands on Leo's waist. His fingers curled into the fabric of Leo's shirt. Benji didn't seem to want to continue that line of conversation.

"Did you need a ride anywhere this morning? I have to head into the office today. There's a meeting this afternoon that I need to prepare for. And because Oliver popped in unannounced, I'm not as ready as I'd like to be."

"Where's your office?" Benji asked.

"It's in city hall."

"It's in the wrong direction."

"Doesn't matter. I'll drop you off. I have time."

"The public library would be fine. There're lots of buses that stop nearby and I can grab the one I need."

"I know you said your business isn't near city hall, but if you happen to find yourself there around lunchtime, you should stop in and I'll treat you to lunch."

Benji looked up at Leo and gave him a sheepish sort of half smile. "You act like you're going to miss me or something. You're going to work, not to war."

"I will miss you. If I could, I'd stay home today, and we'd spend the day in bed again."

"You're insatiable. But if you're going to miss me that much, maybe I should meet you somewhere for lunch."

Leo knew Benji didn't have cash at the moment, and he might not want to go out somewhere and have Leo pay for him. "I'll pack extra, and we can take it downstairs. If it doesn't rain, there's a nice little courtyard out back with places to sit."

Benji's shoulders sagged like he was relieved, and Leo was glad he made the right call.

"That would be nice," Benji said.

“Then I better get breakfast whipped up and I’ll pack up a big lunch and we can meet outside city hall at eleven-forty-five.”

“I’ll help. What do you need me to do?”

Leo cooked breakfast while he directed Benji on what to pack for their lunch. They ate standing up in the kitchen and sneaking looks at each other when they thought the other person wasn’t looking. It was ridiculous. And sweet. And domestic. It was almost good that Leo had to work in the office that day or he might not have let Benji out of his bed. It made him feel like the villain in a fairy tale, the old ogre who kidnapped the sweet, beautiful prince and chained him to a bed to do dirty, dirty things to him.

As it was, Leo was late by the time he dropped Benji off at the library.

Jordan Cooper, one of Leo’s friends, as well as the mayor, noticed him slip into his office and followed behind him, closing the door.

Jordan paused and looked at Leo, appraising him. “Did you have a good visit with your son?”

“I did.” Leo had already been to the lunchroom and had stored his lunch there. Even though the day had just started, he already couldn’t wait to see Benji at lunch.

Jordan looked at Leo. First, he narrowed his eyes, then he tilted his head. “You were late today.”

“Late start, that’s all.”

Jordan dropped into one chair opposite to Leo’s desk and made himself comfortable. “You’re never late on in-office days.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Leo hedged, secretly delighting in making his friend suffer.

“Why were you late, Leo?”

“My answer will depend on who’s doing the asking. My boss or my friend.”

“Your friend.”

“I was late because I got caught up with someone and there was a delay.”

Jordan grinned at him. “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone. Did Anne from the diner down the road finally get you to say yes?”

Leo shook his head. “She’s going to be crushed, but no, it’s not Anne.”

“Well, if it’s not her and it’s not me, who is it? We both know you have no life, Leo. You’re here, at home being a hermit, or down the street getting free refills from Anne.”

“Refills are free for everyone,” Leo reminded him, but Jordan waved his comment away.

“Did you meet on an app?”

“Nope.” Leo turned his attention away from Jordan and turned his computer on. He had a bunch of data to assemble and some numbers to crunch before his meeting that afternoon.

“Wow, are you really not going to tell me anything?” Jordan leaned forward, like if he stared enough at Leo, it might make him cave in and tell him all about it.

“I’m not going to tell you anything yet.”

“Oh, it’s a guy,” Jordan snapped his fingers. “I’m right, aren’t I. You’re always extra cagey when you’re seeing a guy.”

Leo furrowed his brow and looked at Jordan. “What?”

“It’s nothing, just one of your quirks. When you’re with a guy, you’re way more secretive about it. Not like in an I’m so ashamed of being a raging bisexual way, but... it’s almost like you like men better. Like you’re bisexual, but definitely lean more toward wanting a relationship with a man. And it makes you all weird and protective at first. Like you’ll jinx it if you say his name out loud before the first month is up.”

Leo didn't know how to take Jordan's commentary about his love life. "I—his name is Benji and now you need to get out of my office so I can get my job done because I'm meeting him for lunch."

Jordan started to say something but must have thought better of it because he closed his mouth and got to his feet. "That wasn't so hard, now, was it?"

"Get out of my office, Jordan."

"Only because you asked me so nicely." Jordan headed for the door and just when Leo thought he was in the clear, Jordan turned around. "For the record, Leo, it's nice to see you look happy."

"I'm happy."

Jordan scoffed, and Leo sighed in response.

"I'm happier now, though. Does that make you happy?"

"Immeasurably. See you at the meeting."

Jordan left, leaving Leo with his stack of work and all the revelations he'd seen fit to pass along to Leo. But Leo didn't have time for self reflection and navel gazing. He had work to do if he wanted to meet Benji for lunch.

CHAPTER 23

Benji

PERHAPS IT WAS a dangerous thing to hinge his entire mental state on Leo's affection, but currently it was all Benji had. Was it dangerous to cling to the memories with both hands? To sink his claws into the light and airy way Leo made him feel? Probably.

Was he doing it anyway? Absolutely.

It wasn't like he had much else to keep him smiling. His car was toast. He was still jobless, and the first three places he checked back at had filled the position with someone who wasn't him. And though he'd just seen his best friend a few days ago, in a lot of ways, it intensified just how much he missed Oliver.

It was almost worse now that he was gone. Yeah, it was weird in a nice way that Oliver had taken all of ten seconds to see what had been brewing between him and Leo, and had endorsed it, but it felt kind of shitty, too. It wasn't like Benji wanted Oliver to be sad or upset about it, but it made Benji feel like he was being foisted off onto someone else. Like Oliver saw a way out and had taken it. Because if Leo was involved with Benji, that made him Leo's problem.

Benji took a breath and tried to shake the cobwebs out of his brain. Logically, he knew his feelings were irrational, but that didn't stop him from feeling them. Normally, he'd talk to Oliver about this kind of thing, but every time he reached for his phone, he tucked it away without sending a single message. What was he supposed to say? *Thanks for your*

support, but it feels like you've abandoned me all over again.
No. That wasn't going to happen.

Benji did his best to paste a smile on his face, but he couldn't seem to keep it there. Thankfully, the morning didn't last forever and Benji strolled up to city hall with ten minutes to spare. He sent a text to Leo to say that he was there and out front. Leo didn't keep him waiting long before a text came through, giving him directions to Leo's office.

The elevator he rode smelled faintly of bleach and some sort of chemtrail of lavender that a very perfumed individual left in their wake. The combination made Benji a little lightheaded. Thankfully, he only had to go up three floors, but he reminded himself to take the stairs down.

When the elevator doors whooshed open, Leo was standing there waiting for him. He looked handsome, but harried, like his morning had been about as enjoyable as Benji's.

If Benji thought Leo was going to keep him a dirty little secret, that assumption immediately got dashed when Leo's tired expression melted into one that was softer and far happier. Joyful, even. He stepped into Benji's space and brushed a quick kiss against his mouth.

"Hey," Leo said on an exhale, almost a sigh. "You made it. How did your morning go?"

"Honestly, it could have gone better."

Leo motioned to an open door down the hall. "That's me. We can eat and then if we have time, I can give you the grand tour if you want."

"Sure, but food first."

Benji followed Leo into his office and was more than a little thankful when Leo shut the door. Leo didn't disappoint him, and pulled him into his arms and slammed his mouth down on Benji's, licking his way inside with determination and passion. It felt like Benji had barely caught up with the fact that he was being kissed when Leo pulled away.

“I’d thought about doing that all morning,” Leo confessed as he ushered Benji to a chair. “I swung by the lunchroom when you texted and dropped our lunch off here,” he said, as he started unpacking the bag and setting the containers on his desk. “You said you had a rough morning?” Leo carefully popped the lid off a container of pasta salad and stabbed his fork in.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Benji hedged. “Just discouraging.”

“I could probably find you something here.”

Benji shook his head. “I can’t live with you, sleep with you, and work with you.”

Leo opened his mouth like he wanted to argue, but he must have thought better about it. “If you change your mind.”

“I won’t. I’ll find something soon, though. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

What Benji would give to have that same attitude. It seemed like all he did lately was worry. The only time he hadn’t worried was when Leo was keeping his body too occupied for his mind to wander.

“I think we should go bare,” Benji said at the same time as someone opened the door to Leo’s office. Benji’s head whipped around to see who had entered, and though he wasn’t much one to keep up with local politics, he knew the mayor when he saw him. He was a tall man as thin as a reed who had tragically sharp cheekbones and a dazzling smile.

He was handsome, seemed nice, and he was age appropriate for someone like Leo. The mayor, whose name Benji couldn’t conjure up through his tidal wave of mortification, looked at Benji like he was the most shocking and amusing thing he’d ever seen in Leo’s office.

Clearly, he’d heard what Benji said, but at least he seemed to have enough manners to not mention it in front of Benji. He probably would later, but at least Benji wouldn’t be around for that. He wouldn’t be anywhere because he was going to dig a deep hole and crawl into it and never come out.

“What can I do for you, Jordan?”

“Well, you see... I heard that Leo had kissed someone by the elevators, and I thought, no, not my Leo.”

Benji flinched at the words *my Leo* on someone else’s lips. A wave of possessiveness went through him, and it made him sort of want to stab Mayor Jordan whatshisname in the leg with his fork.

Leo heaved an impatient sounding sigh. “Jordan, this is Benji. Benji, this is Jordan Cooper, the mayor, my friend, and perpetual thorn in my side.”

Benji wiped his hand on his pant leg and extended it to Jordan and tried not to think how Benji had been introduced as just Benji. And Jordan was mayor and friend and pain in the ass. It wasn’t like he had been expecting much, but being just Benji sucked more than he thought it would.

“Is there a reason you’re here besides idle gossip and curiosity?”

“Not really. I was on my way back from my morning meeting and I thought I’d swing in here and touch base about the meeting this afternoon. How do the numbers look?”

“I used the new data set Jillian provided, and they’re not bad. I already emailed you about it. There’re a couple of things I have to do before the meeting, but we should be ready to go.”

Jordan looked at Leo, then at Benji, then at Leo again. Benji knew the silent language of friends. He and Oliver had perfected it over the years. The absence of his friend was a gut punch and Benji’s appetite failed, but he had nothing to contribute to the conversation, so he stuffed bite after bite in his face and tried to look like he wasn’t absolutely miserable the whole time mister mayor, pain in the ass, talked to Leo as a thinly veiled excuse to size up Benji.

It felt like an eternity, but it was probably only five minutes before Jordan declared his curiosity satisfied and made his excuses to leave, promising to see Leo at the meeting soon.

“Sorry about him?”

“It’s fine. I’m the one who should be sorry.” Benji put his fork in the container of food he’d eaten without tasting and set it aside. He buried his face in his hands and let out a miserable groan. “I can’t believe I said that. Does he know how doors work? That you’re supposed to knock on them when they’re closed?”

“I’ll give him a refresher course later. It’s a good thing we weren’t living out my boss employee virginity kink fantasy. We should save that for the home office.” Leo’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “I’d love to fuck you over this desk, but that’s really not appropriate office behavior.”

Benji was too mortified to get hard.

“For what it’s worth, I’d definitely love to fuck you bare. I’ll make an appointment to get tested soon.”

The idea of Leo wanting to fuck him bare finally got through to Benji’s libido. Which was the absolute worst timing, because they’d finished eating and Leo had mentioned a tour. Benji had already mortified himself in front of one of Leo’s colleagues. He wasn’t about to go parading around sporting an erection. He needed to go home and have a cold shower.

“Are you okay?” Leo scooted his chair closer to Benji’s, so their knees touched. He put his much larger, stronger, more capable hand on Benji’s and twined their fingers together.

“Sure. Totally fine. I completely just asked you to raw dog me basically in front of your boss, who is also the mayor. That’s... I’m fine.”

“For what it’s worth, Jordan is bisexual, too. It’s nothing he hasn’t also discussed with his own partners.”

“Have you and him ever...”

“Me and Jordan?” Leo bit back a laugh. “Fuck no. We are friends and nothing more. I think kissing the dusty fake plant in the corner would be more appealing. Eventually, you might meet people I’ve been with, but they’re not who I’m with now,

and though there's no need for you to feel jealous, I hope you'll tell me when you feel that way."

"I'm not jealous," Benji tightened his grip on Leo's hand. His protest lasted until Leo arched an eyebrow at him. "Okay, yes. I was a little jealous."

"There's never been anything but friendship between Jordan and I."

How was Benji supposed to explain that he was jealous of that, too? That Leo had friends? People he could talk about Benji with when he wasn't there. Because Benji had a feeling that's exactly what was going to happen the next time Leo and Jordan were alone.

"I should go." Benji stood. He ignored the flash of concern in Leo's gaze and then kissed him to make him stop looking at him, even for a moment, because only weirdos kissed with their eyes open.

"I wish I could go with you," Leo seemed sincere, but then again, who wouldn't want to leave work early?

"I'll take a raincheck on the tour if that's okay."

"Of course." Leo checked the time. "I've got to get ready for that meeting, anyway. I should be home in time for supper, but if you're kicking around here later, I'll drive you home."

"I'll let you know." Benji stole another kiss and forced himself to let go of Leo's hand.

It wasn't until Benji was down the street that he realized he'd left his folder up in Leo's office. He didn't want to go back and get it because Leo had that meeting to get ready for. He sent a text asking Leo to bring it home with him and that he'd be waiting there for it later.

Did Benji have a list—ten miles long of things he needed to do? Yeah, but if he thought too long about any of it his head throbbed like it was going to explode. Benji climbed onto the bus and sent Oliver a text before he turned his phone off, leaned his head against the glass, and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 24

Leo

WHAT LEO SHOULD HAVE BEEN DOING

to prepare for the meeting was finishing a stupid PowerPoint presentation. What he did was scan Benji's resume and saved a copy to his phone and his work computer. Benji had been determined to do things his own way, and Leo admired that, but he saw the effect it was having on him.

Leo still didn't know Benji's whole story, but what he knew Benji tried harder than anyone he'd ever met. If he wasn't out filling out applications, he was applying online. He watched the way Benji wilted, day by day, as his phone didn't ring, and he received no response from any of his applications.

The disastrous would-be interview had been a huge blow to Benji's self esteem. Leo had connections that Benji didn't. It wouldn't take much for Leo to get Benji's foot in the door somewhere. The dilemma was, did Leo ask permission or forgiveness? Because Benji had asked to do things his way, and Leo respected that. He truly did. But he also couldn't stand to see the way Benji twisted himself into knots. It was hard to watch.

The meeting would start in fifteen minutes, but still Leo found time make a list of people who he could potentially touch base with about a job for Benji. It was a tough world to be in with no support system. Leo's heart broke when he

realized that this was what Benji was used to. Save for Oliver, Benji was used to going it alone.

Good thing Benji had Leo now. Even if Leo was going to be late for his meeting.

Jordan appeared in the doorway just as Leo was finalizing things and getting ready to move to the conference room down the hall.

Leo gathered his things before he acknowledged Jordan's presence.

"He's pretty young, Leo."

Leo straightened and curled his hand around his water bottle so he wouldn't clench his fist. There was no universe, alternate or otherwise, where Leo was going to let Jordan say shit about Benji.

Jordan gave him a lazy smile. "Relax, Leo. I think it's cute." He eyed the water bottle Leo clutched. "Don't even think of thumping me over the head with that. I think he seems nice, if a bit shy."

"He asked me if you knew how doors worked." Leo stepped out from behind his desk. "You do know you're supposed to knock if they're closed, right?"

Jordan's eyes sparkled with humor, and he laughed out loud. "Oh, I like him already. You can assure him that from now on I will definitely be knocking on your office door if it's closed."

"We both appreciate that."

"You could even go so far as to invite me over so I can meet him properly and apologize in person."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Like you need an invitation."

"Great, so I'll come over tonight. We can stop for food and wine on the way."

"Tonight?" Leo certainly didn't want to have dinner with Jordan. Not when he could make a meal out of Benji instead.

“Tonight. It’ll be better for all of us if we don’t let things stay awkward.” Jordan bumped his shoulder against Leo’s. “I have a feeling he’ll be around for a while.”

Leo wanted Jordan to be right. That his relationship with Benji had started out rather unconventionally wasn’t lost on Leo, but he’d done things conventionally before and they hadn’t ever worked out. There was only so much appeal to scrolling dating app profiles. It was impossible to tell by a picture and one hundred and forty-two characters if that was a person who was genuine or not. Leo had given up on apps a few years ago and had decided that being alone was okay. He’d meet someone, or he wouldn’t. He was fine either way.

There had been one-night stands in there. A couple of flings, but nothing serious. No one had left an impression on him. Until Benji knocked on his door and got the wrong end of Leo’s patience and then happened to be Oliver’s stranded friend.

“Okay, you can come over tonight. But you can’t stay long.” Leo didn’t feel bad about drawing that line. He wanted to be alone with Benji, but he couldn’t help but want to smooth things out between the three of them. He’d hate it if Benji was forever uncomfortable around Jordan because of one silly mishap.

Leo shouldn’t have let his mind wander there before the meeting, because even as he was walking the council through the proposed park revitalization project, he was also thinking of taking Benji bare.

It made for a long and uncomfortable meeting. A decision hadn’t been reached by the end, which Leo thought was stupid, but Mathers always did like to be a pain in the ass just to make himself feel important. They’d wear him down in the next meeting.

Leo went back to his office and collected Benji’s forgotten folder. He sent him a text to warn him he was bringing a guest to dinner.

“Ready?” Jordan appeared with his tie loosened and hanging out of his jacket pocket. “I’ll stop for wine. You stop

for food? We'll meet at your place?"

"I texted Benji to warn him." Leo walked with Jordan to the elevator.

"Why'd you do that? He's probably going to hide," Jordan laughed.

"Behave."

"This is me behaving. Don't worry, I'm going to pretend that I've never met him before. That this is the first time I'm ever laying eyes on him."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that," Leo replied dryly. "I'm going to hold you to that, Jordan. He's had a rough time lately."

Leo felt Jordan's gaze on him as they rode the elevator down to the ground floor, but he didn't comment immediately.

"Is this rough time anything I can help with?" Jordan finally asked.

Some of the tension in Leo bled out at Jordan's question. "Not really. It's not my business to tell, but I'll let you know, okay?"

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out. Jordan clapped Leo on the shoulder. "I'll stop off for some wine and I'll meet you at your place."

Leo nodded and pulled his phone out. He tapped in a quick dinner order for pickup on the way home. His brow furrowed when he saw Benji hadn't responded to his text yet. He sent another, letting him know he was on his way home, then tried not to worry about the lack of response.

Panic wasn't generally a word in Leo's vocabulary, but when Benji didn't text him back by the time he arrived at the restaurant, he'd admit that his chest was feeling a little tight and a rock had taken up residence where his stomach should be.

When Leo called Benji and his phone went straight to voicemail, that was the instant he allowed the panic to take hold. He probably broke a couple of traffic laws, and he was

definitely speeding, and maybe it was for nothing. Maybe Benji was downstairs using the gym equipment that sat in the basement. Or maybe he'd fallen asleep.

The trouble was for every harmless scenario his brain cooked up, it also handed him eleven more alarming and downright dreadful ones. The closer he got to home, the more worried he became. It wasn't rational. He knew there was likely a perfectly normal explanation for Benji's radio silence, but part of Leo was terrified that he'd get home to find Benji just gone.

He'd never seriously entertained the idea of tying someone up in the bedroom, let alone outside of it, but was tempted now. He fucking loved Benji, and his silence didn't make sense. Benji always texted him back right away. Even when he wasn't having the best day, he'd never shut Leo out before.

Home was only a few miles away, but Leo felt tempted to bother Oliver, though it was the middle of the night there, and ask if he'd heard from Benji. After he got home, he decided.

Home, it turned out, was a building with a fire truck parked in front of it. Leo couldn't pull into his driveway, so he parked half on the street, half on his lawn and bailed out of the cab. Nothing seemed to be damaged, but that didn't mean there was a fire. There could be any number of reasons the fire department was called.

Leo's front door hung open, and he barreled inside. The distinct aroma of something burned slapped him in the face. He found Benji in the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket, thick tear tracks down his face, and a fireman gently patting him on the shoulder.

The fireman, upon seeing Leo, offered him a sympathetic smile. "You're the homeowner?"

"I am." Leo wrapped his arms around Benji. He smelled like smoke. "What happened?"

"Your smoke alarm went off, which triggers your security system to call and ask if it's a false alarm."

“It was. Sort of. I had it under control, but the alarm went off and I’d left my phone in my room and it wasn’t turned on anyway, so I didn’t get the call. And then, I thought I had it under control and I opened the door and the windows to air the place out...” Benji’s voice broke. He sounded as miserable as he looked.

“In his haste trying to clear the smoke out, he’d left a tea towel on the stove. It was a small fire. There will be some clean up, but I don’t think there was much damage.”

“Just my dignity.” Benji curled closer to Leo as if he was trying to disappear.

“You left dinner in your truck.” Jordan strolled in with a bottle of wine in one hand and the bag of food in the other. He ignored the fireman and the mess on Leo’s stove and set the food down on the island, which had been spared from the chaos.

“What’s he doing here?” Benji blinked at Leo, pulling away slightly. Leo held fast.

Jordan swooped in, all suave and charm. He extended his hand to Benji. “Jordan Cooper. I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

Benji looked at Leo, then back at Jordan. “Is this some kind of joke? I don’t like being made fun of.” Benji pulled himself out of Leo’s grip and slid off the stool. He looked back and forth between the two of them, visibly confused.

“It’s not a joke, and I wasn’t trying to make you feel like we were having a laugh at your expense. I just thought you and I could start over, that’s all.” Jordan dropped his hand and tucked it in his pocket.

Benji exhaled. “I need a shower. I smell like burned toast.” Benji turned and fled, shutting himself in the bathroom in the hallway.

Jordan looked at Leo. “Go talk to him. I’ll clean up and send mister fireman on his way.”

“Thanks, Jordan.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Leo shook hands with the fireman, clapped Jordan on the shoulder, then went to talk to his poor, unlucky boyfriend.

Leo tapped on the door and tried the knob. Thankfully it turned and he let himself into the bathroom.

“I’m glad you didn’t lock me out,” Leo said as he shut the door and locked it for good measure.

Benji snorted miserably. “Because with my luck, if I locked it, I’d fall in the shower all naked and shit and break my leg and the fire department would have to come back and kick the door in.” Benji took a big shaky breath. “I’m sorry, Leo.” Benji swiped big fat tears off his cheeks as they fell.

Leo kneeled down in front of Benji and took hold of his hands. Before he could get a word of reassurance out, Benji continued to ramble.

“I just wanted to do something nice for you. And dinner is nice. I’m not totally helpless, but things smoked and then the fire alarm going off scared the shit out of me. I’m such a mess. Why do you even like me? And now he’s here, and that’s even worse because that’s twice in a row that I’ve been an embarrassment to you in front of your boss.”

“Benji,”

“I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time and even when I do, I manage to fuck it up. It’s a wonder Oliver puts up with me. Fuck knows my parents didn’t want to. I don’t know why you do.”

“Benji, stop,” Leo said, a little more firmly than he’d planned, but it had the desired effect because Benji’s mouth blessedly stopped moving. Leo carefully swept the tears off Benji’s face. “Benji, I don’t know exactly how to say this, so I’m just going to say it.”

Benji looked sick. Stricken. Fearful. Leo leaned in and kissed him, soft and sweet. It tasted like tears, but that was okay.

“I love you.”

“Shut up. You do not.” Benji said without sounding as though he believed Leo, or himself for that matter.

“I wouldn’t ever say it if it wasn’t true. All the way over here, I’d been worried about you. I sent you a text earlier, and you didn’t respond, and then I sent another, and you didn’t respond and my greatest fear was that something bad happened to you.”

Benji sniffled. “I almost burned your house down.”

“Even if you had, if you were okay, I wouldn’t have cared. You’re the only thing in this building that I can’t replace.” Leo swiped away a fresh set of tears, then stood and stripped out of his shirt.

Benji blinked at him with confusion. “What are you doing?”

“We’re going to shower, then go out and have dinner and drinks with Jordan, and later, if you still don’t believe that I’m in love with you, I’ll have to spend all night proving you wrong.”

Benji swallowed and slowly cast off the blanket they had wrapped him up in.

CHAPTER 25

Benji

THE UNIVERSE WAS A CRUEL TRICKSTER.

There was no way Leo was really in love with Benji. No one loved Benji before, why would Leo be the one? It didn't make sense. But Benji needed a shower, that he believed. The smell of nervous sweat and burning dinner clung to him. Besides, even if he didn't really believe Leo, the man was getting naked with him and he wouldn't argue with that.

Or any of it, really.

He'd never had someone love him before. When he was small, he supposed his parents must have, but in the end they didn't because they'd thrown him away. Some of the sting had left that particular memory when he realized that if he had no parents, he had no one to disappoint.

Leo turned the water on and Benji stripped out of his clothes with trembling fingers before stepping into the spray. Tilting his face up, he closed his eyes and let the water run down his face and erase the last bits of evidence that he'd been crying.

Swiping the water away from his face, he turned and reached for the shower gel, but Leo already had it and had worked up a nice lather on a loofah. Benji stood dumbstruck as Leo started washing Benji with gentle circles extending from his shoulders, down his chest.

“What are you doing?”

Leo's answering smile was lopsided, and the look in his eyes was softer than usual. "I think that's obvious. I'm washing you."

"Why?" Benji felt stupid. Like the fire had also scorched his brain or something. Maybe he was in shock.

"You've had a rough day."

Benji took a long, slow breath. "It wasn't all bad. Though the two times I've met your boss I've been in full-blown disaster mode. He must think I'm a moron."

"I think he likes you," Leo's hands had wandered lower and Benji bit back a startled yelp when Leo gently washed his groin.

Benji swatted his hands away and took over the duty of washing himself. "If I have to leave this bathroom anytime soon, you'd better let me do the rest." Benji lifted his arms and gave his pits a good scrub before moving on to the rest of him. "Did Jordan really want to come to dinner just to pretend he'd never met me before?"

"He did." Leo looked at Benji as though he wanted to eat him. "My idea was to come home and talk more about that whole going bare business and how much I'd like that."

Benji reached down and pressed the heel of his hand against the base of his dick. "Leo, seriously. You can't just say shit like that when we're naked and I can't do anything about it."

"Sorry," Leo said, not looking sorry at all.

"You're insufferable." Benji turned and wet his hair. He closed his eyes to scrub the shampoo into his hair, but he could feel Leo's eyes on him the whole time. "You're staring."

"I am."

Benji cracked an eye open. "Why?"

"No reason." Leo's face was the picture of mirth. Benji slammed his eyes shut and started rinsing the suds out of his hair.

He didn't believe Leo had no reasons, and he also didn't believe Leo actually loved him. There wasn't much to love about a guy who had no education, no job, and who had just tried to burn your house down. But Benji wanted to believe it. He wanted it with a shocking sort of desperation that made his stomach feel weird. Not sick, but fluttery, like he was looking forward to something.

The worst part of someone telling you they loved you was when you loved them, but couldn't tell them at all. Because there was no way Leo could love Benji, and him loving Leo, and admitting it made him feel vulnerable and afraid. Nothing Benji wanted ever worked out for him. He didn't get to keep the things that made him happy. If he didn't admit it, though, if he didn't say it out loud, then perhaps he wouldn't lose Leo as fast.

Because he would lose him, it was bound to happen. Leo was old enough to be his dad. He should be with someone smart and accomplished like Jordan. Not Jordan himself because Benji believed Leo when he said there was nothing between them. Jordan looked at Leo much the same way Oliver looked at Benji, with a brotherly sort of affection.

Fully rinsed, Benji stepped out of the shower and wrapped a big fluffy towel around himself. Part of him wanted to go across the hall and bury himself in his bed and sleep until he could pretend this whole day had been a bad dream.

Instead, he waited for Leo to be done and they slipped into his room to dress. Benji shamelessly stole Leo's clothes, slipping into an oversized shirt and a pair of Leo's cotton pajama pants.

Leo waited for Benji at the bedroom door. He'd dressed similarly to Benji, but his clothes actually fit him.

"Are you coming?" Leo held his hand out and waited for Benji to take it.

"Do I have to?" Benji looked back at Leo's big, comfortable bed.

Leo slid his hand into Benji's and tugged him close. "Yes, you have to, but I promise the moment he leaves, I'm going to bring you back here and pin you to the bed and not let you up for a very long time."

Benji groaned and headed for the bedroom door. "You're evil. I'm going to have a massive hard-on and I've got to meet your boss for the third time today."

"Third time's the charm."

"Keep telling yourself that."

When they entered the kitchen, Benji was pleasantly surprised to see it looking almost normal. There was a bit of a mess still, but Jordan had rolled up his sleeves and was wiping the counters down. When he noticed Benji, he gave him a bright smile.

"So this is the mysterious boyfriend who I haven't ever met before." Jordan put the dish cloth down and rinsed his hands.

"It's a pleasure to meet you for the very first time—ever, Jordan."

They shook hands, and they made a silent agreement to be friends.

"I set the table. You two can sit and I'll get the food from the oven."

Dinner started off nice, even Benji had to admit. Jordan truly seemed to like him enough to pretend that nothing amiss had happened. He asked a few questions about Benji but didn't press him about his family or anything Benji didn't want to talk about.

"So how did you meet Leo?"

"Well, the first time I met him, he was extremely rude and practically chucked me off his property."

Jordan coughed. "Excuse me?"

"He was selling security systems, door to door."

Jordan grimaced. “Door to door salesmen are the bane of your existence. So how did you meet the second time?”

“Well, it’s kind of a funny story.” Benji poked at his food, his appetite quickly waning. He didn’t like feeling pathetic, but the story of how he couldn’t even look after himself and had to rely on his best friend, who wasn’t even in the country anymore, made him feel small and inadequate.

“His landlord sold the property out from under him and his roommates. They all found other accommodation quite easily, but Benji had a bit more difficulty. Oliver asked if it would be okay for him to stay. I didn’t realize he was the poor salesman I’d been incredibly rude to until he moved in.”

It was the truth, but it wasn’t. It was a nicer, more sanitized version, and Benji loved him for telling Jordan that edition of the truth.

“Actually, your construction on Spruce got my car towed while I was busy getting fired from my job. I called Oliver, who called Leo, who came to get me not two hours after telling me off for knocking on his door.”

Jordan coughed and thumped his chest with the side of his fist. “You got him fired?” Jordan looked at Leo like he was a stranger.

“I didn’t get him fired!”

“It’s true. I did that all on my own. You see... if you haven’t noticed, I have incredibly bad luck.”

“What are you doing now?” Jordan was just trying to be polite, but Benji was getting exhausted being the center of attention.

“I’m practicing my job acquiring skills.” Jordan blinked at him until Benji elaborated. “I’m still looking for work.”

“I’ll hire you,” Jordan said as plainly as one might say, yes, I’d like fries with that, or pass the salt, please.

“You’ll what?” Benji put his fork down.

“Hire you. Employ you. Make you work, give you money for it.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t. Did you hear him ask me for a job, Leo?”

“Nope. Didn’t hear him at all.” Leo seemed disgustingly pleased and annoyingly amused by this sudden turn of events. “I’d have hired him myself, but I figured he might not want to live and work with me. But if he works with you, that’s fine.”

Jordan pointed his fork at Leo. “No sex in the office.”

Leo crossed his heart and rolled his eyes. “I’m a professional, Jordan. Besides, you only made that rule after you fucked Patrick.”

Jordan shrugged. He didn’t appear at all embarrassed that Leo had said that. He turned his attention back to Benji. “You need a job. I need an assistant.”

“You want me to be your assistant? Are you sure that’s wise? You have met me.”

“I already know you’re a mildly inappropriate pyromaniac. The way I see it, you can only improve. You won’t see much of Leo, because he works from home a lot, and I tend to be here, there and everywhere. My re-election campaign is about to kick into gear, and I could use the help keeping my ducks from wandering off cliffs.”

“You haven’t even interviewed me.”

Jordan shrugged. “Do I need to? You seem like someone who I wouldn’t want to chuck out of a moving vehicle.”

“Maybe don’t use that in your re-election campaign,” Benji quipped. “Re-elect Jordan Cooper and he probably won’t toss you out of a moving vehicle.”

Jordan tipped his head back and laughed so hard, Benji feared he might fall out of his chair. When he’d composed himself, he swiped a tear off his face.

“You’re definitely hired. Interview over, you start Monday.”

“I—” Benji closed his mouth, uncertain of what to say. He shifted his gaze to Leo. “Did you ask him to do this?”

Leo shook his head. “Nope. This is all Jordan. You’ll learn soon that he does what he wants.”

“I do. And I want to hire you.”

“I’m a disaster. I lit Leo’s kitchen on fire.”

Jordan shook his head. “You burned a tea towel and a couple of chicken breasts. I’d hire Leo if I wanted a personal chef.”

“What would I be doing?”

“A lot of phone calls, mostly. Delivering shit. Fetching shit. It’s really a shitty job, but it will look stunning on a resume.”

They were asking Benji to put a lot of trust in them. Trust that Leo hadn’t put Jordan up to this, and trust that Jordan wouldn’t get sick of Benji in five minutes and fire him within ten. Trust that this could actually work out.

“Monday?” Benji asked, poking a bite of food in his mouth.

“Monday morning.” Jordan looked like the cat who ate the canary.

“Well... thank you. I’ll gladly accept your gracious offer.” Benji wasn’t entirely sure yet how he felt about this turn of events, but he wasn’t sure how he felt about much of anything. The day had been long and weird and stressful. Benji mostly just wanted to get to the part where Leo promised to prove things to him. Over and over.

CHAPTER 26

Leo

“THAT WAS an incredible thing you did, Jordan. I appreciate it.” Leo waited until Benji had excused himself to use the bathroom. They’d eaten, and Jordan insisted on helping Leo clean up before he left.

“I didn’t do it for you, or even for him. I need an assistant, and I think Benji will do just fine in that role.” Jordan finished stacking the wineglasses in the dishwasher. “I’ll get out of your hair now so you two can continue that conversation I definitely don’t remember hearing part of at lunch.”

Benji appeared as Jordan was slipping his shoes back on. “Benji, bright and early Monday morning.”

“I won’t forget.”

Jordan clapped Leo on the shoulder, ruffled Benji’s hair and let himself out.

Leo felt the tension bleed out of Benji when he sighed.

“He’s intense,” Benji said. “You really didn’t put him up to hiring me?”

Leo shook his head. “That was all him. My plan was to send your resume to a few friends of mine and have them call you for interviews.”

Benji narrowed his eyes and attempted to scowl at Leo. “And what did you plan to tell me when places I’d never heard of, or never applied to, started calling me for interviews?”

“Well, I’d have confessed, but now I don’t have to.” Unable to resist Benji for one more minute, he slid an arm around Benji’s waist and gathered him close. Leo bent and buried his face in the crook of Benji’s neck. “I like it better when you use my shampoo.” Leo nuzzled Benji’s neck and kissed the soft, clean skin.

Benji’s arms wrapped around Leo’s neck. “Don’t leave any marks. I work with the mayor, you know. I have to look professional.”

Leo grumbled his displeasure, then scooped Benji into his arms, bridal style. Benji yelped and kicked his feet, but he held on tight.

“What are you doing?” Benji asked as Leo carried him toward the bedroom.

“I can’t leave marks where your big important boss can see. Therefore, you need to be way more naked.” Leo tossed Benji down onto the bed, grabbed the bottom of his pajama pants, and tugged them off. Benji tugged the hem of the shirt down to cover himself, but his cock tented the bottom, giving away his aroused state.

Benji leaned back on his elbows. He closed his knees, but his feet were spread wide apart, teasing Leo with a glimpse.

“Don’t hide from me,” Leo kneeled on the bed. He slid his hand up the back of Benji’s leg. As he moved closer, he tugged Benji’s legs apart. “You don’t need to be shy, love.”

Benji’s breath caught, and Leo watched him bite his lip. Arousal and mischief lit Benji’s expression, and he tugged the borrowed shirt down again in a vain attempt at modesty.

“I—I’m not shy,” Benji tugged the shirt lower, stretching the fabric. “I’m just cold.”

Leo smiled wide and slow as he moved closer. One hand skimmed up the outside of Benji’s thigh and up over his hip until Leo slid it under his shirt.

“Then let me warm you up.” Leo tugged the shirt up and twisted it, not allowing Benji to have any slack to pull it back down with. Leo leaned down and took Benji’s cock in his

mouth. Benji yelped. He flinched, and his hips pumped up, thrusting, trying to bury his cock down Leo's throat. That would happen, but not yet.

First, Leo wanted to taste him. To tease him and torment him. Leo wanted to map Benji's body with his mouth. To make Benji writhe on his tongue. He wanted to show him how much he adored every inch of him. Leo's ego didn't demand that Benji love him back, but it broke his heart to know that Benji didn't believe he was worth Leo's love.

He hadn't said as much, but Leo saw the disbelief in his expression earlier. The hope, chased immediately by devastation. Leo licked a slow stripe up the underside of Benji's cock. Lifting his gaze, he watched Benji watch him.

"So beautiful, Benji," Leo said. The words had the desired effect of getting Benji to look at him. Leo poured all the love he could into his gaze, if such a thing were possible, and he took Benji's cock into his mouth.

Leo pinned Benji's hips to the bed, and he put his many years of practice to good use and took Benji to the root. He took his time. Laved with his tongue, swirled it and caressed Benji's cock as he sucked. Eventually, Leo's hands wandered. He swept his touch up Benji's body, flicked his nipples, pinched, and tugged at them when Benji seemed to respond well to the sensations.

Before long, Leo pulled away from Benji's cock. He licked and sucked at Benji's balls, taking delight in the way Benji whimpered and tried to squirm away, only to squirm right back and beg for more.

"Leo, I can't take it."

Leo grinned wickedly and kissed the tender inside of Benji's thigh. Benji's fingers found Leo's hair, and they twitched against his scalp, like he was uncertain if he wanted his dick sucked again or if he wanted to smother Leo in the bedding to make him stop.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to. I'm not nearly done with you, love." Leo kissed his way back up Benji's quivering

body. Of course, he took his time. He wanted to learn all there was about the beautiful man beneath him. Like the way he laughed, nearly giggled when Leo kissed too close to his belly button. Or the deep throaty moan that Leo dragged out of him when he bit Benji's nipple.

By the time Leo made his way back up to kiss Benji, he was a panting, writhing mess. Leo leaned in and waited until Benji tried to lift his head, wanting to close that bit of distance before he spoke.

“You don't have to say it. Or feel it. But I need you to believe it.” Leo cradled Benji's cheek in his hand and dragged him closer, only finishing the sentiment a fraction of a breath before he kissed him. “I love you.”

Perhaps it was cheating to do it that way. To say he loved him then kiss him senseless, but Leo didn't care because Benji was his goddammit, and he kissed him like forever was a foregone conclusion. Leo dipped his tongue in past Benji's lips and delved inside, tasting him, stealing his breath and hopefully his doubts.

Benji wrapped his arms around Leo, then his legs. He grappled him closer and ground against him, using Leo to chase his own pleasure. Leo laughed against Benji's mouth.

“Don't get carried away. I'm not done kissing you yet.”

Benji's lips were puffy, and his face was a ruddy, blushy, red. Leo had never seen him look more beautiful. It was almost a crime to pull away.

“Where are you going?” Benji asked, looking alarmed. “You said you weren't done kissing me.”

“I'm not.” Leo turned Benji over onto his stomach, then wriggled down until he was eye level with Benji's ass. Benji twisted around to see what Leo was doing, and Leo smiled at him. “I haven't kissed you here—yet.”

Gently, as if he was unwrapping a gift, Leo parted Benji's cheeks and dragged his tongue from taint to hole. Benji wriggled and writhed as Leo continued. He used his tongue to

trace circles around Benji's hole. He spent time licking and kissing, while holding Benji open with both hands.

Benji arched up into Leo when he plunged his tongue past the ring of muscle and delved inside. Leo pulled back and gently followed the contour of Benji's soft opening with the tip of his finger. He knew he'd been the first man inside Benji, and it was a point of strange pride for him, but it came with a weird mix of happy and sad. Happy that he'd get Benji all to himself, but also sad for the way Benji had been overlooked. The way no one had taken the time to see how fucking stunning he was when he was getting tongue fucked and fingered within an inch of his sanity.

Benji was barely coherent now, writhing and wriggling as Leo pressed his finger deeper, slid it in slowly until there was no more left to insert. He fucked Benji with that one finger for a few agonizing minutes. Leo was so fucking horny he worried that he'd shoot the minute he tried to roll a condom on.

"Leo," Benji said, though he drug out the vowel sounds, elongating Leo's name into a magic word that enthralled Leo, making him forever Benji's to command.

"Yes, love?" Leo asked as he pressed a second finger into Benji.

"You're such a tease."

"That's impossible, you see," Leo crooked his fingers, grazing Benji's prostate. He smiled as Benji jerked from head to toe, a harsh groan tearing out of him as he did so. "If I were teasing, I'd stop right here. I'd drag you to the edge and then I'd leave you hanging there."

"Don't—" Benji's voice cracked. "Don't do that. That sounds mean."

"I'd never be mean to you, love. You deserve all the sweetness and light I can give you."

"Leo," Benji whispered, his voice watery and broken. "Leo, please."

"I know, love. I know." Leo withdrew his fingers and cursed himself for not having a condom ready. After he

grabbed one from the bedside table, he rolled it on, managing to not shoot his load in the process, though it was a near thing.

“We’ll go bare soon. I’ll get tested,” Leo said as he returned to Benji lube bottle in hand. Benji had waited patiently for him, but now wriggled his hips back and forth. “I’ll take you bare soon, just how you asked. I’ll fill you so full of me and then watch it leak out.” Leo lined his cock up with Benji’s hole and added a squirt of lube.

Benji pressed his face into the mattress and mumbled something incoherent.

“That’s right, love.” Leo eased the head of his cock inside Benji. The tight heat stole Leo’s breath. Benji turned his head and looked back at him. From his position behind Benji, over top of him, pressing inside, the possessiveness he felt previously came roaring back.

Leo dug his fingers into Benji’s hips and pulled him back as he pressed in. Benji gasped and moaned. His eyes fell shut, but that didn’t diminish the connection Leo felt to him. He didn’t have to stare into his eyes to see that Benji loved him, or to see how much it scared him to feel that way. There was still a lot about Benji that Leo didn’t know, but he wanted to learn.

Leo stretched out over Benji and gathered him close. He dug his knees into the bed, used his feet for purchase, and drove himself deeper. Benji’s parted lips panted out little moans and whimpers, delicate sounds that were half-formed.

Leo pressed a kiss to the corner of Benji’s mouth. Benji turned his head into a kiss. The angle was still awkward, but Benji kissed him like he’d die if he stopped. He reached back and his fingers brushed Leo’s thigh as though he was trying to coax Leo into going deeper, as though fully seated wasn’t deep enough. Close wasn’t close enough. Hard wasn’t hard enough.

Each time Leo pulled back, Benji’s ass chased Leo’s cock. Leo rocked forward, pressing himself inside as deep as he could go. Then he pushed forward again, thrusting deeper, harder, not pulling back before thrusting forward again. When

he pulled back, he took his time, savoring the way Benji's tight ass gripped him before he slid home again.

Leo set a furious pace. Their mouths stayed pressed together and sometimes they forgot to keep kissing, they were so carried away in the way they were connecting. Benji came apart slowly at first, then all at once. He gasped and arched and writhed, fucking himself on Leo's cock.

Leo sped his pace, fucking Benji through his orgasm and beyond. His own was building like a storm and when it unleashed, his hips lost rhythm and his mouth lost control. He whispered to Benji that he loved him. Over and over, he said the words until he ran out of air, then he mouthed them against Benji's sweaty skin.

He only stopped saying them when he pulled out, tossed the condom aside and rolled Benji over. Leo flopped onto his side, tugged Benji close, and kissed him, breathless or not.

CHAPTER 27

Benji

THE CLOTHES on his back were the only thing that Benji owned that he got himself. Well, if you didn't count his car, which he didn't because it wasn't running. The rest of Benji's life was made possible by the kindness of others. Oliver. Leo. Jordan.

Benji tried not to feel entirely pathetic about it as he buttoned his shirt and fussed with his hair. He tried to tell himself that he was lucky that he had a few people who cared about him. He might only have three people in his corner, but there'd been a time when that number was zero.

He tried not to spend too much time in front of the mirror. There was something far too vulnerable about looking back at himself. He stared into the eyes of his reflection and tried just for a minute to see what Leo saw. Benji furrowed his brow and turned away. There was nothing special at all about him. Most of the time he thought the opposite must be true. No one had ever claimed to love Benji before, though, so what did he know about it? Not much.

He knew his heart sped up whenever Leo was near. He knew that sometimes it felt like Leo was oxygen and gravity, letting Benji breathe, but pulling him closer, reeling him in a day at a time. Sometimes Leo was sunsets and stars, all the most beautiful things in the universe. And Benji was a storm. A natural disaster. A tornado that left nothing but disaster in its wake. No one in their right mind looked at a tornado and called it beautiful. No one wanted to be caught in a hurricane.

Except maybe Leo. Benji's stomach still did little somersaults when he thought of the way Leo had kissed him all over. He'd tried at first to keep track of the number of times Leo said he loved him, as though they, too, were a debt Benji had to repay with declarations of his own. He'd quickly lost track, though, and now Benji had to live with the knowledge that he was terrified to love Leo.

Leo waited for him in the kitchen, brewing coffee and scrambling eggs and being so fucking perfect that Benji wanted to cry. Or maybe climb out the tiny bathroom window and run away.

Benji didn't know how to be in love. He'd stopped looking for it a long time ago. For reasons Benji might never understand, Leo looked at him like he was worth seeing, and Benji didn't know what to do with that. No one had looked at him the way Leo did and Benji didn't know what to do with that either.

He would never find out if he kept hiding in the bathroom. The mirror held no answers for him either, and Benji abandoned it and made himself go out to the kitchen where Leo was putting the finishing touches on breakfast.

When Leo saw him enter the room, his quietly content expression blossomed into happiness. In response, Benji's stupid little heart fluttered. It whispered things to him, reassurances that this was real. That Leo wasn't going anywhere. Benji was halfway to believing when his brain reminded him that of course Leo wasn't going anywhere, this was his house.

Benji's smile faltered, and he knew Leo saw it. Instead of looking like he took it personally, Leo reached for him and pulled him close and kissed him the way Benji liked best, he thought. All soft and slow, like they had all the time in the world to just exist in that space.

"Good morning, love." Leo brushed a last kiss against Benji's freshly shaven cheek. "Are you ready for your first day?"

Benji scoffed. “Absolutely not, actually. I’m nervous to the point of being terrified. I’m convinced that somehow, I’m going to set something on fire and burn the building down.”

“That’s what insurance is for,” Leo quipped as he dumped the scrambled eggs onto two plates. Whole wheat toast cut on the diagonal sat on the edge of the plates next to three strips of bacon. “I figured I’d work in the office today. I won’t encroach on your territory forever. If you’d like, I can have a look at your car after work. Maybe it’s something we can fix. If not, I can either lend you the money to have it repaired, or you can use transit while you save up to have it fixed.” Leo stopped talking abruptly and flashed Benji an apologetic-half smile. “Sorry. I don’t want to steamroll you and just make decisions. I want to give you options and input, but I guess I could’ve just asked you what your plans were.”

Leo’s embarrassed smile kicked Benji right in the heart. God, he loved this man. From top to bottom and inside and out. No one had ever tried so hard for Benji before. No one had worried about making him comfortable, or looking after him, or just being there for him. No one had ever looked at Benji the way Leo did, and it made him believe that Leo loved him, just like he said he did.

It wasn’t Leo specifically he’d doubted, but love in general. He supposed he had a complicated relationship with it. Growing up, his family was supposed to have loved him. But they didn’t. He’d had friends ghost him for no discernable reason over the years. Even Oliver left him, though Benji couldn’t fault him for that. Not when Benji had begged him not to sacrifice an opportunity just for his sake.

Benji realized he still hadn’t said anything to Leo. He set his coffee on the counter and stepped into Leo’s personal space. Tipping his head back, he rose on his toes and kissed Leo, sweet and brief.

“It doesn’t matter,” Benji’s answer surprised them both, but after quickly mulling it over, he found it to be true. Leo only wanted Benji to be safe and comfortable. He wanted to help him, not because Benji was pathetic, but because Leo loved him. And because Benji loved Leo, he didn’t want to

make him sad. He didn't want to fight about dumb things like a car that wouldn't run or bus fare. "I'll take the bus while we have a look at it. Worst case scenario, I sell it for scrap metal and use that money for bus fare."

"Did you want to look at it this weekend with me?" Leo grabbed a slice of bacon off his plate and held it up for Benji.

After he took a bite he answered, "I'd like that."

Benji never worked up the nerve to tell Leo that morning. They ate in the kitchen, standing shoulder to shoulder, stopping to trade sappy smiles and steal kisses. Breakfast took far too long that way and they were almost late getting to the office, which Benji teased Leo about instead of blurting out how he really felt about the man.

Jordan greeted them both with a big grin, then whisked Benji away from Leo for a trip around the building so Benji could familiarize himself with things. They stopped at human resources and Jordan left him there to fill out forms, with instructions to meet him back in his office when he was done.

Benji arrived what felt like years later, but really it had only taken about an hour to go through all the forms. When he returned to Jordan's office he looked up from his computer and smiled at Benji. "I see you survived. Come in, shut the door and we'll go over what you're going to be doing." Jordan leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms over his head, he rolled his neck one way, then the other.

Benji closed the door and took a seat.

Jordan put his arms down and looked at Benji. "Did you know that I've never been to college?"

Benji's eyes bulged. "Really?"

Jordan nodded. "I got my GED when I was twenty-two. I've worked just about every shit job there is to work. I've pumped gas. I've sorted mail. I've delivered phone books and pizzas. I've washed windows and sometimes I didn't work at all. And eventually I was hired by the old mayor. He was a hard man to work for. Exacting. Expected people to care as much as he did, to work as hard as he did." Jordan paused and

leaned forward, folding his arms on the desk. “Do you know why I hired you?”

“I don’t have the foggiest idea, to be honest. I thought maybe Leo asked you to.”

Jordan shook his head. “I’ve had assistants before. But you see, the trouble with not having been to college, to not having a random assortment of letters behind my name, is that people apply for your job, but they think they can do mine. I might have gotten this job because running for mayor is like running for class president. It’s just a bit of a popularity contest, but I kept it because I’m good at it.”

“You hired me because I’m not as educated as other people?” Benji almost felt insulted.

“I hired you because you’re not grossly overqualified. You had a job knocking on doors and you stuck with it. You didn’t walk in here thinking you knew more than me,” Jordan grinned. “And though Leo didn’t ask me to, I did it because I love Leo like a brother, and he loves you, and I’d frankly do a lot of far more embarrassing things to see the two of you happy, but we both know that can’t happen if you’re entirely dependent on Leo. So here’s my promise to you, Benji. Short of you committing a felony, I won’t fire you or lay you off. This is your job for as long as you want it. And when you’re ready to move on, I’ll personally help you find something else.”

Benji fought the urge to slide off his chair and curl up on the floor and cry his eyes out. As it was, his eyes stung with unshed tears. He couldn’t get a word out at first. It took a few attempts opening and closing his mouth to get the words to work right.

Jordan tilted his head, making him look like a curious puppy. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Benji sucked in a deep breath and fought to get himself under control. “Apparently, the fastest way to make me emotional is to be nice to me.”

“I’ll make a note to not be too nice to you, then.”

Benji laughed and dashed away a tear that escaped. “You could stand to be a bit meaner, honestly.”

Jordan swiveled in his chair and grabbed a box of tissues off the shelf behind him and passed it to Benji. “You need to stop that before you get puffy eyes, and your boyfriend thinks I was mean to you for real.”

Benji took the tissue, and the idea of coming between them was enough to stop the desire to cry. “I don’t want to come between you and Leo. Will my working here cause problems?”

“I can honestly say that I don’t think it will. I think Leo will enjoy knowing you have a boss that won’t mistreat you, or fire you, for that matter.”

“Unless I commit a felony.”

“Do you commit many felonies, Benji?”

“Not so far, but I’m still pretty young.” Benji grinned at Jordan. It was comforting to know that he’d have to fuck up pretty hard to lose this job. It also made him want to try ten times as hard for Jordan, so he wouldn’t ever regret making that promise.

“Right, first order of business. We need to get you a work phone and a laptop. Unlike Leo, you won’t get to work from home a lot, but you will need to have your own phone and computer so you can do all the mundane tasks that I hate doing.” Jordan stood and ushered Benji out of his seat. “Come on, Benji. Let’s go shopping. We can go for lunch after. Make sure to tell your boyfriend where to meet us so he doesn’t die of jealousy.”

“He wouldn’t.” Benji furrowed his brow. “Would he?”

Jordan’s answer was a smirk and a shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never taken one of his boyfriends out to lunch before.”

Benji started to doubt the sanity of Leo’s best friend, and himself for taking a job with him. But it was too late to walk it back now. Besides, Benji had a good feeling about this job.

CHAPTER 28

Leo

AFTER THE FIRST few days of Benji's job, Jordan had made it clear that hanging out at the office wouldn't get him more time with Benji. Jordan was everywhere, and where he went, Benji went.

Leo stayed home after the first week and stepped back into his old routine. Except now he had Benji to look forward to at the end of the day. Leo took a look at Benji's car, determined that the alternator was the issue, and Benji said he'd take the bus until he could afford to replace the part.

Leo was going about his business, throwing clothes from the washer into the dryer, thinking of what to cook for dinner for the two of them when it hit him that Benji's things were still stacked in the spare room. He was living there, but he hadn't fully unpacked.

He also hadn't slept in his bed since Oliver left. Leo didn't know quite what to make of that. They were clearly in a relationship now. But it had started rather unconventionally. It was like they'd done everything out of order.

Benji moved in. Then they'd become friends. Then lovers. Now that Benji was working, Leo had embraced the role of house husband. He was quite happy to stay home, do his job, and look after Benji.

But Benji's things were still in the guest room, and it bothered Leo. It made him uneasy, like if Benji had somewhere else to go, then he'd be there. Leo wasn't under the assumption that Benji was using him. He was too sweet,

too honest for a deception like that. Leo thought about asking if Benji would like to move his things into Leo's room, but then he thought better about asking.

It took almost no time to clear some space in his closet for Benji's clothes. He gave him dresser space and moved his things into the ensuite. The whole process took him less than an hour. There were still some things Benji had stuffed in a couple of boxes. Leo moved the boxes into what was now their bedroom and set them off to the side for Benji to deal with when he got home.

To celebrate, Leo made a roast. He knew that it was one of Benji's favorite meals. Leo was just popping it in the oven when he heard the front door open. A quick glance at the clock had him worried. Benji shouldn't be home for another hour or more.

"Benji, that you?" Leo wiped his hands on a tea towel as he went to greet his boyfriend.

"It's a good thing Jordan promised not to fire me unless I committed a felony." Benji said as he came around the corner. "I doubt he'll be taking me to any more construction sites, though."

Leo raked his gaze over Benji. He didn't look hurt, but it was hard to tell under all the dirt. "What happened?"

Benji rolled his shoulders back and smoothed a hand down his dirt-covered, obviously ruined, button down.

"I warned Jordan that of all the places I wouldn't belong, a construction site was at the top of the list. In my defense, this wasn't even my fault. I had on high-visibility gear. The hard hat. They even had those slip-on steel toed things that go over your shoes."

Benji toed out of his shoes, which had seen better days. He started to unbutton his shirt right there at the front door and Leo stepped in closer and gently batted his hands away, taking over the task himself.

"What happened?"

“One of the crew members didn’t put a truck in park and it rolled. I had two choices. Get smashed or jump out of the way. Out of the way ended up being a massive mud puddle. I didn’t have the most graceful landing.”

“Are you okay? Was anyone hurt?”

“Nothing wounded except my dignity.” Benji smiled, looking unaffected by his ordeal, clearly oblivious to how the idea of him getting smashed into by a truck had affected Leo. His knees were weak, and his stomach felt empty and sick.

“I’m going to kill Jordan.” Leo slid the shirt off Benji’s shoulders and gently folded it, mud side facing in so it wouldn’t track all over the house. Maybe Leo could still salvage it.

“He was really great about the whole thing. Rolled a few heads. Picked me up out of the mud and helped me bang off the worst of it. Then he promised never to bring me near heavy machinery ever again before he ordered me a cab and sent me home.”

Leo flicked the button of Benji’s pants open and slid them down his hips. Benji’s cock was half hard in his briefs, and he met Leo’s eyes sheepishly.

“Apparently I have an—oh my god, he’s unbuttoning my shirt—kink.” Benji’s cheeks flushed bright red, but he stepped out of his pants and stepped closer to Leo. He tracked his gaze lower, and it landed on the bulge in Leo’s pants. He looked back at Leo and raised an eyebrow.

Leo looped his arms around Benji and closed the distance between their bodies. Soon, he’d have to herd Benji into the shower, but it wasn’t urgent. The only immediate need Leo had was to get as close to Benji as possible.

Benji rested his head on Leo’s shoulder and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Leo kissed the side of Benji’s head and held him tight.

“I don’t know why you even like me,” Benji said, sounding miserable. “I’m such a disaster.”

“I happen to like disasters.”

“You could be with anyone, though.”

Leo pulled back and cupped Benji’s face in his hands. He stroked his thumbs across Benji’s cheeks. Dried mud flaked off and crumbled under Leo’s touch.

“Come here.” Leo grabbed Benji’s hand and tugged him toward the bedroom. He marched Benji over to the closet and threw it open, revealing the newly organized space, complete with Benji’s things hanging up next to Leo’s.

“What’s this?”

Leo stood behind Benji and gathered him into his arms. “This is your stuff, in our closet, in our bedroom.”

Benji made a breathy sound. Maybe a scoff. Maybe he was speechless.

“Our closet?” Benji trembled in Leo’s arms.

“Our closet. Our room.”

“Why, though?”

Leo held Benji tighter. “Because I love you. Because I want you here.”

“But I’m a mess. You could do so much better than me.”

“What’s better than you, Benji? Tell me. Because I don’t think it gets any better than this. I know what it feels like to be in love. I’ve been here before, but it’s better because it’s you. I wish I could find all the people who hurt you and made you think so little of yourself and kick their asses.”

“You really don’t need to do that,” Benji interrupted.

“You didn’t let me finish.” Leo spun Benji around and tilted his head up, making Benji look him in the eyes. “I can’t make it so they never hurt you to begin with, but I can love you with everything that I have, and maybe you’ll believe me one day. I fell in love with you and your talent for keeping life interesting. I don’t want you to change, or settle, or be any less than who you want to be, than who you are. If you’re a disaster, that’s fine. You’re my disaster.”

Benji reached for Leo, dragging a fingertip down the line of his jaw. “I never dared to believe that good things could happen to me. But you’re not just a good thing, you’re the best thing. It terrifies me, Leo.”

“What does?” Leo whispered, drawing Benji closer, tugging him back into the shelter of his arms.

“Loving you as much as I do.” Benji gripped Leo’s shirt in both hands and held tight. “If I don’t get to keep good things, how am I supposed to hold on to the best thing that’s ever happened to me?”

Leo put his hands over Benji’s and held them tight. “Benji, look at me.”

Eventually, Benji lifted his gaze. Leo saw the worry and the fear, but also the love. Benji was always going to be a barely contained hurricane, but Leo wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Then we’ll both hold on, together. I love you, Benji.” Benji loving him back had never been a requirement or a condition, but relief swamped Leo all the same as Benji’s words sank in. “You’re my best thing, too.” He cupped Benji’s cheek, warmth washing over him.

Benji, being slightly shorter than Leo, had to rise on his toes a little to brush a kiss against Leo’s mouth. “I love you.” Benji huffed out a laugh directly after saying the words. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

“I don’t mind being the first man you let into your heart.”

Benji’s eyes sparkled with happiness. “You’re also the first man I let into my body.”

“And the last, I hope.” Leo slanted his mouth over Benji’s and backed him into the wall. Benji still gripped Leo’s shirt, and he still gripped Benji’s hands. It wasn’t the most comfortable way to kiss someone, but it was perfect all the same, because he couldn’t let go of Benji, not for a moment. Not ever.

“Leo,” Benji said breathlessly a few minutes later.

Leo could hardly stop kissing Benji long enough to respond. “Yes, love.”

“I’d really like to wash the mud out of my hair now.”

Leo laughed and pulled away, dragging Benji toward the ensuite.

“My shampoo is in here,” was the first thing Benji said when they entered the bathroom.

“I was doing laundry, and I realized that I didn’t want you to take your clothes to the guest room. I want this to be your home, Benji. Our home.”

“Our home.” Benji looked at Leo over his shoulder and smiled. “I like the sound of that.” Benji twisted the shower knobs while Leo undressed, and without waiting for Leo, he stepped into the spray.

Leo followed Benji into the shower and nibbled at Benji’s neck as he soaped up his chest.

“Leo,” Benji laughed, as Leo’s hands roamed over Benji’s body. He held Benji by the hips and tugged him closer until not even water could get between them.

“Yes, love?”

Benji passed Leo a bottle of body wash. “Mind getting my back?”

Leo took the bottle and gave Benji a kiss. “It would be my pleasure.”

CHAPTER 29

Benji

ADMITTING to Leo out loud that he was in love with him had terrified Benji. He sometimes felt like if he acknowledged a good thing, it would vanish. Hell, he half expected to wake up in some random parking lot like he'd done when he'd had nowhere else to go. But this wasn't just a dream. This was reality. Benji might never deserve this. He might never be worthy of everything Leo could give him, but he wanted to try.

He didn't know how to take that next step, though, from wishing to believing. Wanting to getting. Stumbling around his life aimlessly had led him here, but he didn't have to go it alone anymore. Leo was right behind him, and maybe Benji had a thing for older men because they were supposed to be smarter and more solid, more put together, but he had a thing for Leo because he was kind, generous, and caring. As well as all the other things. Benji probably had daddy issues, but that wasn't something he wanted to think of at the moment.

“Leo?”

Leo's lips grazed the shell of Benji's ear, making him shiver.

“Yes?”

“You know I believe you, right? When you say that you love me, and that this is my home and that you want me here.” Benji took a breath that shook more than he wanted it to. “I might need you to remind me. Maybe a lot.”

“I’ll tell you every day if you need me, too. As often as you need to hear it. If you need the first words you hear every day to be, *Benji, I fucking love you, never leave me*, I can make that happen.”

Benji tried not to choke on his emotions. “I’d have to be stupid to leave you. And honestly, I’m a lot of things, but I don’t think I’m that thick headed.”

“You’re right. You are a lot of things. Tender. Sweet. Funny. Feisty.”

“The look on your face when you realized who the wayward friend Oliver sent you to rescue was.” Benji snorted and turned to face Leo. He looped his arms around Leo’s neck and ground his dick against Leo.

“If we’re comparing facial expressions, yours was a mixture of rage and devastation. If it helps, I felt fucking awful.”

Benji tried to look anything but absolutely smitten, but he knew it was a lost cause when he couldn’t wipe the smile from his face. It was a good thing he’d never wanted to be an actor. “Who would have thought that we’d end up here?”

“I must confess that I didn’t see you coming.” Leo’s smile dazzled Benji, and his stomach did a little swooping thing it had never done before.

Was that a byproduct of falling in love? Benji wondered to himself. Did love make you feel like your feet dropped out from under you and your chest tight all at once? It was either love, or Benji was about to have a heart attack.

“Leo,” Benji could scarcely breathe.

“Yes?”

“I think I need you to kiss me now.” Benji no sooner had the words out and Leo’s mouth was on his. A gentle warmth spread throughout Benji from head to toe. Being with Leo was like being kissed by a sun, but without burning to a crisp. Leo was all warmth and security and adoration. It was apparent in the way he cradled Benji’s cheeks when he kissed him, deep and firm with far more tongue than Benji was used to being

kissed with. Leo kissed like he wanted to keep Benji, like this was his life now.

Benji took a step back and his shoulders hit the tile of the wall. Leo pulled Benji to him with an arm around his waist. He sank a hand into Benji's hair and tugged his head to the side, opening up an avenue for him to attack Benji's throat with his mouth.

Benji clung to him like the almost virgin he was and stupidly wondered what he should be doing. Then he slid his hands down Leo's body and around his barrel of a chest. He loved that he got to touch this man now. Benji smiled into the kiss and skimmed his hands down Leo's ass.

"Is that something you want?" Leo's question threw Benji out of the moment, and then right back into it as his dick registered the meaning a second before his brain, going from hard to rock-fucking-solid.

"Holy shit. Sorry. I—yeah. If it's something you want."

Leo brushed his lips over Benji's with such a tenderness that it made Benji ache all over. "It's been a while for me, but I honestly wouldn't mind."

Benji scoffed. "You'll have to do better than, wouldn't mind." He gave Leo's ass cheeks a playful squeeze. "I won't settle for less than enthusiastic consent."

"Okay, then how about this?" Leo pinned Benji to the wall. He reached down and wrapped a hand around Benji's cock. "I want to know what it's like to feel you inside of me. I want you to finger me open and then I want to be the first and last person you're ever inside of."

"I don't want to hurt you." Benji's nerves took over and were it not for the hand on his cock, his erection might have flagged, but as it was, Leo kept pumping and jerking, stroking and teasing, making sure Benji's dick didn't quit before his brain could catch up.

"You won't hurt me." Leo grabbed Benji's wrist with his free hand and he tangled their fingers together. First, he kissed Benji's knuckles, then he smiled at him. "These delicate hands

won't hurt me. They're attached to the sweetest man alive, and he's not capable of hurting anyone."

"You really want me to do that?" Benji flushed and tried to look away but couldn't make himself, not when Leo looked so earnest and sort of vulnerable, the way Benji felt vulnerable.

"I really want you inside of me. But when you're ready, love. And not a moment sooner."

The sound of Benji's laughter made Leo smile. "I wanted to be inside of you the moment you said it." If Benji blushed any hotter he could fry an egg on his face. "I haven't been inside anyone before."

"I know." Leo grinned like he wasn't about to have the most awkward fuck of his life. "I'll coax you through it, my sweet virgin boyfriend."

Arousal shot through Benji, and his dick twitched.

"God, that has no excuse for being that hot." Benji reached for the taps and killed the water.

"Someone's eager." Leo followed Benji out of the shower and passed him a towel.

Benji quickly buried his head in the towel and scrubbed his hair dry before doing his best to dry his body as fast as possible.

"*Someone* grabbed my dick and asked if I'd like to fuck him with it and shouldn't tease someone about how fucking hot that makes him." Benji finished drying and playfully tossed the towel at Leo before snatching it back. "We might need one of these."

Leo was laughing even as he swept Benji close, the towel trapped between them. Benji slid his hand into Leo's hair and tugged him down into a kiss.

Leo pulled away when Benji started grinding against him. There was a hint of affection in his laughter as he ushered Benji through to the bedroom. Leo yanked the covers off the bed, leaving just the bottom sheet. Benji smiled at him when he took the towel and laid it out in the center of the bed.

“Is that where you want me?” Leo asked.

Benji reached down and grabbed his dick, squeezing the base to quell the sudden rush of arousal. “Oh god,” he whined, his heart hammering against his chest. “I’m going to fuck this up.”

Leo turned and took Benji’s face in his hands and kissed him hard and fast. Benji’s stomach did that swooping thing again, and he thought for sure maybe he could do this. Leo guided them down onto the bed and stretched out underneath Benji.

“Leo,” Benji whispered. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.” Leo’s assurances calmed Benji’s frazzled nerves, at least a little. Benji could remain a top-virgin for the rest of his life if he wanted.

“What if I mess up?” Benji couldn’t look Leo in the eyes. Instead, he looked at his earlobe, at the line of his slightly stubbly jaw, at his mouth and the way it smiled at him.

“It’s not a test, Benji. You’re not being graded.”

“I want to be perfect for you.”

“It will be perfect because it’s you.” Leo dragged Benji into a kiss and, before Benji could fathom what was happening, Leo flipped him over on his back and pinned him to the bed. “But if you’d like, I can still drive.”

Benji must have gaped at him like a very surprised fish because Leo laughed and kissed the corner of his mouth, then ground their cocks together, making Benji see stars behind his eyes.

“Oh fuck, that’s amazing.” Benji grabbed Leo’s ass and encouraged the grinding motions. He could come just like this, he realized, with Leo’s mouth on his neck and their bodies writhing together, and that would be amazing. Perfect, even. But Leo had offered something Benji had never had before. Love and trust, and Benji was greedy for it and everything else Leo had on offer.

The mere idea of sticking his cock in Leo had him nearly coming undone.

“Leo. Leo, please. I’m going to come if you don’t stop and I really want to come, but not until I’m in you.”

Leo stopped grinding, but he didn’t stop kissing. He slanted his mouth over Benji’s and kissed him long and deep which lit him up inside. Benji was so full of love he could’ve cried if he hadn’t been so horny. But his libido was driving, and it desperately wanted to know what was going to happen next.

Leo grabbed the supplies from the bed-side table and Benji watched, fully invested, as Leo slathered his fingers with lube, then reached around and—holy fuck. Benji let out a squeak and Leo only grinned at him. Then Leo made a sound, a low, moaning sort of sound and Benji was entirely fucking jealous that those were Leo’s fingers and not his own. Next time, Benji promised himself.

Next time when it hadn’t been way too long for Leo, when Benji was less likely to hurt him. Leo leaned down and Benji rose, bracketing Leo’s cheeks in his hands. It was his turn to drive the kiss. Leo writhed and twisted and Benji delved his tongue into Leo’s mouth, tasting him, breathing him.

Leo pulled away. He already looked half-wrecked, with his blown pupils and his ruddy cheeks. “Condom.”

Benji fumbled at first but managed to get it on without too much fuss. He watched, feeling very lucky, and very inexperienced, as Leo slathered his cock with lube, then straddled Benji.

“This okay?” Leo paused to ask.

The question shouldn’t have shocked Benji, but it didn’t and he broke out in a smile. “Shouldn’t I be the one asking?”

“Consent is a two-way street, love. It’s okay for anyone to ask, at any time.”

Benji cupped Leo’s cheek. He followed the contour of Leo’s lip with his thumb. “Is this okay?”

Leo's eyes sparkled with warm affection. "It's more than okay."

"Then it's okay with me. You may... um... you may proceed." Benji let out a nervous laugh that was quickly cut short when Leo grabbed Benji's cock and aimed it at his hole.

The act of entering Leo was unlike anything Benji had ever experienced. He couldn't take his eyes off Leo. Even blinking seemed like a crime. Benji put his hands on Leo's strong thighs and held him as Leo sank down, enveloping Benji's cock in a blissful, tight, heat.

"Holy shit." Benji keened. Leo was gorgeous and Benji was inside him. He wasn't going to last. Already his orgasm was building, raging like a storm. But he stared at Leo, at the way he looked, straddling Benji with his powerful body.

Leo's lips were parted and Benji watched him lick them. Then, Leo moved. He did something with his hips. An undulating sort of move that rocked Benji into him even deeper. Leo reached for his cock, but Benji beat him there and stroked it, watching Leo's eyes roll as he tipped his head back.

Benji had never seen anything hotter. He couldn't grasp words long enough to describe how it felt to be inside Leo.

"Leo. Fuck. Holy shit, Leo. I'm so close. Don't let me come yet."

Leo laughed and slowed his rhythm, but that was no better. It was still earth-shattering, mind-numbingly hot, and Benji was still in danger of blowing his load.

"I love you, Leo." Benji was glad now that he'd said it before this. Before he was in Leo, and his words might not be believed because he was in Leo. Sex made people say dumb shit sometimes, but this was... this was everything. "You're so fucking sexy, Leo. Holy fuck." Benji's hips, of their own volition, thrust up, burying Benji's cock deeper into Leo.

Leo made a sound that encouraged Benji to do it again. Leo was still doing the most, but Benji's enthusiasm seemed to be what tipped Leo over the edge. It seemed remarkable that

Leo came first, but he gasped and coated Benji's cock with his release. He ground down on Benji, pressing their foreheads together as he writhed and bucked and fucked himself on Benji's cock.

Benji came with a strangled cry, flooding the condom. Leo's mouth found his, and they kissed. Frantic at first, then lazier as they came down off their sex-fueled high. After Leo carefully slid off Benji, and even though he'd been the one to get fucked, he still looked after Benji. He disposed of the condom Benji stripped off and brought back a cloth to clean them up with, and gathered Benji into his arms and kissed him sweetly after.

“How was your first time inside someone?”

“If you ever let me do that again, I'd really like to finger you open. I'm glad you didn't let me this time. I'd have come the moment my finger touched your hole. That was the hottest thing ever. I know I don't have a lot of experience, and that you did all the work, but I hope... well... did you like it?”

Leo tilted Benji's head and captured his mouth. “I loved having you inside me. And experience doesn't matter. I'd never had a man in me before.”

Benji started and sat up. He stared down at Leo, who looked cool as a cucumber. “You what?”

Leo tugged Benji back down and wrapped him up in his arms again.

“I've fucked myself with toys. I've even let a woman I was seeing peg me a couple times. I've had men finger me, but you are the first man who ever had me like that.”

“Why?” Benji felt special, but also rather incredulous.

“Why haven't I until now or why you?”

“Both.”

“Well, most of the men I've been with were interested in doing things the other way around. And I was okay with that, but with you.” Leo brushed a hair from Benji's forehead. “I

want to experience everything with you. I want to give you everything I can give you. I wanted to give you all of me.”

Benji sighed. “Just when I think you can’t be more perfect.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“You’re perfect for me.” Benji snuggled closer and let himself feel loved.

Epilogue

IT HAD TAKEN Leo months to convince Benji that he was allowed to change things around in their home. But now there were little reminders of his existence in every corner of the house. Benji had purchased a big thick blanket for the couch. He loved curling up under it when they watched movies together.

Then, a few weeks later he added new pillows to the couch. The ones Leo had were too fancy, according to Benji, who picked ones that admittedly felt nicer to use. Now, there were touches of Benji everywhere.

Benji had decided that yellow was a lovely color and it had crept into their kitchen. A lemon shaped timer was the first thing that appeared. Then came yellow measuring cups and measuring spoons. Tea towels.

The biggest change was in the bedroom where Leo used to go to bed every night alone. Benji was generally a tidy person, but his bed-side table was often cluttered with books. Some new, some thrifted, some borrowed from Jordan, who also had a love of gay sci-fi romance.

The room also smelled like Benji now, which never failed to make Leo instantly hard. It was a good thing he kept in decent shape, or his younger boyfriend might have worn him out by now. Before Benji, Leo had gone weeks and months without sex without batting an eye. He had a healthy relationship with his hand, and he'd used toys now and then when the mood struck. But since Benji had walked into his

life, all Leo could think about was sex. He felt like a teenager sometimes with how often he thought about sex.

Leo still worked from home most days, and even when he was in the office, it was a rare occasion that he saw Benji at work. Jordan usually kept him busy. Dinner was in the oven and Leo had finished work early. He was just stepping out of the shower when the bathroom door opened.

“You’re home early.” Leo smiled as Benji plastered himself against Leo’s wet body. “I haven’t dried yet.”

Benji brushed his lips against Leo’s. “Don’t care. Missed you.” Benji’s hands snaked around behind Leo, and he gripped his ass.

“Did you miss that, too?” Leo loved the way Benji had thrown himself into exploring all things sexual, and he loved he was the one who got to guide him through it.

Mischief glimmered in Benji’s eyes, and he batted his lashes at Leo. “I don’t know what you mean. How can I miss something I never had?”

Leo bit back a growl and backed Benji up against the counter. He loved it when Benji played the part of the shy, blushing virgin. Though now it became a sort of game to see how long Benji could keep up the act before cracking.

“Is there something my sweet virgin boyfriend wants?” Leo nuzzled into Benji’s neck, kissing as he popped the buttons on Benji’s shirt open. “Do you want in my ass, love?”

Benji trembled when Leo shoved his shirt off his shoulders. “I—”

Leo smiled into Benji’s skin when he stumbled over his words. “It’s okay to be nervous. I’ll walk you through it.” Leo nipped at Benji’s lip.

Leo unzipped Benji’s pants and shoved them down because he wanted to feel Benji against him, skin on skin. Benji’s fingers danced up Leo’s ribs. His hands skated up Leo’s chest, then Benji pressed a shy kiss to Leo’s lips.

“Turn around for me?” Benji asked as he slowly switched positions so Leo was pinned up against the counter, but with his back to Benji.

Benji skimmed his hands down Leo’s back and then down lower, between his cheeks and over his hole. “Tell me what to do.” The confidence in Benji’s voice and his assured movements gave away the fact that he was no longer a blushing, timid virgin.

“There’s lube in the drawer,” Leo rasped as he widened his stance and stuck his ass out.

Benji rattled around in the drawer and Leo heard the top of the bottle click open. Cold lube ran down the crack of Leo’s ass and he sucked in a breath.

“Sorry,” Benji said, sounding very not-sorry.

Leo opened his mouth to assure him it was fine, what was a bit of cold lube between lovers, but Benji’s fingers delved in and spread the lube around Leo’s hole. As much as Leo had loved showing Benji what to do, he also loved confident Benji. The Benji that most of the time was still just as happy to let Leo lead, to roll over and stick his ass in the air and beg for Leo to take him. But sometimes Benji would walk into the room and ask for this.

Leo hissed when Benji’s finger slid in. He kissed Leo’s bare shoulder, slid a hand up his chest and brushed his fingers over Leo’s nipples.

“Sorry,” Benji withdrew his finger and then inserted two, brushing them expertly over Leo’s prostate. Benji laughed at the effect it had on Leo, a head to toe, full-body jerking motion.

Leo sucked in a deep breath as Benji continued to mercilessly peg him in just the right spot. If Benji didn’t fuck him soon, Leo might die from wanting. Benji’s soft laughter filled the room and he reached for the lube with his free hand.

They’d ditched condoms months ago. The decision to go bare was made not long after Benji had confessed his love to

Leo. It had been Leo's idea though. He'd wanted to know what it was like to have Benji in the most intimate of ways.

"Don't make me wait," Leo begged breathlessly.

"Patience."

Leo's laughter was cut short when Benji drove his fingers deeper. God, sometimes Leo could come just from this, and he'd turn around and suck Benji's brains out through his dick, but today he wanted Benji inside him.

"Benji, please," Leo didn't care that he whined. Not when Benji complied and slicked his cock with lube and lined it up with Leo's hole.

Leo bent his legs a little more to help Benji achieve the perfect angle, and then he slid inside, stretching Leo and filling him in ways that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with intimacy. The only hard thing about Benji was his cock, the rest of him was marshmallow soft. He was always careful with Leo, with his body and his heart. There wasn't a thoughtless bone in his body, and even when he was driving into Leo, he was careful with him.

"I won't break, love." Leo pressed his ass into Benji, wishing he could go deeper, but every inch of Benji was inside him. Leo was just greedy, he supposed.

Then Benji's hands dug into Leo's hips with a sharpness that took his breath away and Benji pulled him back as he thrust forward, grinding into him.

"Is this... is this—okay?" Benji panted against Leo as he ground harder and deeper.

Leo couldn't speak. Benji had stolen his ability to form a coherent thought. All he could do was nod and breathe and grip the counter.

He knew Benji was close when he reached around and took Leo in hand and stroked him as he fucked faster and deeper. Benji's open mouth pressed against Leo's shoulder, and he felt the warm heat wash against his skin.

“Leo, please. Come for me. Come for me. I need you—” Benji’s rhythm faltered, and he spilled inside Leo and that sent Leo careening over the edge. He shouted as he spilled all over Benji’s hand and probably the counter and definitely the floor.

Benji didn’t stop touching, kissing, fucking, until he’d gone soft and had to pull out. Still standing behind Leo, he wrapped his arms around him and pressed his forehead into Leo’s back.

“Need another shower.” Leo mumbled as he tried to catch his breath and get his faculties back in order. Benji had scrambled his brains. After a minute, Benji’s hands explored Leo’s body. Two fingers dipped back into Leo’s loosened hole, and he shook with the way it made him feel.

“Okay?” Benji asked, as he slowly pumped his fingers in and out.

Leo tried to say, yeah, but it sounded more like, “Ungh.”

Benji laughed softly and peppered Leo’s back with kisses as he slowly toyed with Leo’s sensitive hole.

“It’s like you belong to me,” Benji whispered as his fingers slipped free, covered in his own cum.

Leo turned around and gripped Benji’s face in both hands, and slanted his mouth over Benji’s. He kissed him until he couldn’t breathe, could barely stand the lack of oxygen in his body, before he pulled away.

“I do belong to you,” Leo said. “I’m yours and your mine and nothing will ever change that.”

Benji curled himself into Leo’s chest the way he did when he needed to be reassured. They were still working on Benji feeling safe and secure and that he wouldn’t lose things he loved.

Leo took his time in the second shower he had that day, washing Benji’s hair and scrubbing his back. Benji, in turn, washed the cum from Leo’s ass, which was strangely intimate in its own way.

“I love looking after you,” Benji admitted quietly as he rinsed the last of the soap bubbles from Leo’s skin.

Leo opened his mouth to reply to Benji but heard the doorbell chime. He furrowed his brow and killed the water. “Were you expecting anyone?”

Benji shook his head, but he grinned at Leo. “Maybe it’s someone selling something.”

“That’s not funny.” Leo stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist as the doorbell chimed again.

“It’s a little funny.” Benji wrapped himself in a bathrobe that used to be Leo’s, but Benji had proclaimed to be his. He padded out ahead of Leo, who was still wrapped in a towel.

“You can’t answer the door in a towel, Leo. Be decent. Even if it’s probably someone selling something. You can’t be pantsless and angry at strangers. The neighbors will talk.” Benji headed for the door and swung it open. Leo couldn’t see who was there, but suddenly Benji yelped and flung himself out on the front step. Leo rounded the corner to see Oliver with an armful of Benji.

“Well, I’m definitely rethinking the intelligence of answering the door in a towel.”

Oliver looked over Benji’s shoulder at his dad, then abruptly pushed Benji away, laughing the whole time. “Good God, I feel violated. I clearly interrupted something.”

“You interrupted nothing.” Benji said, his smile bright. “We’d just finished.”

“Maybe I should stay in a hotel.”

Benji grabbed Oliver and dragged him inside, then he went back for his suitcase, and he dragged that inside too. Leo stared out at the front porch, which had two more very large suitcases sitting on it.

“How long are you staying?” Leo grabbed one case and hauled it inside as Benji took the other.

“Well, I thought I’d move back.” Oliver rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s stupid, because I shoved the two of you together, and you’re so fucking happy, and I’m happy you’re happy. But I’ve also really missed my best friend, and my dad, and I know things will be different now, but...”

Leo gripped his towel and pulled Oliver into a one-armed hug. Oliver wrapped his arms around Leo and squeezed him tight, but briefly, before he stepped away.

“Dad, I really love you, but please go put pants on.” He shot a look at Benji. “You too.”

Benji rolled his eyes, but he grabbed Leo’s hand and tugged him toward the bedroom. “The guest room is empty. You can put your stuff in there while we put pants on. Spoilsport.”

“You love me,” Oliver called.

Once they were alone to get dressed, Leo looked at Benji. “Just how big of a surprise was this?”

Benji shrugged his shoulders. “He sounded really sad the last time we talked. So I told him it’s okay to change your dreams. The big fancy job wasn’t making him happy anymore, so I told him to quit. I might have also told him that losing a job on purpose was a million times better than losing it by accident the way I usually did. To be fair, I didn’t know he’d decided anything yet.”

Once dressed, Leo and Benji went in search of Oliver and found him in the kitchen. He was poking about in the oven to see what was for dinner and stood, grinning, when Leo and Benji walked in holding hands.

“There’s definitely a lot more yellow in here.”

“That’s my doing.” Benji grinned proudly.

They ate an early dinner, because Oliver was famished and exhausted and Leo watched him ruffle Benji’s hair on the way to the guest room. He patted Leo on the shoulder and bid them both good night.

Later in bed, Benji curled into Leo's side and snuggled up tight against him the way he did when he was content. Leo kissed the top of his head and smiled as he sniffed his hair.

"I enjoy having my whole family together," Benji whispered sleepily.

"Me too, love." Leo held him tight as he dropped off to sleep. "Me too."

About E.M. Denning

E. M. Denning is a married mom of three and a writer from British Columbia. Author of endearing filth and schmoopy sex, also addicted to books and coffee. She writes romance for the 18+ crowd.

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